

To all my friends but particularly those of us who attended Southside High School. I hope you will read this letter that I am sending to the Fort Smith School Board members and the Times Record. Feel free to copy it, add your name and send it to the school board. My hope is that we can effect immediate change. Thanks! This weekend the Southside High School class of 1985 is celebrating its 30th High School reunion. As a member of this class, I intend to participate in some of the activities. However, I am not a happy and willing participant due to the unforgiveable fact that the school and the Fort Smith Public School District continue to make use of a racist mascot and fight song. As I have watched the news coverage of the horrific event in Charleston, South Carolina unfold I have to say my initial reaction was how awful but what can I do? I am not a racist. Further, I am not raising my children to be racists. I was fortunate to have parents that taught me, among many things, not to judge people based on their appearance. Then I realized I can and should do something. In fact, I have a moral obligation to do something. I can stop tolerating racist actions starting with the shameful fact that my high school has continued to hold onto a reprehensible school mascot and anthem. Make no mistake, the use of "Johnny Reb" as the mascot for the Rebels and "Dixie" as the school's fight song is racist. "Johnny Reb" symbolizes a confederate soldier and is the personification of the South dating back to the Civil War. The fight song "Dixie" glorifies the South and the "old times there" as a positive spin on the institution of slavery. This is disgraceful and the time has long since passed when we need to stop making excuses for utilizing them and let them become a part of our past that is best left for the history books. As I look at the world in which I am raising my children I see tremendous hope but I also see a complacency in the United States to allow symbols of oppression to endure under the auspices of historical significance and the belief that continuing to make use of them does no harm. The Charleston, South Carolina shooting shows us this belief is not only wrong, it is condemnable. It is incumbent on all of us to stop using these symbols and prove to ourselves, our children, our neighbors and the world that we are better than that. This starts with every one of us refusing to display the confederate flag, Johnny Reb or any other symbol of the Civil War and racism. It starts with the people of Fort Smith, Arkansas demanding that Southside High School immediately stop being referred to as the Rebels, abandon the use of "Jonny Reb" and stop singing "Dixie." We are better than this. Julie Llewellyn Ketcham