

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF

Civil Rights Leader and Living Legend...

Mr. Jerome "Big Duck" Smith

"There is a spirit of good that exists in all. And at times, you can enter the depths of the spirit of a person and transcend the negative – when that happens, he will no longer go against you. You become committed to the humanity of each other."



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Louis A. Berry Institute for Civil Rights & Justice
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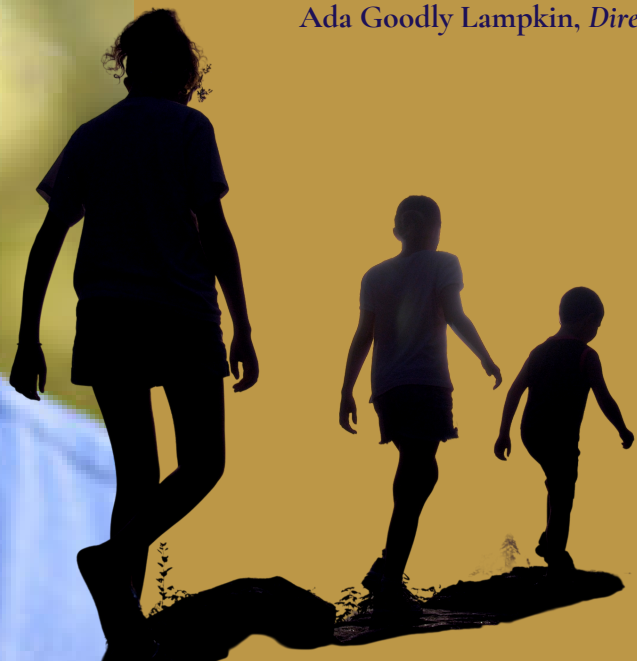


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RTA bus features the artwork, “Tribute to the Freedom Riders,” and depicts New Orleans Civil Rights icons and Freedom Riders, Doratha “Dodie” Smith-Simmons, and Jerome “Big Duck” Smith. Source: [New Orleans RTA enters bus into service celebrating city’s Freedom Riders](#)

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BIOGRAPHY

Jerome “Big Duck” Smith, a life-long resident of New Orleans, Louisiana, is considered a stalwart of the Civil Rights Movement locally and nationally. Smith’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement dates back to the late 1950’s when he joined the New Orleans chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (“CORE”) as a 19-year old student at Southern University of New Orleans.



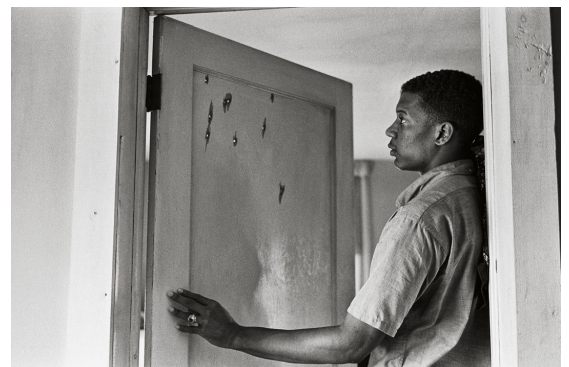
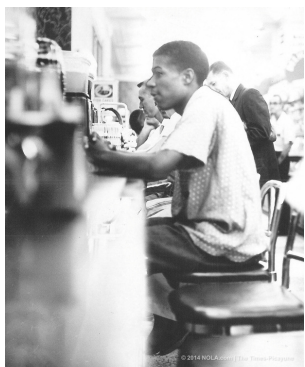
1961 arrest photo of CORE member Jerome Smith as Freedom Rider. Source: [The Core Project](#)

From boycotting stores that refused to hire or serve Blacks to sit-ins along Canal Street, CORE’s substantial contributions were integral to the Civil Rights Movement from 1960 onward. Speaking of CORE, the late Rudy Lombard stated, “They had ‘a certain confidence,’ . . . because they came out of a culture that was so rich. They knew that everything that was unique about the city could be traced to the Black presence.”

