

'History is knowledge' as Tallahassee bus boycott marks 64 years

Amanda Sieradzki | Council on Culture & Arts | 11:03 am EDT May 17, 2020

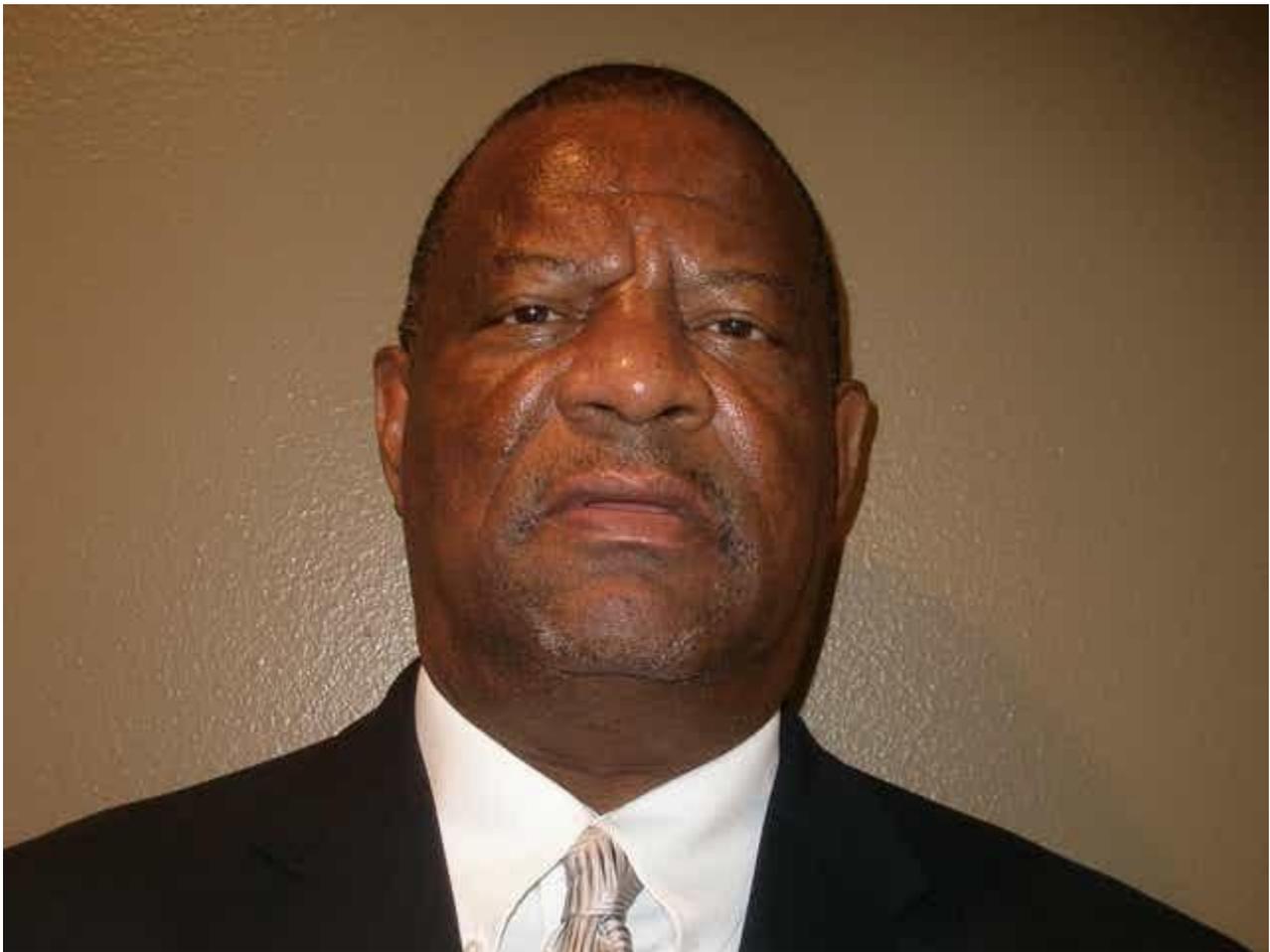


An image of a 1956 city bus is one of the dominant images on Tallahassee's heritage sidewalk, which pays tribute the Tallahassee civil rights movement, including the 1956 bus boycott. The sidewalk, on East Jefferson Street between City Hall and the county courthouse, was dedicated on Sept. 30, 2013.

