

Southern University Officials Complain Over Treatment of Rape Suspect

Contributed by Amber R. Perry and Black College Wire staff
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SGA leader forced to take "perp walk" through student union

A Southern University-Baton Rouge student government leader was arrested recently in connection with the alleged rape and oral sexual battery of a 15-year-old girl. University officials expressed concern, not about the alleged crime, but about how law enforcement officials handled the arrest of the student.

SGA Chief Justice Christopher Richardson, a senior political science major, was arrested on Sept. 25 in the student union.

"What upsets me is that they paraded him around the union. As the dean of students, it's my job to protect everyone on this campus," said Robert Bennett, dean of students. "They should have contacted me and I would have talked to Christopher myself. He's a good kid. I've known him since he was in school. All they had to do was speak to me and I would have brought him in."

According to an initial Baton Rouge Police Department report obtained by the DIGEST, along with other media reports, the incident allegedly involving the 23-year-old Richardson took place Aug. 23 and was reported the next day. The alleged victim sustained minor injury and visited a local hospital. The Juvenile Sex Crimes Division was also notified.

His bail was set at \$75,000 at the time of the arrest, but Richardson's name did not show up on the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison's Internet listing of inmates.

According to Bennett, SUPD Chief Michael Morris—accompanied by two off-campus police and two U.S. Marshals—entered the second floor of the Smith-Brown Memorial Union Thursday looking for Richardson, who was then handcuffed and escorted out of the union.

Although they were present at the arrest, Morris said they were only assisting the U.S. Marshals.

"We don't respect criminals. The respect belongs to the 15-year-old girl," Morris said. "As far as I'm concerned, he's a felon. You might be innocent until proven guilty, but when a judge has signed the warrant for probable cause, then it's serious."

"Should he have been treated differently because he was in SGA? I think not. We didn't beat him or curse at him. His Miranda Rights were read and he was handcuffed for his safety and ours."

When asked how he felt about criticism on the way the arrest was handled, Chief Morris said, "When they get to be chief of SUPD, they can run the department however they see fit."

Morris also added that Richardson's arrest would not have taken place in the SGA office, but the previous three places they searched he was not there. Almost a month had passed from the time of the incident until the arrest.

"This was our last resort," he said. "Honestly, it broke my heart to do that. But that's the law of the land and we have to respect that."

Bennett believes BRPD overreacted in their manner of arresting Richardson.

Bennett said, due to Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office was unable to locate Richardson, who in turn contacted the U.S. Marshals to trace Richardson's whereabouts.

According to state law, a person convicted of aggravated rape could face a life sentence without the chance of parole, probation or a suspended sentence while oral sexual battery could garner 10 years if the victim is under the age of 15 or three years younger than the offender. The police report shows Richardson is at least eight years older than the alleged victim.

"This is a serious charge. Regardless of if he's guilty or not, he's in the court system. I always try to tell the students on campus, be careful about going into girl and boy's room. You may have not done anything wrong, but if someone says you did and you were there, then that means you might have."

SGA President Jamal Taylor agrees with Bennett. "I think the situation with SUPD was handled disrespectfully. They acted as if he were a hardened criminal."

As of yesterday, Richardson had been released and has relinquished his position as SGA Chief Justice. “This is not an admission of guilt,” said Bennett, “but the implications are very serious. One should not have that hanging over his head.”

It is now up to Taylor to appoint a new Chief Justice, whom the Senate will confirm. The President said within the coming weeks he’ll make his recommendation to the Senate and hopes that everyone can move on. Julie Wessinger, interim vice-chancellor of student affairs, said the University would take no action until Richardson’s case has been tried.

“He’s still a student at this university,” she said. “He has all the rights and privileges everyone else has.”

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Amber R. Perry writes for The Southern Digest, the Southern University student newspaper, which originally published this article.