Thereafter, Smith challenged Federal desegregation laws across the South as a member of the Freedom Riders. Throughout his travels, Smith participated in numerous protests that resulted in battle wounds. In fact, Smith had been beaten at least 12 times by mobs or police during the struggle. On May 24, 1963, Smith met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and a host of celebrities and civil rights leaders in New York City to discuss the state of civil rights in the United States. During this meeting, it is said Smith emotionally told the United States’ Attorney General, “I’ve seen you guys [from the Justice Department] stand around and take notes while we’re being beaten.” Despite grave injustice and adversity of the times, Smith made a profound impact on civil rights history.

Beyond the Civil Rights Movement, Smith continued to impact our city, particularly in the Treme. In 1968, Smith founded Tambourine and Fan to instill important culture, history, and tradition in New Orleans youth. He continues to teach classes modeled on those of the Freedom Schools during the 1964 Freedom Summer. “Children in the Center recite lyrics of “Strange Fruit”, the names of the four young girls killed in the Birmingham, Alabama Church-fire of 1963, the Neville Brothers’ ‘Sister Rosa’, and chants of Mardi Gras Indians who will ‘not bow down.’”

Jerome Smith has mentored multitudes of individuals across the city for decades and continues to do so. Smith is the definition of a true warrior and his legacy continues to inspire people **everywhere**.



MEMORANDUM

SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY LAW CENTER

Louis A. Berry Institute for Civil Rights & Justice

MEMORANDUM

TO: Southern University Board of Supervisors

FROM: Ada Goodly Lampkin, Director

DATE: March 22, 2022

RE: Request For Issuance of Honorary Degree – Mr. Jerome Smith

Please allow this memorandum to serve as official request for consideration and issuance of an honorary degree to **Mr. Jerome “Big Duck” Smith**.

Jerome “Big Duck” Smith was a 19-year-old student at Southern University Baton Rouge when he became a member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). He participated in boycotts and sit-ins along Canal Street in New Orleans. His actions led to Southern University’s decision to expel him. It also paved the way for groundbreaking progress with the United States Civil Rights Movement.

Now at 83, Mr. Jerome “Big Duck” Smith is a civil rights legend, New Orleans community leader and change agent who continues to fight for dignity and equity for the underserved. Mr. Smith is often sought out by historians, journalists, and movement leaders nationwide who hope for an opportunity to get a firsthand account of the experiences he had and friendships he developed while putting his life on the line for a greater cause.

He is likely most known for his participation in the Freedom Rides and involvement in a fateful meeting between a who's who of notable African American Civil Rights leaders, entertainers, and U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. The meeting in New York was attended by James Baldwin, Lena Horne, and others. But it was a young Jerome Smith whose testimony that day would reportedly weigh so heavily in the consciousness of AG Kennedy that it has been said to contribute to the momentum needed to encourage President Kennedy to pen monumental Civil Rights legislation.

Of all the priceless personal accounts Mr. Smith gives of his past he often returns to his brief time as a student at Southern University. He made several meaningful connections during his time at Southern and recalls having his interest and thirst for deeper knowledge peaked by the educators and fellow students with whom he interacted.

Mr. Smith's short tenure at the University would ultimately come to an end when he was expelled for his participation in an on-campus and national protests.

Though he was no longer permitted to attend, Mr. Smith still maintained a fondness for the University and his hunger for learning did not cease. He recounts covertly making his way back onto the campus to observe some classes after he was expelled.

Mr. Smith sacrificed his personal educational achievement for scores of people of color who now stand on his shoulders. For these reasons, I submit this request that Southern University issue an honorary degree to Mr. Jerome Smith.

CHANCELLOR PIERRE



“MR. SMITH’S LIFE’S WORK SPEAKS VOLUMES FOR HIS DEDICATION AND PASSION TO CIVIL RIGHTS AND RACIAL EQUALITY. HE INSPIRES US TO BE BETTER VERSIONS OF OURSELVES.”

