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Name is taken off building at USC

Rufus von KleinSmid, the university's fifth president, was a eugenics supporter.

By TERESA WATANABE AND TOMÁS MIER

With its soaring arches, international flags and globe-topped tower, the Von KleinSmid Center for International and Public Affairs is one of the most prominent buildings at USC. Its namesake, the late Rufus B. von KleinSmid, has held a place of distinction as the university's fifth president.

But on Thursday, USC announced it had stripped Von KleinSmid's name from the building as the university at last reconciled with his disturbing leadership role in California's eugenics movement.

The scholar, who is credited with expanding the university's academic programs and international relations curriculum as president from 1921 to 1947, believed that people with "defects" had no ethical right to parenthood and should be sterilized. His "Human Betterment Foundation" was instrumental in supporting the 1909 Califor-

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USC removes ex-president's name from building

[USC, from A1] nia legislation that authorized the forced sterilization of those deemed "unfit" — essentially anyone non-white, said Alexandra Minna Stern, a University of Michigan history professor and expert on eugenics.

His active support of eugenics is "at direct odds" with the university's multicultural community and mission of diversity and inclusion, President Carol L. Folt announced.

"This moment is our Call to Action, a call to confront anti-Blackness and systemic racism, and unite as a diverse, equal, and inclusive university," Folt wrote. "You have asked for actions, not rhetoric, and actions, now."

The university also removed Von KleinSmid's bust from the building after a unanimous vote by the Board of Trustees' executive committee.

Tweets with the hashtag #VKCisOverParty celebrating the change circulated Thursday among USC students after photos of the building without Von KleinSmid's name were posted on the platform.

"Everything he believed in is a threat to the Black community and any marginalized community, so I do think it's a step in the right direction," said junior Jaya Hinton, co-director of USC's Black Student Assembly. "But anti-Blackness is more than just names on buildings. USC is an institution, and systemic, institutional racism is a real thing."

USC had failed to respond to years of demands



USC PRESIDENT Rufus B. von KleinSmid, left, and Universal Pictures producer Mark Hellinger in 1946.

from within and outside the university to remove Von KleinSmid's name from the building.

They include Japanese Americans, who say Von KleinSmid prevented more than 150 second-generation Nisei students from returning to USC after World War II, when tens of thousands were wrongly incarcerated following Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

Von KleinSmid was the only West Coast university president who refused to send their transcripts to colleges in other states, where Japanese Americans released from incarceration camps were trying to finish their education, said Jon Kaji, past president of the USC Asian Pacific Alumni Assn. He began pressing USC in 2012 to remove Von KleinSmid's name from the building but officials did not respond, he said.

But mass protests calling

for racial justice, triggered by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, finally pushed USC to action. Folt said her office has been deluged with input from students, staff, faculty leaders, deans, alumni and neighbors.

Earlier this week, students began circulating an online petition, similar to one in 2018, calling for the renaming of the building. Last September, just an hour before Folt was sworn in as USC president, the bust of Von KleinSmid was found with a rag over its face with the words "rename VKC" on it and a piece of cardboard inscribed with "NAZI" hung around its neck.

Last year, then-Provost Michael Quick announced the formation of a Nomenclature Task Force to address concerns regarding building names, symbols and monuments. The committee's formation came af-

ter members of the Undergraduate Student Government had called for it a year before.

Folt also announced five other actions USC would immediately take to confront systemic racism.

- Form a community advisory board for the Department of Public Safety, Racial and Identity Profiling, officer training, education, disciplinary matters, financial resources and partnerships with the Los Angeles Police Department are among issues that will be examined.

- Convene a new task force on diversity, equity and inclusion. Folt said she will charge a new committee to identify structural and institutional processes that perpetuate racism and inequality.

- Hire a chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer.

- Expand space and programming for underserved students, including those who are undocumented, along with those who are the first in their families to attend college. The expanded services will include students who are Black, Asian Pacific American, Latino, Native American, Middle Eastern, LGBTQ, veterans and former foster youths.

- Mandatory unconscious-bias training. Folt's announcement drew cautious support from students who have been pressing for action on the issue.

"She's using the right words, for sure. I'm just hoping there's action behind them," said USC rising senior Michael Mikail, who is

majoring in political science. "I think it's one step in the right direction, but we have a lot of steps to go."

In a Daily Trojan letter to the editor last week, Mikail had included the name change on a list of actions he wanted Folt to take to better support Black students.

"I, and other Black students advocating for change, did not come to USC to be activists or agitators," said Mikail, who also serves as executive director of USC's Pan-African Student Assembly. "We came for an education, and USC's institutional failings have forced us into these roles."

Hinton, who is studying business administration, commended Folt's other actions, such as instituting implicit bias training. But she said she hoped not just students but also faculty members, administration and Department of Public Safety members would be required to take it.

George Sanchez, a professor of American studies and ethnicity and history at the school, who has documented Von KleinSmid's history, said the former USC president was a key figure in pushing California to the forefront of the eugenics movement. The German Nazis were reading writings by California scientists leading the movement, which was couched as a scientific way to improve public health and welfare by regulating the makeup of America's "racial stock."

"They were seen as reformers," Sanchez said. "At the time, these ideas were

seen as what the social sciences and science should work together to make a better society."

California's sterilization law did not call out race explicitly, instead targeting those with "mental deficiencies" and "feeble-mindedness."

But the labels were disproportionately applied to racial and ethnic minorities, people with actual and perceived disabilities, poor people and women, Stern said, and the eugenics literature of the time specifically mentioned Mexicans, Filipinos and, later, Japanese and Japanese Americans.

Overall, about 20,000 people in a dozen California state institutions were sterilized throughout the 20th century under the law, which was repealed in 1979, Stern said.

Her research lab has found that Latinos were sterilized at significantly higher rates than others in the institutions, the majority of whom were white. Latinas were 59% more likely to be sterilized than non-Latinas, the lab found.

Assemblywoman Wendy Carrillo (D-Los Angeles) has introduced legislation to compensate survivors of sterilization.

"To me, this is California's version of Confederate monuments," Sanchez said. "This history of eugenics and sterilization is central to California's racial history. In a sense, USC understands that it has a long history that is implicated in this, but I think they waited until a moment like this to act."

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