



# THE ROCK RACISM RECONCILIATION

**RACIST MESSAGES ON THE ROCK HAVE SPARKED A SERIES OF DIALOGUES AMONG MEMBERS OF THE KENT STATE COMMUNITY—PROMPTING ACTION STEPS THAT PROMISE REAL CHANGE**

*By April McClellan-Copeland, photos by Bob Christy, BS '95*

The “Rock” has resided on the Kent Campus since the 1920s, offering a public canvas for students, organizations and community members who have painted messages on it to promote events, welcome visitors and highlight social issues. It was originally located on a grassy strip between the sidewalk and East Main Street, but when the street was widened in 1976 it was moved to its current location at the bottom of Hilltop Drive on Front Campus.

While standing as a symbol of the Kent State community’s long legacy of free speech, the Rock has also borne the weight of offensive messages that have been painted on it periodically over the years.

During the summer and early fall of 2020, the Rock became a medium for those intent on spreading racist messages aimed at the Black community. The messages, though hateful, sparked peaceful protests, anti-racism discussions and more robust safety and diversity policies at Kent State.

The racist writings on the Rock followed the death of George Floyd, a Black man who, during an arrest for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill, was killed by a white Minneapolis police officer kneeling on his neck. The tragedy, on May 25, 2020, not only ignited passionate protests nationwide but propelled a diverse group of Kent State students to march multiple times in protest of systemic racism and police brutality.

Throughout the summer, Kent State community members met in virtual town halls to address systemic racism by learning, listening and taking action as a collective. At a town hall discussion geared to faculty and staff in June, President Todd Diacon announced plans for a task force to address issues of racism.

Kent State students also painted slogans, such as “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) and “Say Their Names” on the Rock. On Aug. 28, 2020, someone painted over the BLM message on the Rock with “White Lives Matter.”



Hundreds of masked participants in the Black Lives Matter Peaceful Protest on Sept. 10 march through the Kent Campus to the Rock, to protest recent racist messages painted on it. Clockwise from top: Gabrielle Blake, director of political affairs and grievances for Black United Students (BUS), leads a rally call; an estimated 600 protestors fill the lawn of Front Campus; Tayjua Hines, president of BUS, speaks to the crowd; protesters hold hand-written signs and cut flowers to demonstrate the beauty of diversity.

a white supremacist message, which brought the outrage about Floyd to a head. At the time, Kent State student Marteshia Thompson, president of Voices of Color, told KentWired that the message was “a direct threat to the Black students here on this campus.”

The racist message was painted over but was soon replaced with other “White Lives Matter” messages. Students, faculty and community members reacted by engaging in

peaceful protests and continuing to repaint the Rock.

Then on Labor Day, Sept. 7, the Rock was found with its most recent message, “Hate has no home here,” crossed out and replaced with “Blacks have no home here.”

A photo of the Rock with its latest racist message was tweeted out and the response on Twitter was immediate and intense. According to a report on KentWired, students

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were repainting the Rock that evening—with a rainbow background and fist, symbolic of the BLM movement—when a passenger in a car driving by repeatedly shouted the “n-word” at them.

### CALLS FOR CHANGE

Tayjua Hines, president of Black United Students (BUS), says the recent racist incidents involving the Rock magnified existing racism that Black students and faculty have experienced for decades.

“BUS has been calling out racism since our foundation, and we will continue to demand change for Black people on this campus,” Hines notes in a recent email interview. According to its mission statement, BUS was founded in 1968 “to unify and serve all Black students at Kent State, identify relevant issues and initiate appropriate actions to reduce or eliminate any impediments adverse to students and their continued well-being and matriculation.”

Lamar Hylton, PhD, vice president for student affairs, says the racist messages on the Rock were a catalyst for substantive dialogue about race equity at Kent State. “The Rock became the starting point for transparent, vulnerable conversations about race equity—which, I believe, are a microcosm of what we’re experiencing in the broader societal context.”

Alarmed by the repeated racist messages, the BUS executive board



President Todd Diacon and members of the campus and city police forces join others from the Kent State community on Sept. 14 for the March for Unity, sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. and Black United Students. Hundreds of masked demonstrators met at Risman Plaza, marched to Kent State Police Services at the Stockdale Safety Building, and gathered at the Rock, where President Diacon and others addressed the crowd.

drew up a list of seven demands that were created with input from Kent State students. Among the demands were: adding an anti-hate clause in the university’s Student Code of Conduct with a reprimand or expulsion for students who violate it; immediate announcements to alert students about racist incidents (in the same manner as sexual assaults) while implementing Flash ALERTS following the announcement; an increase in the number of security escorts on standby; appointment of a faculty member to supervise campus

of Pan-African studies, to discuss the demands.

