



Home / News

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In Homecoming parade, racial justice advocates take different paths

One group chose to march in the parade, another staged a protest along the route

RUTH SERVEN, ASHLEY REESE Oct 10, 2015



KATIE HOGSETT

MU student protesters block the car driving UM System President Tim Wolfe and his wife Saturday in the 2015 MU Homecoming Parade at the intersection of Ninth Street and University Avenue. The protesters said they each individually want to go by the name "Concerned Student 1950" — 1950 marking the year African American students were first admitted to the university.

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COLUMBIA — A few minutes before the MU Homecoming Parade began Saturday morning, about a dozen people huddled together at the corner of Conley and Fifth streets. As they took their position behind the MU Water Ski and Wakeboard Club and a pickup truck carrying former Missouri wide receiver Bud Sasser, they unfurled an orange banner that read: "We Support Our Minority Students!"

Carl Kenney, who had organized the group, warned the group that spectators might heckle them. "I just want to tell you it might happen," he said, "and just smile back."

"We could just do this," one person said, flashing her middle finger. Another began humming a protest song, and soon the whole group joined in. "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes."

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The group was marching in support of students, particularly students who are black, rather than marching against something, said Kenney, who is a co-pastor at Bethel Baptist Church and a columnist for the Columbia Missourian.

As Kenney's group carried its banner along the parade route, a few blocks away at the intersection of University Avenue and Ninth Street, a group of students wearing black shirts and wielding bullhorns linked arms in front of the red convertible carrying UM System President Tim Wolfe. The students, who each called themselves Concerned Student 1950, brought the parade to a halt while they denounced what they considered the administration's lackluster efforts to combat racism at MU.

Protest from Columbia Missourian on Vimeo.

Some parade spectators joined the protesters, filling the intersection. Homecoming organizers eventually diverted the parade through the adjacent Domino's Pizza parking lot, but Wolfe's car wasn't able to maneuver away from the protesters.

MU juniors Nick Jordan, Libby Snethen and Breanne LoPresti were standing at the corner across from Domino's when the protest began. The car carrying Wolfe and his wife bumped one of the protesters, they said. Snethen said the driver was getting impatient and kept revving the engine, but she didn't think the protester was intentionally hit.

None of the protesters were arrested Saturday morning for disturbing the parade, MU Police Major Brian Weimer said. Police were investigating an accident report related to Wolfe's car.

"We disrupted the parade specifically in front of Tim Wolfe because we need him to get our message," said Jonathan Butler, one of protesters. "We've sent emails, we've sent tweets, we've messaged but we've gotten no response back from the upper officials at Mizzou to really make change on this campus. And so we directed it to him personally. That we are here. We want to make our presence known, that we are here and we deserve respect, we deserve humanity."

The protesters blocked the street for about 15 minutes, chanting and making speeches through a bullhorn. Although some spectators supported the protesters, some people began chanting "MIZ" to drown out the bullhorn speeches.

"All we get is emails and empty promises," Butler said. "And we're here to say we're not going to be OK with just emails or empty promises anymore."

On Thursday, MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin announced all incoming students would have to complete diversity and inclusion training before enrolling in classes. The university will also require faculty and staff to complete the training, which is under development.

Snethen said she wasn't sure if blocking the parade was the right way to get the protesters' message across.

"I don't like that they were being so aggressive with children around," she said. "I mean, I understand where they're coming from and I like their point, but I just feel like the kids don't need to see that yet. Especially such little kids and they're so like angry. I feel like there are other ways."

LoPresti disagreed. "No one's noticing them," she said. "They have to do something to be noticed."

During the protest, multiple bystanders yelled that the protesters shouldn't use racial slurs in front of their children. LoPresti said it was hard watching the demonstration because the protesters started getting really emotional. Once she noticed other people linking arms with the protesters, she did the same. Standing in the street, she noticed some of the protesters were crying.

"That's what got to me," she said. "I joined in the line because white silence is compliance, like what they were yelling in the Student Center. I feel like I can't just sit by and watch. It's not my fight, but I support it."

Police eventually dispersed the protesters — to some cheers — and the parade route returned to normal.

Reached by phone Saturday afternoon, Kenney said he hadn't heard about the parade protest. In an interview Friday, he worried that interracial tension on campus would worsen over the next few days. "And I think the reason for the escalation of the violence of the students is because of silence," he said.

The university has never effectively dealt with its racist history, said Kenney, who grew up in Columbia and graduated from the Missouri School of Journalism. "After the chancellor's announcement for mandatory diversity training, students are

still calling for something different. They want Missouri to face how racism has been a part of this institutional culture for beyond 50 years.”

Kenney said his group was inspired to march by students in the Legion of Black Collegians, whose rehearsal for a Homecoming performance was disrupted Sunday when a man yelled racist slurs at them.

“I’m pretty happy,” said Lynn Maloney, a member of Race Matters who marched with Kenney to support minority students. “We got our banner and we got our group. We wanted to have a presence and an impact and let them know we see them, we hear them.”

Kenney said racism isn’t just a campus problem. “It’s a part of this city’s culture,” he said. “The University of Missouri is embedded in a community where black people suffer the implications of implicit bias and marginalization because of race.”

MU has celebrated Homecoming since 1911, when Chester L. Brewer, director of athletics, invited alumni to “come home” for the football game. Homecoming is historically a day to celebrate MU’s traditions and its graduates. But not all students and graduates felt welcomed to Homecoming festivities; the Legion of Black Collegians created its own homecoming events in 1988 to protest the theme “Ol’ Mizzou,” saying it represented a racist history. MU did not admit black students until 1950.

On Wednesday, Kenney met with Loftin to discuss racist incidents on campus, including racist slurs yelled at MSA President Payton Head in September. He said he recommended to the chancellor that diversity training be mandatory for all incoming freshmen. When Loftin announced a more comprehensive plan on Thursday, Kenney said he applauded the chancellor for going beyond his recommendation.

Kenney’s group represented a coalition involving Bethel Church, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, Rock Bridge Christian Church, the African American Clergy Coalition of Mid-Missouri and the community discussion group Race Matters. Kenney said the role of the church, and of all people of faith, is to show a broken community what community should look like.

“We believe we are all created from the same source, and it is incumbent on each of us to find a way to coexist in peace. That’s why we march in the parade. Because we have to say, look at this here. This is real community.”

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