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James A. Hefner

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James A. Hefner

James Arthur Hefner (June 20, 1941 – August 27, 2015) was president of Tennessee State University from 1991 to 2005.

Hefner was raised in Brevard, in western North Carolina. His family was so poor it could not afford books. His elementary school principal noted his brightness and invited him to visit after school to read her encyclopedias.

“For eight years,” said Hefner, “while I was in elementary school, I would stop at her house on the way home, and I would read the encyclopedia.”

After getting excellent grades in elementary and high school, he was offered several scholarships from various colleges. He settled on North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro, N. C. He was classmates with Jesse Jackson; both were befriended by Dr. Janieta Tate, professor of Economics. Dr. Tate often invited Hefner to come to her house to discuss economics. Here Hefner had the opportunity gain a deeper knowledge of the subject which was to become his major scholarly interest.

Graduating with a B.S. in Economics in 1961, Hefner then earned a master's degree in economics from Atlanta University in 1962, where he taught for several years. In 1971, he earned his Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Colorado.

One of Hefner's favorite sayings, often heard at graduation, was:

“Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must outrun the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle, or it will starve. It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or gazelle – when the sun comes up, you'd better be running.”

At TSU there is a scholarship named after him.

Hefner used his training in Economics to become an expert on the black labor force. Specific areas of interest were the areas of employment practice; participation in areas of employment practice, and labor-force participation regarding minorities. He was co-editor of the book Public Policy for the Black Community: Strategies and Perspectives. He helped write a number of other works in the area.

Hefner spent most of his career working at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) These were Tennessee State, Jackson State, Tuskegee Institute, Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University.

He was known for his interest in making friends with students. Hefner challenged the students with “intellectual walls”; he also enjoyed involving them in "intellectual headaches,” as he called them

During his time at TSU, Dr. Hefner implemented the construction of several new buildings, for example, the Floyd-Payne Student Center and the Ned McWherter administrative offices. The money for these improvements came in part from the \$112 million Geier settlement. The Geier decree finalized the 40-year lawsuit aimed at eliminating the segregated educational system in the state of Tennessee. The original plaintiff was Rita Geier. She was a lawyer and professor at TSU. She filed the suit in the early seventies.

He oversaw the addition of new graduate programs. During his tenure enrollment reached an all-time high of 9,100 students.

Hefner’s son David also chose a career in high education administration.

In addition, Hefner brokered the partnership with the Tennessee Titans that allowed TSU's football team to play at what is now Nissan Stadium.

The slogan he chose for his administration was “students matter most. “Signs bearing the saying were posted around the campus.

After his time at TSU, he was named a fellow at the W.E.B. DuBois Center for African American Research at Harvard University.

His career at TSU lasted 14 years.

He died of colon cancer in 2015. He is interred at Greenwood Main Cemetery in Nashville.





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Additional Reading

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