Gerald Ensley/Democrat Correspondent

“From chaos, and from the ashes, we usually have a few good people rise to the top,” remarks Dr. Keith Parker, a sociology professor at Florida A&M University who applies his field’s theory of “rising expectations” to acts of courage and activism.

“If you expect people to do good things, they will. History teaches us that many men and women do not adhere to the common denominator. They are the outliers and they make it possible for others to excel,” Parker said.



Dr. Keith Parker is a sociology professor at Florida A&M University.
Keith Parker

He counts local, FAMU activists, Wilhelmina Jakes and Carrie Patterson among these individuals. Tuesday, May 26, will mark the 64th Anniversary of the Tallahassee Bus Boycott when Jakes and Patterson sat in the “whites only” section of a segregated bus. Many students were arrested and charged with “placing themselves in a position to incite a riot.” Jakes and Patterson woke up the next morning to burning crosses on their front lawns.

The National Education and Empowerment Coalition will honor these students during their annual celebration on May 21 and 22. Though this year will look different due to COVID-19

restrictions, activities will include a virtual showing of two documentaries, as well as livestream panel discussions. This will be Parker's sixth year involved in the remembrance.

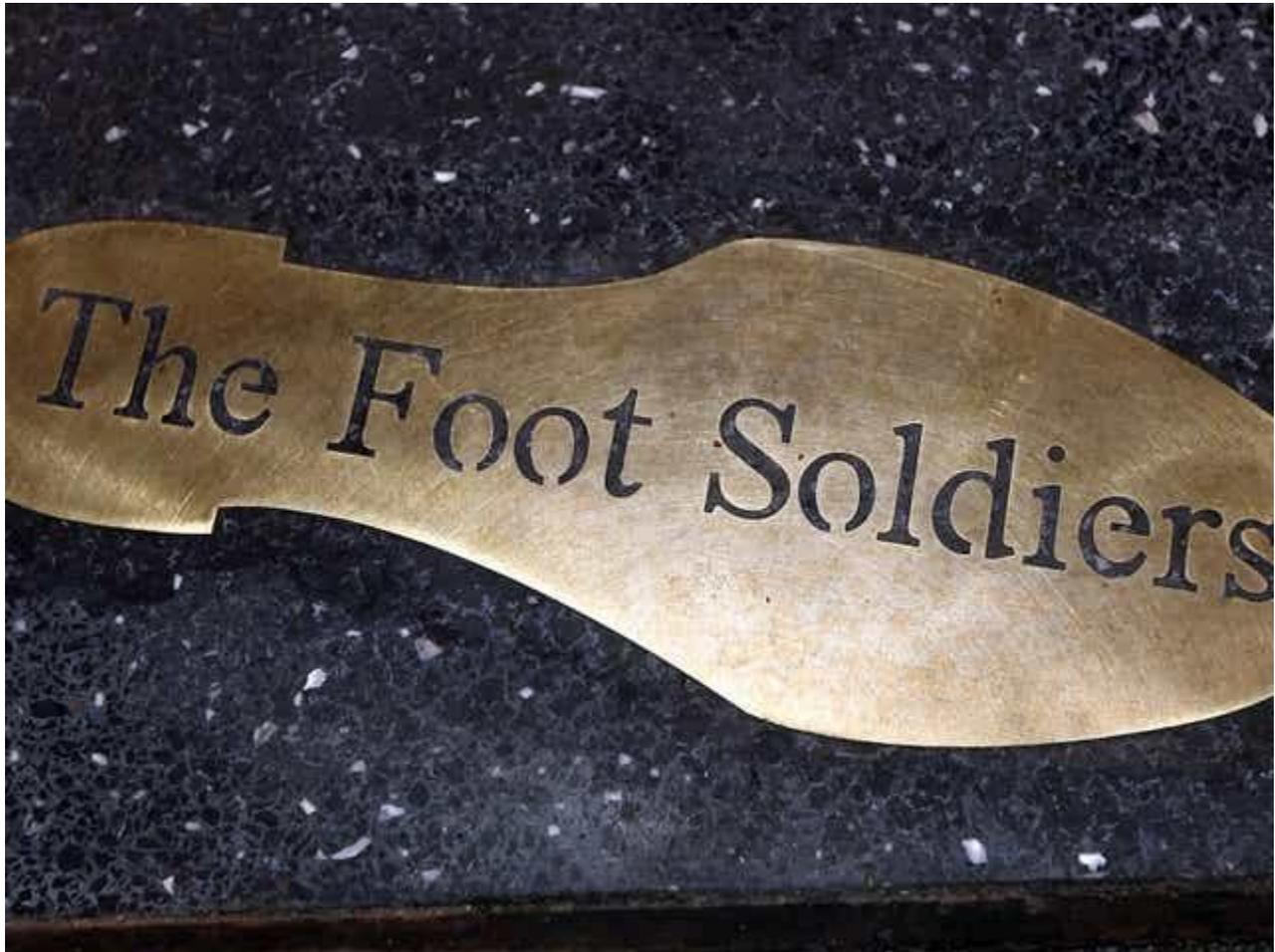


Two FAMU graduates credited with starting the bus boycott at the university were honored with a street in their name because of their efforts. Wilhelmina Jakes and Carrie Patterson are credited with the 1956 Tallahassee Bus Boycott.

Democrat files

