

Follow Up

Campus activist of '60s in insurance now

Follow Up is a weekly feature that provides updated information on people and events formerly in the news.

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Charles E. Freeman III says he has always been singled out, both for praise and for blame.

Freeman was one of two black students who desegregated Rice University in 1965.

He was one of five students charged with fomenting riots at Texas Southern University in 1967.

He sparked a challenge to the powers of Rice University's president when he attempted to gain readmission to the school in 1969.

Today, Freeman is 28 and an insurance salesman with his father's firm in Port Arthur. He is married and has a two-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son.

Of his experiences in the '60s, he says, "I had a burden placed on my shoulders that I was too young to handle. I was 17 when I first went to Rice.

"I was alone at Rice. I never knew my roommates and never really got along.

"I had a good time. I played a lot of pool, read a lot, but the courses I was taking required attention to detail that I just didn't give to them.

"Then some friends of mine from Port Arthur who were going to TSU made me aware of how isolated I was on the Rice campus. I didn't even know where the Third Ward was."

Freeman was suspended in his sophomore year because of poor grades. He transferred to TSU.

"I had to stay in school," he says. "It was draft time."

Freeman says he wasn't very interested in the schoolwork at TSU either, but he did become active in campus politics.

On May 17, 1967, rioting broke out on the TSU campus. Scores of police officers were rushed to the scene, and as police tried to clear a barricade and bonfire on Wheeler Street, shooting erupted. Officer Louis Kuba was shot and killed. Two other officers and a TSU student were wounded.

Police arrested 462 persons. Freeman and four other students, later known as the TSU 5, were charged with violations of the state antiriot statute. Charges of murder and assault to murder were lodged against the group later.

"We were scapegoats," says Freeman. "They couldn't charge 500 people. They couldn't find the killer. But they knew who the activists were — they knew who I was — so they picked us up."

Freeman says the disturbance grew out of rising tensions related to a variety of campus and community issues.

The prosecution in Freeman's riot trial, led by Dist. Atty. Carol Vance, alleged that Freeman had incited other students to riot by knowingly lying in telling them that some whites had murdered a black child.

The trial ended in a hung jury and Freeman was not retried. The murder and assault to murder charges were dropped.

In the spring of 1969 Freeman applied for readmission to Rice. A faculty review committee approved his admission, but Rice's acting president, Frank Vandiver, vetoed the decision, saying it would lower the school's academic standards to readmit Freeman.

Faculty and students protested and Freeman's name was in the headlines again.

"I was a convenient issue," says Freeman. "The SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) joined in, but they were more interested in promoting themselves than in helping me."



Photo by Blair Pittman, Chronicle Staff

Charles Freeman was 17 and one of Rice University's first black students when this photo was taken in 1965.

Freeman eventually got back into Rice by making up his failed credits. But he still wasn't happy there and transferred to Lamar University in Beaumont, from which he was graduated with a degree in history and literature.

Freeman says his metamorphosis from student activist to insurance salesman is a logical change.

"I needed to do something concrete, something out in the world. I'm helping people. If I can help someone who needs insurance I will, even if it means a smaller commission."

He says the activist spirit which he helped shape has been subverted.

"It's all become commercial and affiliated with the drug culture. The sweat of brothers and sisters has become fashionable. And once something becomes fashionable, all you have to do to undermine it is to change the fashion."

But Freeman still has hope. "The spirit of our nation has always been tested, but we're still here."