From that discussion, the university created a list of Action Steps that incorporated issues from the BUS demands. (See sidebar on page 33.) Progress has been made on many of the action steps and includes: increased lighting on campus and around the Rock, security cameras at the Rock, hiring more security aides with increased hours, and anti-bias training—which approximately 1,000 students and staff have undergone so far.

### ANTI-RACISM RESPONSES

“The real issue wasn’t the Rock, but the Rock was an example of how racism and racial aggression operates, not just at Kent State University, but also in the nation,” says Amoaba Gooden. “The students were looking for ways that they could feel supported. And they also wanted the university to acknowledge the impact that racist actions, like those related to the Rock, have on students, faculty and staff on the Kent Campus.”

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escorts; and mandatory bias training and LGBTQ+ education.

President Diacon, Lamar Hylton, and Amoaba Gooden, PhD, interim vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion, met with BUS members and advisor Charmaine Crawford, PhD, associate professor

BUS also requested that the university recognize the organization, work with its members and alumni, speak about them in public spaces, and create a website that promotes BUS and its history and legacy at Kent State.

Gooden says she is proud of the collaborative way that the university and students worked to address the concerns of Black students. “Students recognized what the issue was,” she says. “They named it, they labeled it and they asked the



## NEW POLICY ON PAINTING THE ROCK

Kent State University is implementing a new administrative policy for painting the Rock. The policy, which goes into effect Jan. 11, is one of the university's responses to the racially offensive language that was painted on the Rock in early fall semester and aimed at Black students.

"Kent State's policy does not seek to restrict free speech in any way, shape or form," says Lamar Hylton, PhD, vice president for student affairs. "There are no 'hate speech' policies as pertains to the Rock. We took an approach of looking at the Rock from a broad logistical, health and safety perspective, making sure that we knew, for instance, how much time a painting can remain on the Rock before it's allowed to be painted over by someone else. These safety, health and logistical matters will make sure that the Rock remains as close as possible to its original intent."

Kent State's new policy coincides with Senate Bill 40 recently enacted by the Ohio General Assembly, which includes the "Forming Open and Robust University Minds Act" regarding free speech on college campuses. The law states: "No state institution of higher education, or any of its administrators acting in their official capacity, shall prohibit any individual from engaging in noncommercial expressive activity on campus, so long as the individual's conduct is lawful and does not materially and substantially disrupt the functioning of the institution." Senate Bill 40 also bans "free speech zones and security fees for speakers."

See the policy at [www.kent.edu/policyreg/administrative-policy-regarding-painting-rock-located-hilltop-drive](http://www.kent.edu/policyreg/administrative-policy-regarding-painting-rock-located-hilltop-drive).

institution to respond—and the institution has done so. I'm proud to be a part of an institution that recognizes students are aware and knowledgeable about their own experiences and know what's best for them. The university worked with them to find solutions.

"I welcome the close relationship that Kent State University and its staff has with students in terms of trying to find solutions. I'm extremely proud of our students and the way that they've intentionally responded, not only for their individual safety but for their collective safety."

Beginning in August, the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion announced a new virtual series, "Shaping a Better Future: Dialogues and Strategizing for Change," part of a yearlong series focusing on social justice topics.

Lamar Hylton says the response to the Rock opened the door for broader, philosophical conversations around Kent State's culture in a meaningful, coordinated and transparent way. While challenging, these conversations are very exciting, he adds. "The university is now at a place where we are beginning to have these discussions openly and honestly—and we are beginning to understand how we should, as an institution, move forward."

In a message to the Kent State community on Sept. 2, President Diacon introduced the new Anti-Racism Task Force—led by Amoaba Gooden, Lamar Hylton, and Melody Tankersley, PhD, senior vice president and provost—which will explore all facets of racism at Kent State. It will begin its work with a focus on anti-Black racism and later expand to examine all areas of racism on Kent State's campuses.

"Kent State has a long and storied history of supporting free speech, including the Rock," notes President Diacon. "This task force's work will further our commitment to free speech by providing a platform for open dialogue, without allowing free speech to be used as a blanket to cover the faithless shadows of racism and hate."

