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Rodney Stephenson biographical sketch

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Rodney Stephenson

Written by Katherine Wilson.

Rodney Stephenson was a leading activist at the University of Chattanooga who, as a black man, pursued racial equality and justice by exposing the existence of racism on campus. Sources reveal Rodney Stephenson's activism during his fight for Civil Rights on the UTC campus during the early 1970s. *The University Echo* was the UTC student newspaper that shed light on his work. During Stephenson's time on campus, he served in many important roles in the fight for Civil Rights on campus. He participated in many events to expose racism and promote racial equality, while encountering animosity from fellow student as well as the university administration.

During the fight for Civil Rights and exposing racist behaviors, Stephenson was very well known on the UTC campus due to the many positions he held to advance his cause. *The University Echo* newspaper published on February 17th, 1970 an announcement that Rodney Stephenson was promoted to "Publications Chairman" in the Black Student Association group.ⁱ One of *The University Echo* newspapers written on March 25th, 1970 cited a student: "I was unable to attend the rally last Monday, but I understand Rodney Stephenson, an officer of the Black Student Association, publicly burned a Confederate flag declaring the flag was a symbol of racism."ⁱⁱ Stephenson destabilized white supremacy by contesting southern tradition. The *University Echo* newspaper dated September 8th, 1971 described how the university witnesses a "year of revolution" with all those that spoke out about the Civil Rights and racism at UTC, especially the "Chattanooga 4."ⁱⁱⁱ The Chattanooga 4, as the newspaper explained consisted of the "President of the SGA- Russell T. King. Martin J. Schulman, Chief Justice, Steve Benton, editor of the Echo, and Rodney Stephenson, Black student leader."^{iv} The Chattanooga 4 embraced the progressive fight for Civil Rights at UTC, Stephenson representing a critical force. He exposed himself to many organizations and devoted himself to the roles within them to advocate for Civil Rights on the UTC campus. One major outlet that Stephenson used to spread awareness about racism on campus was the student newspaper. Stephenson contributed to the *University Echo* newspaper through articles and images. One of Rodney's most famous contributions to the newspaper is titled "I am a black student..." published on February 17th, 1970. In the article, he expressed the reality of being a black student on a predominately white and racist Greek life campus.^v Stephenson amplifies his point by announcing the fascist, racist, and selfish motives of administration that tried to suppress his freedom of speech and while protecting the Rebel Flag and the racist song "Dixie." He concluded the article by equating the administration to pigs.^{vi} The most compelling unification tool on the UTC campus was Stephenson's musical talents. The newspaper published on May 20th, 1970 reveals the unified and bonded atmosphere felt on May 20th and 23rd when a group of black musicians played music in the Cadek Hall for fellow students. The newspaper details that Stephenson was a "technical assistant" during this production^{vii}. The March 25th, 1970 newspaper does report Rodney's performance in the Saint-Thomason Blacks Band for students and faculty at UTC's Student Center as a part of Black Week. The text reads "The group consists of Steve Smith, Jim Thompson, Mark Varnell, Gary Lee Walter, and UTC's own blues specialist big Rodney Stephenson, who was the vocalist for this affair."^{viii} One of the main ways that Stephenson promoted the great feeling of unification between the races was by beautifully performing the foundation of Africa American cultural freedom in music, the blues. Stephenson's

passion for the Civil Rights Movements on the UTC campus translate into power words with his writings and displayed through his desire to unify the races with music and culture.

This prominent, active, engaged, and motivated black student of UTC deserves the credit of pursuing a goal that is to this day is not yet resolved. Rodney Stephenson's drive to make an impact with UTC's Civil Rights rested on his endurance to persevere. Once he received his letter from the Administration announcing his charge of obscenity due to his article "I am a black student..." he responded in the newspaper. Stephenson writes "To Hell with this racist and corrupt segment of this community. With these people expounding their dead views on University life. With these views I can see why this Institution will never grow mentally."^{ix} Even the administration of UTC could not silence the activist because his passion and drive for a change did not let him back down, even when faced with the fear of expulsion.

Credit

This biography was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of HIST 3920R: History of White Rage taught by Professor Susan Eckelmann Berghel, Ph. D. in the Department of History at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in Spring 2021.

ⁱ "BSA Appoints Executives," *The University Echo*, February 17th, 1970.

ⁱⁱ "Black Week Failure," *The University Echo*, March 25th, 1970.

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Year that," *The University Echo*, September 8th, 1971.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Rodney Stephenson, "I Black Student..." *The University Echo*, February 17th, 1970.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Veronika Higgins, "Black Musical May 20 and 23," *The University Echo*, May 20th, 1970.

^{viii} Elliot Simmons, "Heavy Sounds," *The University Echo*, March 25th, 1970.

^{ix} Rodney Stevenson, "I am Black," *University Echo*, February 17th, 1970.