DIRECTOR LAMPKIN



“MR. SMITH IS A PILAR OF THE COMMUNITY WHOSE WORK AND ADVOCACY ON BEHALF OF YOUTH AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES HAS NEVER CEASED SINCE HE WAS A YOUNG MAN HIMSELF. HE IS A TRUE EXAMPLE OF A LIFE OF DEDICATION TO SOMETHING LARGER THAN YOURSELF.”

HIGHLIGHTS

May 3, 2011

- A Freedom Rider's First Stand: Jerome Smith recalls the childhood event that later led him to join the civil rights movement

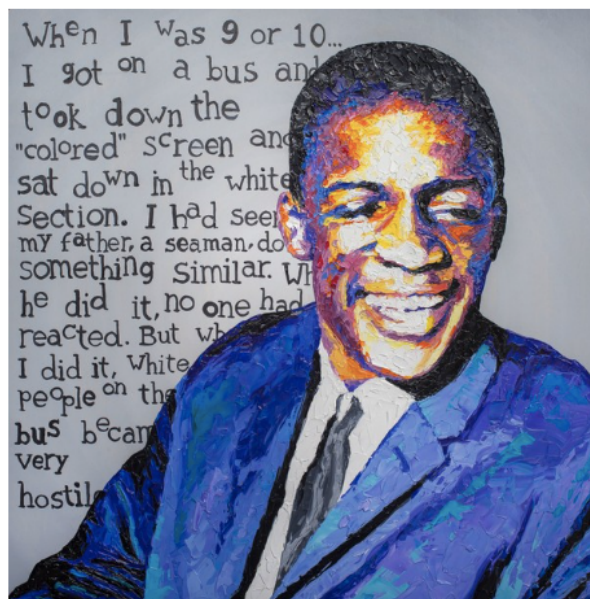


AP

Jerome Smith (left) was one of 15 Freedom Riders on a Greyhound bus from Montgomery, on May 24, 1961. All were arrested.

'No um bow': The Freedom Rider who never stopped

Updated May 2, 2018; Posted May 2, 2018



A portrait of Jerome Smith by artist Sean Randall of Where Y'Art, as commissioned by NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune for its "300 for 300" celebration of New Orleans' tricentennial. (NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

My mother was the well from which I drew much of my strength. She worked as a domestic but also cultivated her natural talents — photographer, furniture maker, seamstress. She taught us all to stand up for our dignity.

My mother used to say: "You're black, but you don't have to be dirty. You're black, but you don't have to be dumb. You're black, and the children of the people that I work for are not smarter than you. They cannot do the things you do." That is true. I could walk in their neighborhood, but they were afraid to walk in mine.

Our people always put themselves up for struggle. Many of the unknown paid a tremendous price. It was all about our collective strength. The collective thing was much more powerful than Dr. [Martin Luther] King, much more powerful than whatever my humble contributions were.

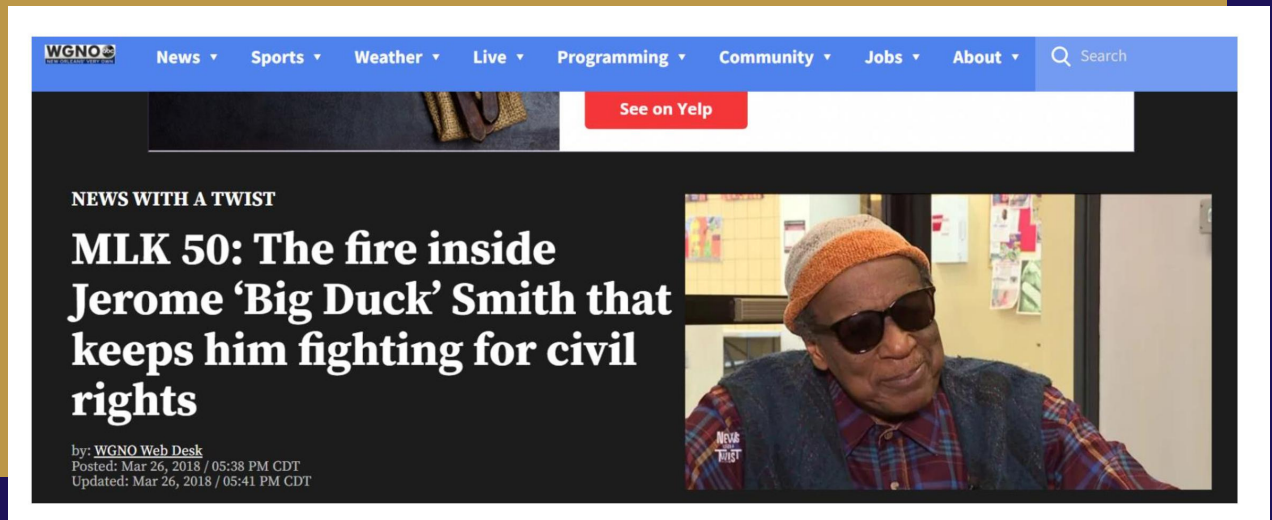
The things I think about when I look back are not the major events but the day-to-day dangers. To face those monsters every day with no cameras rolling, plain ordinary people had to extend their hand and help you get your job done.

