

Black Student Defends His Confederate Flag

Byron Thomas Says He Doesn't See Racism, Just Southern Pride

Submitted by Scott D. Myers

By Deb Goldschmidt (CNN)

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(CNN Image)

(CNN) -- Byron Thomas is 19, black, a freshman at the University of South Carolina Beaufort and a proud Southerner. He hung a Confederate flag in his dorm room window until the university asked him to take it down because several people had complained about it. (The university later stepped back from the request, saying all students have the right to free speech.)

"I know it's kind of weird because I'm black," Thomas said in an iReport he submitted. "When I look at this flag, I just don't see racism. I see pride, respect. Southern pride, that's what I see."

"Ignorance gave that flag a bad name, ignorant people like the KKK," he told CNN's Don Lemon.

The post got other iReporters talking, including Omekongo Dbinga, who said Thomas has the right to fly the flag, but there's no denying the flag's history. Egberto Willies said he doesn't understand Thomas' view of the Confederacy, but he thinks the North and South both have ugly histories with race relations.

Thomas said he won't put the flag back up, although he believes he has the right to do so. The university plans to host a discussion about the flag after students return from winter break.

Here's what Thomas told CNN in America about the flag and why he probably won't hang it up again.

CNN: What does the Confederate flag mean to you?

Thomas: To me, it means more states' rights and no bigger government. The government was getting too big. I believe South Carolina knows me better than the federal government. I personally have a lot of pride from being in the South. I see some freedom from when the South seceded from the North. I know that sounds bad. I see freedom differently than most people see it. Just that you have the right to do what you want to do and form your own opinion.

The bottom line for me: I do not see that flag as a racist symbol. Only an ignorant person can say that. I have researched it and studied it.

CNN: Why is it so important to you to be able to display this flag in your dorm room?

Thomas: It is very important that I be allowed to exercise my freedom of free speech. I'm one of the nicest people, but today, you can't say anything without people getting offended or hurt by what you are saying. I felt very offended when I was asked to take down that flag because (the housing department) said it violated the racist code. It's a freedom thing to me.

The generation before us told us that the flag is racist. It's not going anywhere. No one is going to burn all of the flags. If I or someone else can show my generation that it means something different maybe it won't divide us. I haven't experienced racism myself but it still exists. Maybe if we start now with this flag, racism can continue to get smaller.

CNN: Do you have roommates and what do they think of your flag?

Thomas: I have three white roommates and they know I'm not racist. They think what I'm doing is amazing because they have never met a black person like me before because of my opinions. I was starting to make a change because I made my own opinion.

Some black students came to me and have said I have changed their viewpoint on the Confederate flag and that I helped change them. They have said (like me) they also don't want to be called African-American anymore. They, too, feel like they want to be American, not African-America, because it's like a second category and they were born in America not Africa. So other people have come up to me, not just my roommates.

CNN: When did you hang the flag up and how long was it up before you were asked to remove it?

Thomas: I hung it up in September after a research paper for a class about it. After that, I hung it up because I saw other students hanging things up and I didn't really have anything. It was up for two months and no one said anything about it. I had other black students say they had no problem with it. There were no riots, no complaints; no one was throwing rocks or anything. It was peaceful around here until the housing department asked me to take it down. They said they had been trying to get in touch with me. It was Sunday, Nov. 20. A resident adviser came to my room and asked me to take it down. So I put it up in my living room and then the head housing woman came looking for me and said I was violating the racism code. I asked if I could put up an American flag and she said yes because it's not racist. It's a double standard because some Native Americans could take offense to an American flag. I didn't say that, but I was thinking it.

The flag is down (since Monday, Nov. 21) because the housing woman said I had to (remove it.)

I might not put it back up now because my parents are disappointed in me. They've said I can do what I want but I want them on my side. I want them to see it as trying to make a change for my generation. I'm sorry if I'm making my family look bad.

CNN: Were you surprised when you were asked to remove your Confederate flag?

Thomas: I was very surprised because it wasn't bothering anyone. The big reason is because I'm black and most black people have feelings about it and I have no problem with it. It didn't become an issue until they asked me to take it down. People came and asked me why I had to take it down and I was embarrassed. I was apparently violating a code I didn't think I was violating.

CNN: What do you want your critics to know?

Thomas: I just feel like, I should have my right to see a flag the way I see it. Just because someone feels offense to it, why should I have to take it down? They can walk another way. It's not like I have a cross burning or a noose hanging outside my room. I don't see it as a racist statement to me and that's my opinion of it. I don't think I should have to take it down just because someone might take offense. They shouldn't have that control of me. They are not my mom and dad.

My generation should have our opportunities to show our viewpoint. We shouldn't have to change it just because the majority disagrees. I'm not trying to make someone cry or hurt them. Why can't we be ourselves and think for ourselves for once? I'm trying to show that I'm not thinking for the majority which is that (the Confederate flag is) racist.

CNN: At this point is it about influencing change more than about the flag itself?

Thomas: Change has to happen somehow so I said, 'Why can't I be the person who makes the change? Why not start now instead of later?'

I've made change before in my community, so why can't I do it on a national level? In my high school, I got them to become a national green and solar school by using solar panels and my school or county didn't pay for a thing.

CNN: What have you learned from this experience so far?

Thomas: I learned that my generation of people are applauding me and telling me they want to see things different now. I've gotten so many friend requests on Facebook. They are encouraging me. The generation before has mixed views about it, strong views. The generation before won't let us think for ourselves. They had their chance to think and run things but we need to have our chance. We will have our turn to step up to the plate and get out of this mess that we're in.

I respect where they are coming from. I'm not saying that what happened didn't happen. We don't want history to repeat itself, but I see where they are coming from. They endured things I might never endure, but why do I still have to feel grounded, that I have to endure it? They weren't allowed to go to school with white people but I am. I have never been to a school without white people. Why can't my generation start making our own history? I respect every black person for the civil rights movement. I just want us to move on from all of the hatred that's still dividing us today. I'm tired of us still being divided.