“I am still fascinated to learn more about the valor and courage of ordinary men and women, especially when it involves doing things at the time when they had very little protection from state and federal law enforcement agencies,” says Parker. “They knew the risks involved in their efforts, but they put the greater good of the community before their personal self-interests.”

Parker grew up immersed in conversations surrounding injustices and the fight for basic civil rights. His desire to be a community-engaged leader and sociologist was driven by the bravery of the men and women in his Mississippi hometown where his interests in social justice and human success stories first coalesced.



A ceremony was held in Tallahassee's City Hall celebrating the new "Footsteps to Freedom" commemorative sidewalk on Monday. The segment of sidewalk on Jefferson Street pays tribute to the 1956 bus boycott and 1960 lunch counter sit-ins that took place in Tallahassee. City and county commissioners honored the 58 people memorialized in the sidewalk before a standing room only crowd.

Glenn Beil/Tallahassee Democrat, Glenn Beil

He credits his “village” of schoolteachers, religious leaders, elders and athletics coaches for their mentorship. In the 1950s, they discreetly shared information about the life experiences, heroism, sacrifices and bravery of outstanding men and women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington.

“I grew up in the shadows of the awful 1964 murders of three civil rights workers as they traveled back from Philadelphia, Mississippi, to Meridian after investigating the destruction of

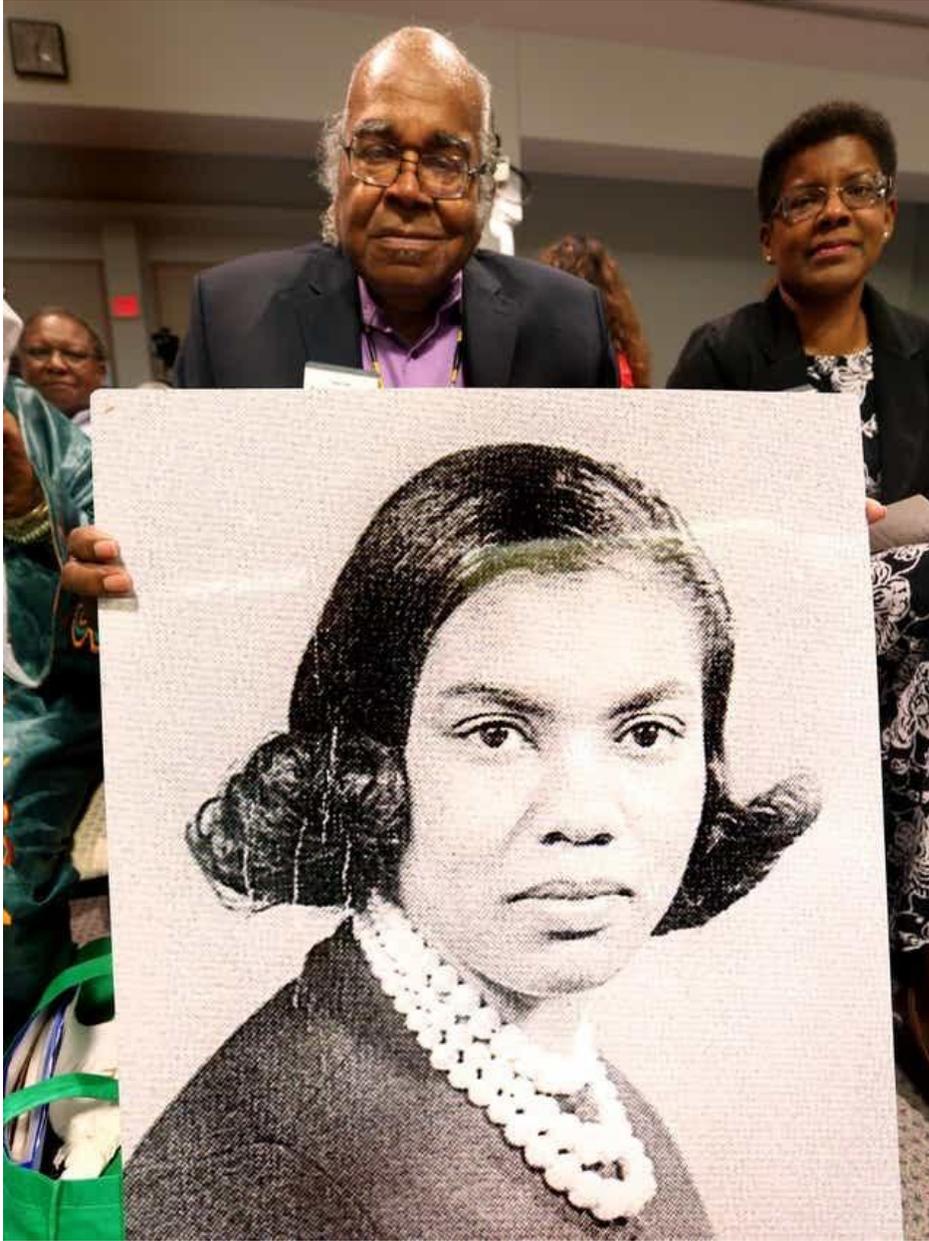
several churches,” recalls Parker, who was 9 years old at the time. “That is when I started paying attention.”