Students organized another peaceful protest—Black Lives Matter at Kent State—on the afternoon of Sept. 10, and hundreds of protesters marched from Risman Plaza to Oscar Ritchie Hall and then gathered at the Rock. They were invited to bring cut flowers to share with the students to show the beauty of diversity.

Later that day, in another move towards unity and understanding, Black United Students (BUS), the Undergraduate Student Government (USG), the Division of Student Affairs and the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion hosted a virtual town hall called "Strategizing for Change: Revising the Rock." Participants discussed how to support community members who have been hurt by these racist actions and how everyone can contribute to a better future.

On Monday, Sept. 14, President Diacon and members of the campus and city police forces participated in the March for Unity—sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. and BUS—which included hundreds of students, staff, faculty and community members. The march started on the "K" in Risman Plaza, where President Diacon thanked the members of BUS for providing guidance and positive solutions to what has been a painful situation.

"I began to wonder about how to square our core values with this painful reality, and I sort of got lost," Diacon told demonstrators, according to KentWired. "But then Tayjua Hines and the leadership of Black United Students and the membership of Black United Students provided us with the light."

Demonstrators proceeded to Kent State Police Services at the Stockdale Safety Building, where Dean Tondiglia, Kent State chief of police, and Nicholas Shearer, city of Kent police chief, spoke to the crowd.



Members of the Black community at Kent State hold signs and share their concerns about safety on campus during the Sept. 10 Black Lives Matter protest.

Then the group reassembled at the Rock, where President Diacon and others again addressed the crowd and answered questions.

After the March for Unity, President Diacon released an email to students, staff and faculty: "Today I had the meaningful opportunity to take part in the March for Unity sponsored by the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and supported by the Black United Students (BUS) on our Kent Campus. Today's march and the two other marches last week in support

During a town hall meeting of the Anti-Racism Task Force on Dec. 10, 2020, 14 subcommittees reported the progress of work on various issues, including: campus safety, recruitment and retention of Black faculty and staff, and examining academic curriculum. President Diacon began the town hall meeting by thanking the 170 faculty, staff and students who are members of the task force for engaging in the important work of ensuring that Kent State University provides equity for all.

**“Learning, examining and understanding in and of themselves will not get us to where we want to be. We will not have lasting change unless we act.”**

—President Todd Diacon

of the value of Black lives, represent the very essence of the Kent State spirit and the values this university holds dear: exercising our right to free speech and claiming loudly and clearly that hate has no home here."

Diacon made a commitment to the Kent State community: "You have my pledge that we will continue to act until all people experience our university as a place that fosters diversity, equity and inclusion for all."

Kent State's Anti-Racism efforts: [www.kent.edu/antiracismefforts](http://www.kent.edu/antiracismefforts)

Kent State University Libraries' anti-racism resources: <https://libguides.library.kent.edu/antiracism>

He added that the university must examine, learn and understand why racism persists at Kent State University, but there must be action to address anti-racism as well.

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## TAKING ACTION AGAINST RACISM

Soon after Black United Students (BUS) submitted its list of seven demands in response to the racist comments that appeared on the Rock on the Kent Campus, university administrators began to work on the following action steps that incorporated many of the BUS recommendations.

## ACTION STEPS (FALL 2020)

- Install security cameras.
- Increase lighting around the Rock.
- Hire more security aides and expand hours for student escort services, including providing these services during the day.
- Promote and enlist the support of Black United Students to enhance the recruitment and retention of students.
- Provide anti-bias training for faculty, staff and students.
  - Create incentives for faculty through Center for Teaching and Learning focused cohorts (diversity focus).
  - Require anti-bias workshops for all new Kent State employees.
- Conduct a formal review of the Student Code of Conduct.
- Implement policies and procedures for painting the Rock.
- Explore the creation of a platform for notifying students, faculty and staff about hate speech/acts.
- Create a platform/website for anti-racism statements, announcements and actions of the university.
- Explore off-campus and on-campus police relationship.

Progress has been made on all the action steps, including added security measures and an increase in campus lighting, a website for anti-racism statements and actions of the university, and anti-bias training for about 1,000 students and staff.

Kent State's Anti-Racism Action Steps: [www.kent.edu/antiracismefforts/action-steps](http://www.kent.edu/antiracismefforts/action-steps).