All the fear was never in the moment itself. It was always after, when you'd think about what you'd done, what you'd been through, and tremble. Most times I would try to deal with the moment with a kind of emotional detachment you find in some of Gandhi's teaching, because you cannot surrender. You have to keep moving forward.

HIGHLIGHTS

August, 2017

- MLK 50: The fire inside Jerome 'Big Duck' Smith that keeps him fighting for civil rights



For someone who has dedicated his life to fighting for the civil rights of others, Jerome Smith remains one of the most unassuming folks around, but make no mistake: He understands the fire inside him and where it originated.

"That New Orleans spirit. We have an independence, man, and that's what I'm trying to get these children to understand," Smith told News with a Twist.

Smith's story is one of several News with a Twist is telling as part of MLK 50, a yearlong commemoration of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Smith was a student at Southern University when he began participating in sit-ins and freedom rides and meeting with national leaders.

He was severely beaten at Parchman Prison in Mississippi, but nothing swayed his resolve.



HIGHLIGHTS

August, 2017

- Jerome Smith and His Freedom-Fighting Peers' Enduring Light Smith Recently Honored at Ashe's Maafa Ceremony.



“You have to find ways to celebrate humanity,” Smith said. “And I think through some way,

Smith spoke about his past and children’s present and future in New Orleans. He remembered the “speech-impediment” that had kept him “in a prison” for much of his own childhood. He said that this impediment made him be quiet, listen, and think. Smith said that because he couldn’t speak a voice grew inside his head and he became freed from “the walls” of written language. His handicap compelled and empowered illumination for the boy. He praised his mother’s wisdom and her belief in him. “One day—one day, Jerome, you will speak, and all that you’re storing up will come out for you. Be patient and keep learning. You are not dumb, Jerome. You are gaining knowledge.” Smith said his mother told him that the truths gained within his empowering silence were “worth more than any dictionary” and that “there are no words in that Dictionary equal to what you have to tell.” Then, the next day, his mother bought him the entire set of ‘the Great Books of the World’.”



IN HIS OWN WORDS



February 2, 2019

- Jerome Smith: New Orleans Native and Civil Rights Icon in a rare television interview, Smith talks about his time in the civil rights movement and how he's still inspiring young people today.



IN HIS OWN WORDS

May, 2021

- Why civil rights activist Jerome Smith wants Lee Circle renamed 'Good Morning-Good Evening Circle'



Jerome Smith at the Treme Community Center in New Orleans on Thursday, May 13, 2021.

As a child in the 6th and 7th Ward, Smith was taught to greet anyone he passed on the street. "It's not something I take lightly," he said, describing how he honored that tradition even as he traveled across the Deep South with a tenacious, tight-knit Congress of Racial Equality group from New Orleans that led Freedom Rides, integrated lunch counters and public facilities and led voter-registration drives.

Smith, now 82, has come to believe that the city's greetings are so essential that the former Lee Circle should be renamed "Good Morning, Good Evening Circle."



CONTACT US

For more information on
Mr. Jerome "Big Duck" Smith
please contact...

SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY LAW CENTER

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