The most iconic photo of the 1956 Tallahassee bus boycott is this one picturing Rev. C.K. Steele (by window) and Rev. H. McNeal Harris, riding at the front of a Tallahassee city bus on Dec. 24, 1956 when protesters began riding the buses in a “non-segregated manner.”
Florida Photographic Collection

Three years later, he watched as civil rights activists Victoria Gray Adams, Annie Devine and Fannie Lou Hamer were seated on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1968. He said that moment made him proud to be a Mississippian. Years later it would inform his research in criminology, social stratification, race and ethnic relations and social and environmental justice.

The sociology of sports became another platform for Parker as he blended his interests to uncover the role athletes play in social movements. Jackie Robinson purchased reading materials for demonstrators and protesters who were arrested and jailed. Harry Edwards, John Carlos and Tommie Smith refused to participate in the 1968 Olympics given the treatment of black athletes, rampant racism and continued segregation.

“I like to look under the rocks of the evolution of sports,” says Parker, who first entered college on an athletics scholarship for basketball. “Sports continues to provide a vehicle for self-improvement, community, empowerment, and I believe, international communication.”



John Due holds a large photo of his wife Patricia Stephens-Due who was among those who were arrested and held in the Leon County jail for 49 days. A ceremony was held in Tallahassee's City Hall celebrating the new "Footsteps to Freedom" commemorative sidewalk Monday. The segment of sidewalk on Jefferson Street pays tribute to the 1956 bus boycott and 1960 lunch counter sit-ins that took place in Tallahassee. City and county commissioners honored the 58 people memorialized in the sidewalk before a standing room only crowd. Democrat files

In sharing his research, Parker passes the torch his early educators handed to him, opening the eyes of interested students. He's proud of former students who have become doctoral candidates, were scouted by leading government organizations and entered law school.

While these new voices are being nurtured, Parker recognizes the importance of keeping the voices of the past alive.



50 years ago, FAMU student Wilhelmina Jakes helped to start the Tallahassee bus boycott. Friday, she came back to her alma mater to help dedicate a plaque on campus commemorating the historic event.

Democrat files

The Tallahassee Bus Boycott Celebration will show the documentary “Footsteps to Freedom” followed by a discussion from community participants who were part of the FAMU demonstrations. There will also be a presentation by Rev. Dr. Henry Steele, the son of one of the early pillars of the Civil Rights Movement, Rev. Dr. C. K. Steele.

There will also be oral interviews provided by the University of Florida's Samuel Proctor Oral History program with a presentation by program director, Dr. Paul Ortiz and digital humanities production coordinator, Deborah Hendrix.

Parker is looking forward to their insights on how to share and adapt this history for K-12 classroom lessons and make these stories more readily available to all communities.

“I think history is knowledge and knowledge is power, and we need to empower our communities so we do not allow the awful things that happened in the past to percolate again,” says Parker. “History is every day. My hope is that we will take this information and we will use it on a regular basis, and whenever we have the opportunity, to share with others the growing successes of this community.”