

“This is ‘*Him*.’” The Life of Joseph Allen Vaughn
Brian Neumann

When Joseph Vaughn enrolled at Furman University in January 1965, he insisted that his presence was not “part of any great movement, not...any sort of monumental precedent;” it was simply “the fulfillment of his dream” to get the best education possible.¹ He assured his white classmates that he wanted “the same things that you want” and had “the same dreams and aspirations that you have.”² In the years ahead, the empathy, enthusiasm, and equality in these words came to define his time at Furman—and his life.

Joseph Allen Vaughn was born into a single-parent household in an impoverished Greenville neighborhood in 1946.³ His great-grandfather Crawford Vaughn had been born into slavery, probably near Reidville, South Carolina, and moved to Greenville County after the Civil War; the family spent the next seventy years as farm laborers and mill workers.⁴ When Vaughn was five, his mother Clara Vaughn married James Adkinson, a 27-year-old tire worker and World War II veteran, and Vaughn’s half-brother James Otis Adkinson was born in 1953.⁵

Vaughn attended Greenville’s Sterling High School, the state’s oldest public black high school and a center of Civil Rights activism.⁶ Throughout the early 1960s, his classmates led the sit-in demonstrations that desegregated the city’s lunch counters, libraries, and public parks.⁷ Vaughn excelled at Sterling, graduating third in his class and serving as president of the student body, vice president of the National Honor Society, president of the French and Physics Clubs, and a member of the student newspaper and yearbook staffs. As president of both the Greenville and Southeastern NAACP Youth chapters, he met national Civil Rights leaders Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins.⁸

In October 1963, the Furman University trustees voted to consider applications from “all qualified applicants.”⁹ The following spring, Vice President Francis Bonner asked Greenville civic leader Sapp Funderburk to find an African-American high school student with a history of leadership and academic success and a “personality that could handle the pressures of desegregat[ion].”¹⁰ After speaking with Sterling guidance counselor Xanthene Norris, Funderburk quickly identified Joseph Vaughn; in a letter to Bonner in May 1964, Funderburk wrote simply and confidently “In my judgment, this is ‘*him*.’”¹¹

When the trustees voted to delay desegregation, Bonner arranged for Vaughn to spend a semester at Charlotte’s all-black Johnson C. Smith University. Furman officials monitored his progress, commenting on his “excellent” course work and extracurricular activity and sending him material about his “situation for next semester.”¹² Sometime in November 1964, Bonner secretly approved Vaughn’s application for admission, and the following month the trustees officially reaffirmed their non-discriminatory admission policy.¹³

Vaughn enrolled at Furman on January 29, 1965, and started classes the following week.¹⁴ His enrollment, by all accounts, was “routine” and uneventful, and though he later described his first semester as “an adjustment for Furman as well as for me,” he “never perceived any problems.” In his relationships with teachers and students, he sought “to be accepted as Joe Vaughn, and not as a black student.”¹⁵ As a friend and classmate later explained, Vaughn “was not concerned about desegregating Furman. He was concerned about *attending* Furman...It was his dream to attend Furman, and he was living his dream.”¹⁶ In his own words, Vaughn wanted above all “to be a student”—to obtain “a quality education” that would enable him to “be of significant service to my people, my community, my state, and my country.”¹⁷

Vaughn majored in English and minored in French, and, as he had in high school, he excelled both socially and academically. Never one to “sit back and watch things,” he joined the Pershing Rifles, the Color Guard, the Baptist Student Union, and the Collegiate Educational Service Corps, and served as Vice President of the Southern Student Organizing Committee. He served as chairman of the “Talk-a-Topic” committee, which organized forums to discuss race relations, the Vietnam War, and the student rights movement.¹⁸ He acted in at least two school plays—“The Firebugs” and “Pygmalion”—and, upset about the lack of school spirit on campus, he joined the cheerleading squad his senior year.¹⁹ Despite his busy schedule, Vaughn later confessed to feeling “cheated” by the lack of social opportunities on campus.²⁰

