

Freedom Riders to Finally Receive Degrees

Contributed by Acquanetta Donnell Jr. & staff reports -- Black College Wire
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Tennessee Board of Regents reverses previous decision

The Tennessee Board of Regents voted unanimously on April 25 to award honorary degrees to the Freedom Riders, former students who were expelled from what is now Tennessee State University in 1961 for participating in civil rights demonstrations.

The 14 former students will receive honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degrees in a ceremony to be announced at a later date. The board's vote was a reversal of a previous decision not to award the degrees.

"Those students, now known as the Freedom Riders 14, have come to exemplify persons who are deserving of honorary degrees. They are individuals who have demonstrated extraordinary achievements, setting standards that merit distinction," said Tennessee State president Melvin N. Johnson, in a statement released shortly after the board's vote.

TSU spokesperson Cheryl Bates-Lee said the faculty senate and numerous alumni, students, staff and community residents contacted the board urging the reversal. "It was an absolutely incredible wave of support," Bates-Lee told Black College Wire. "So many people asked the board to revisit their decision."

During a previous meeting held March 28, the board voted 7-5 against a proposal from Johnson to award the 14 former students honorary degrees after they were expelled from the institution in 1961.

The former students were expelled from school during the presidency of Walter S. Davis, but were not informed of why they were being expelled.

Dominic Matthews, a senior criminal justice major from Memphis said, "I'm glad that the TBR found it deep down inside their hearts to award these courageous students honorary degrees. If it were not for them taking a stand for what was right, my peers and I would not be here today on the campus of TSU."

Although some of the Freedom Riders did return to TSU, others attended different institutions of higher learning, and some did not finish their schooling at all.

"I never received a letter from TSU while in jail in Mississippi," said Allen Cason, a Freedom Rider who was not only arrested in Mississippi, but also in Georgia. "I went back to school when I was let out of jail and I went to register for summer school because I knew I had hours that I needed to complete. From that point, I was expelled, but I was never told why."

Johnson said the university would award the degrees and honor the recipients with a celebration. "Within the next few months, I hope to announce TSU's plans to publicly honor this distinguished group of individuals," Johnson said.

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