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Black Teen Who Stopped Assault at Ku Klux Klan Rally to be Honored

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July 17, 1996

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Black Teen Who Stopped Assault at Ku Klux Klan Rally to be Honored *Brave Act by Michigan Woman Draws National Praise*

"Risking her own safety and acceptance, she stood up for what was right."

--Newspaper Editorial

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--The 18-year-old African-American woman who gained national acclaim for shielding a Ku Klux Klan demonstrator from anti-Klan protesters bent on attacking him at an Ann Arbor, Mich., rally last month will receive an award at Illinois Wesleyan University on Saturday.

Keisha Thomas of Ypsilanti, Mich., will receive the award from the Bloomington-Normal-based Coalition for Diversity --an interfaith group founded a couple of years ago to promote diversity and peaceful resolution of conflict--at a 7 p.m., July 20, ceremony at IWU's Evelyn Chapel, 1301 N. Park St., Bloomington. The ceremony is open to the public, free-of-charge.

Narendra Jaggi--associate professor, chairperson of physics at IWU, and a member of the Coalition for Diversity--nominated Thomas for the award and is sponsoring her visit.

Thomas will receive the Coalition for Diversity award one day after receiving a similar honor from the Mahatma Gandhi Center in St. Louis, a group dedicated to the principles of non-violence and peaceful resolution of conflict long associated with the great Indian leader who was assassinated in 1948. She will receive the award from Rep. James M. Talent (R-Mo.). Jaggi, a member of the Gandhi Center, will deliver the keynote address.

First of Detroit, a civic group dedicated to promoting racial harmony, honored Thomas on July 11. Various civic groups and the mayor of Kansas City, Mo., also honored Thomas on July 13-14, presenting her with a plaque and painting a mural of her on a city building. The Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) will present her with a medal in New York City on Aug. 3.

Locally, Thomas' award is co-sponsored by IWU, the Coalition for Diversity, the Gandhi Center, and the Bloomington-Normal chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the nation's oldest civil-rights organization.

Jaggi, who has spoken to Thomas by telephone about seven or eight times, describes her as "very focused and able to put things in perspective. She's very humble and doesn't understand why people are making a big thing about what she did."

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She remarked to Jaggi in one telephone conversation that the public response to her action was her 15 minutes of fame and that it might be forgotten in a month.

Noting the news media frenzy to book Thomas on radio and television news and talk shows, Jaggi said: "It is a true waste of a person of this character to use her as a ratings tool for a month and then lose her in the crowd. I want to do all I can to enable her to attend college.

"This teenager practices what groups like the Gandhi Center and the Coalition for Diversity preach--peaceful reconciliation. Older people rarely find the courage to practice what we preach unlike this teenager."

Thomas will visit IWU's campus while in town. Jaggi and IWU President Minor Myers, jr., are encouraging Thomas to pursue college.

Thomas was protesting the June 22 Klan demonstration in Ann Arbor, Mich. At first, the group wanted to verbally confront the man.

However, according to newspaper reports, when the counter-protesters reached the man, who reportedly was wearing a T-shirt decorated with a Confederate flag, someone hit him with a stick, while others cornered the burly, tattooed, and leather-jacketed man beating and stomping him to the ground.

Thomas, who had wanted to give the man a piece of her mind, found herself covering him with her body within seconds of the violence erupting. According to published accounts, she faced down the mob, while cradling the man's head in her arms, giving police time to rescue him.

A photograph of Thomas defending the man was distributed by The Associated Press and published in newspapers nationwide.

News accounts reported Thomas explaining her actions this way: "You can't kill a man for his views. Someone has got to break the cycle."

A June 25 *Chicago Tribune* report quoted her, saying: "I just sort of fell on top of him and put his head on my chest and yelled 'Stop!' because, once somebody breaks the cycle of the mob mentality, then other people begin to realize what they're doing . . . Then the cops came and pushed me back into the crowd."

Thomas added: "I think everything I did I would do all over again, except for running a little faster when they were spraying Mace."

Commenting on Thomas' actions, one newspaper editorial observed: "In one defining moment, Thomas gave the mob--and, poignantly, rally supporters--a primer on character. Like the rest of the demonstrators, she had every right to despise the Klan's racist views. She had

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every right--morally and constitutionally--to let the guy have it with her words, however raucous. But she knew she had no right to strike him. Risking her own safety and acceptance, she stood up for what was right."

A June 29 letter to the editor, published in the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*, summed up widespread response to Thomas' action: ". . . there is no doubt that this young woman saved the man from serious injury or death.

"What an incredibly courageous thing for this young woman to do. She risked serious injury (or worse) for a man she undoubtedly, and with good reason, felt threatened by . . . This is an example of dedication to the principle of free speech far beyond what most of us ever have the opportunity or willingness to display. I believe that Keisha Thomas is a true American hero and is an inspiration to us all."

Another woman wrote: "Here is a young woman of only 18 who could teach all races a few things. If everyone had her maturity, wisdom, courage and compassion, the world would be a much nicer place."

According to newspaper reports, Thomas' high school principal, Arthur Williams, wasn't surprised by her actions, noting her work with at-risk youngsters and the Black Student Union.

Williams was quoted in one account, saying: "I thought it really put her convictions to the test. From the times I've met her, she reminded me of a person who would stand up for what she believed."

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,850 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$25 million science building opened in the fall of 1995. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 161 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition.

Editor's Note: For more information about the ceremony honoring Keisha Thomas, contact: Narendra Jaggi, IWU associate professor and chairperson of physics, at 309/556-3418 (office) or 309/827-3931 (home). The award ceremony and reception for Keisha Thomas is open for news media coverage. The award ceremony is open to the public, free-of-charge.