Though Vaughn did not see himself as part of “any great movement,” he expressed a passionate belief in equality throughout his time at Furman. After years of spiritual searching, he concluded that Christianity too-often stood in the way of progress and equality in American society; though its values were “valid,” in practice it was “inadequate” and “inapplicable to present situations.” He converted to the Baha’i Faith, which actively sought to eliminate prejudice and injustice and (in Vaughn’s words) to “revitalize mankind spiritually, break down barriers between people, and lay foundations for a unified world based on justice and love.”²¹ His senior year, as vice president of the Southern Student Organizing Committee, Vaughn led seventeen students and four Greenville citizens in a peaceful protest of the Orangeburg Massacre. The demonstrators marched in front of the Greenville Federal Building carrying signs that condemned racial prejudice and police brutality. As Vaughn explained to Mayor David Traxler, the “sympathy march” had three primary objectives: to protest injustice, to defend African-Americans’ right to free expression, and to defend the dignity and equality of all people.²² Two months later, Vaughn led another interracial march through downtown Greenville in memory of assassinated Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King.²³

Vaughn graduated Furman *cum laude* in 1968 and took several graduate educational courses at the University of Georgia and the University of South Carolina.²⁴ He worked as an English teacher in the Greenville County School System from 1969 until 1982, and he quickly earned a reputation for activism and involvement. At Hughes Middle School, Vaughn chaired the English Department and led several programs with the district’s Drug Education Steering Committee. To encourage and develop students’ individual passions, he taught several “special interest programs” on creative writing, drama, and modern dance. He believed that teachers must do more than “give out information;” they must help their students with “value clarification and value formation.”²⁵ One of his students remembered that Vaughn “reached out to every student” and “saw potential where we didn’t see it...Joe took responsibility for each and every one of us.”²⁶

Vaughn was a tireless advocate for teachers, fighting for higher salaries and greater representation. He served as president of the Greenville County Association of Teachers and in 1981 was elected president of the South Carolina Education Association.²⁷ Vaughn, colleagues remembered, was “never intimidated,” and his activism often brought him into conflict with district leaders. In the mid-1970s, Superintendent Floyd Hall transferred Vaughn to Mauldin High School, where he hoped Principal Marilyn Hendrix could more easily “contain” him. Although Hendrix described Vaughn’s teaching methods as “unorthodox,” she realized that students loved the joy and humor that he brought to the classroom, and she gave him the freedom to be himself. Forty years later, Hendrix remembered Vaughn as a “committed,” “enthusiastic” teacher whose words could “move crowds.” His co-workers, like his classmates at Furman,

described Vaughn as a “smart,” “happy,” “outspoken” man with a joyful sense of humor and a “love of life.”²⁸

Though Vaughn retired from teaching in 1982, he remained a vocal social and political activist. He served on the Governor’s Task Force on Critical and Human Needs and on a Blue Ribbon Task Force on the South Carolina Educational Improvement Act.²⁹ He died in Columbia on May 31, 1991, at the age of 45.³⁰ Fifty years after Vaughn desegregated Furman—and almost twenty-four years after his death—friends, classmates, and co-workers remember a man and a life filled with joy, humor, wisdom, compassion, and a passionate belief in equality. Vaughn came to Furman “to be a student;” instead, he became a symbol. He wanted to be “just another regular guy;” instead, for the lives he touched and the school he loved, he became much more.

¹ Larry Estridge, “New Student Notes Furman’s Friendliness, Scholarship,” *The Furman Paladin*, 19 February 1965, Furman University Digital Collections.

² Quoted in Courtney Tollison, “A Majority of One,” *Furman Magazine*, Summer 2008, Furman University Digital Collections, 21.

³ Shi, David. “Joe Vaughn fought his own crusade.” *The Greenville News*. 10 February 2002. Furmaniana, Box U-War, Folder “Vaughan [sic], Joe.” Furman University Archives.

⁴ “Crawford Vaughn,” Reidville, South Carolina, 1870 *United States Federal Census*, ancestry.com. “Crawford Vaughn,” Butler, South Carolina, 1880 *United States Federal Census*, ancestry.com. “Oliver Vaughn,” Butler, South Carolina, 1920 *Federal Census*, ancestry.com. “Ollie Vaughn,” Butler, South Carolina, 1930 *Federal Census*, ancestry.com.

⁵ “Clara Josephine Vaughn and Johnie B. Adkison,” August 14, 1951, Marriage License Search, Greenville County Probate Court, <http://www.greenvillecounty.org>. “James Adkinson,” *Greenville, South Carolina, City Directory, 1953*, U.S. City Directories Collection, 1821-1989, ancestry.com. “Johnie B. Adkinson,” *U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946*, ancestry.com. “James Otis Adkinson,” *Find a Grave Index, 1600-Present*, ancestry.com

⁶ “A Walk Through History: Take a Stroll Downtown to Connect with Greenville’s Civil Rights Struggles,” *Greenville Online*, 12 January 2010, greenvilleonline.com.

