

Tennessee Freedom Riders Denied Degrees

Contributed by Acquanetta Donnell Jr. -- Black College Wire
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Regents board rejects proposal for civil rights heroes

With a 7-5 vote, members of the Tennessee Board of Regents, during a recent meeting, denied a proposal to award honorary degrees to 14 former TSU students who participated in the civil rights movement.

These former students, popularly known as the Freedom Riders, 47 years ago were expelled from TSU (then known as Tennessee A&I) and unable to attain degrees in their prospective fields.

The board, during its March 28 meeting, decided the former students would not be given honorary degrees; however, they will receive a special recognition ceremony in which they may be awarded a medallion.

According to TSU President Melvin N. Johnson, TSU submitted a request for the students to be awarded the degrees because they have been an inspiration to faculty, staff, administrators, alumni and members of the local, national and world communities.

"The committee met on this and there was a discussion," said Mary Morgan a representative from the regents board. "There was a difference of opinion to recognize the Freedom Riders. We even discovered that some of the Freedom Riders were in academic trouble and on the verge of being expelled."

The Freedom Riders were students from TSU as well as Fisk, who conducted sit-ins at restaurants in which they were not allowed because of segregation laws. The students were beaten, taken to jail, and some were even killed. Ultimately, they were responsible for the integration of downtown Nashville in the 60's.

"Freedom Riders are very important and we want to recognize them, but not with degrees," Morgan said.

The Freedom Riders from TSU were suspended during the university presidency of Walter S. Davis after being arrested in Mississippi in 1961 for participating in the Freedom Rides, a non-violent act of civil disobedience.

While still jailed in Mississippi, some of the students received letters from TSU that stated they were being expelled; however, not all of them received the same letter.

"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."

Five of the members who sat on the deciding governing board voted for the Freedom Riders to receive their degrees.

"They gave up a lot to do what they did. It is important that they be recognized," said Paul Montgomery, a member of the board who voted for awarding the degrees.

Members of the board who voted against the proposal said they respect the sacrifice of the Freedom Riders but the TBR's rules limit the number of honorary degrees that can be given.

"Voting the way that I did was no way to demean the Freedom Riders," said Jonas Kisber. "I admire them and what they did. However, the rule is two degrees per school per year."

A special event is now being prepared for the Freedom Riders so that they may be recognized.

"We are forming a committee under the direction of Provost Robert Hampton," Johnson said. "I anticipate that we can do a lot of planning, but not much in the way of an actual event in the spring because we are so close to the end of the academic year."

The final decision of the resolution in the awarding of the honorary degrees stated, "It is unquestionable and unequivocal that we desire to honor the TSU students who became known as the Freedom Riders.

"We appoint TSU President Dr. Melvin Johnson to lead and organize a celebration, recognition and honor where this state, the Board of Regents and the Tennessee State University community can honor all of the students who became known as the Freedom Riders and preclude the necessity that this board has to waive its policy 2:06:00:00."

On Friday, April 4, four of the 14 Freedom Riders were honored at the 23rd annual Great Debate hosted by the Great Debate Honor Society and the Nashville Chapter of the TSU Alumni Association.

"I think that it is tragic for them not be honored," said Patrick Walker-Reese, a junior history education major from Nashville, "especially for so much they did. I hope that TSU can find some way to honor them.•"

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