⁷ O’Neill, Stephen, “Memory, History, and the Desegregation of Greenville, South Carolina,” *Toward the Meeting of the Waters: Currents in the Civil Rights Movement of South Carolina During the Twentieth Century*, ed. Winfred B. Moore, Jr. and Orville Vernon Burton (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2008), 289-291. Victoria Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 172.

⁸ “Help in Forming Values One Role of Good Teacher.” *Baltimore Afro-American*, 2 March 1974.

⁹ “Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Trustees of Furman University,” 8 October 1963, Board of Trustees and Executive Committee, Box “Minutes 1962-1963,” Folder “August-December 1963,” Furman University Archives

¹⁰ Tollison, “Majority,” 20.

¹¹ Courtney Tollison, “Upstate Desegregationists Blazed the Trail,” *Greenville Journal*, 3 October 2013, greenvillejournal.com. Funderburk, Sapp, to Francis W. Bonner. 20 May 1964. Francis W. Bonner Collection, Box 212, Folder “Joseph Allen Vaughn.” Furman University Archives.

¹² Funderburk, Sapp, to Joseph Vaughn. 27 October 1964. Francis W. Bonner Collection, Box 212, Folder “Joseph Allen Vaughn.” Furman University Archives.

¹³ Bonner, Francis, “Why I Am Convinced That the Trustees of Furman University Must Not Alter the Present Policy on the Admission of Students,” Furmaniana Collection, Box “Be-Bo,” Folder “Bonner, Francis W.,” Furman University Archives. Minutes of the Board of Trustees of Furman University, 8 December 1964, Office of the

Chaplain: L.D. Johnson, Box "Office Files, 1965-1967," Folder "Furman University Committees and Trustees, 1963-1965," Furman University Archives.

¹⁴ "Furman Enrolls First Negro Undergraduate." *Greenville News*, 30 January 1965.

¹⁵ "Help."

¹⁶ David G. Jeffrey to Kate Dabbs, email, 11 June 2014.

¹⁷ Tollison, "Majority," 19. Report on Joseph Vaughn. Francis W. Bonner Collection, Box 206, Folder "Trustees—Admission Policy." Furman University Archives.

¹⁸ Tollison, "Majority," 21.

¹⁹ "Help." Courney Tollison, *Moral Imperative and Financial Practicality: Desegregation of South Carolina's Denominationally-Affiliated Colleges and Universities*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 2003, 118.

²⁰ Michelle Rene Simpkins, "Furman's First Black Students Look Back," *The Furman Paladin*, 8 February 1985, Furman University Digital Collections.

²¹ Joseph Vaughn, "Why I Am a Baha'i, Not A Christian," *The Furman Paladin*, 10 February 1967, "Furman Student Newspapers," Furman University Digital Collections.

²² George Johnson, "Sympathetic Marchers Protest Student Killings," *The Furman Paladin*, 16 February 1968, "Furman Student Newspapers," Furman University Digital Collections.

²³ Michel, Gregg L., "It Even Happened Here: Student Activism at Furman University, 1967-1970," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 109, No. 1 (January 2008), 46. Available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27570938>.

²⁴ Simpkins, "Furman's First." Vaughn's obituary, and several secondary sources, claim that Vaughn earned master's degrees from the two institutions. Though the University of Georgia confirmed that Vaughn enrolled for at least one quarter, neither university found any record that he completed the degree.

²⁵ "Help in Forming Values One Role of Good Teacher," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 2 March 1974, available from news.google.com.

²⁶ Neil Harris, quoted in Tollison, "Majority," 21.

²⁷ Shi, "Joe Vaughn." Marilyn Hendrix, interview with Brian Neumann and Steve Richardson, 10 July 2014. Other sources state that Vaughn was elected in 1982.

²⁸ Hendrix, interview with Brian Neumann and Steve Richardson, 10 July 2014. Gale Werner, interview with Brian Neumann and Steve Richardson, 10 July 2014.

²⁹ Tollison, "Majority," 21.

³⁰ "Funeral Services Thursday for J.A. Vaughn," *The Greenville News*, 6 June 1991.