

Chapman, John Kenyon (Yonni) ^[1]

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19 Mar. 1947- 22 Oct. 2009

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John Kenyon Chapman, known as Yonni, was a life-long [social justice activist](#) ^[2], organizer, and historian who focused his academic and social career on workers' rights and African American empowerment in central North Carolina. Chapman was born in Shaker Heights, Ohio, in 1947. He received a bachelor's degree in United States history from Harvard University in 1969 and subsequently moved to Atlanta, Ga., to join the fight for African American equality. Chapman became a certified laboratory assistant after attending a two-year program at Atlanta Area Technical School. He moved to North Carolina in 1975 and worked as a technician, chiefly in the hematology laboratory at the North Carolina Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill, N.C., from 1975 to 1985. During this time, Chapman became active in local social justice struggles and community organizations. He served as president of the North Carolina Memorial Hospital Employees Forum from 1978 to 1980 and helped unite his coworkers against racial discrimination and unsafe conditions in the workplace.

Soon after joining the North Carolina Memorial Hospital staff, Chapman became involved with the Workers Viewpoint Organization, a diverse nationally active progressive organization that was involved in many workers rights and racial justice campaigns, as well as African liberation and anti-apartheid struggles, in and around Greensboro and Durham, N.C. In 1979, he joined the Communist Workers Party, a radical Maoist political organization with militant and strongly anti-capitalist principles that focused its efforts chiefly on unionization and civil rights. On 3 November 1979, the Communist Workers Party held an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally in Greensboro. Armed members of the [Ku Klux Klan](#) ^[3] and the American Nazi Party arrived at the rally and opened fire, killing five [Communist Workers Party](#) ^[4] members. This event is known as the Greensboro Massacre, and the victims are remembered collectively as the CWP-5. Chapman was present at the Greensboro Massacre, an event that helped to solidify his commitment to social justice advocacy. He remained an active member of the Communist Workers Party until it dissolved in the early-mid 1980s.

Chapman was involved with a number of other campaigns and organizations during his time as a hospital employee. In 1980, he helped organize the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Housekeepers Movement and was active in various other campaigns in and around Orange County, N.C., including those of the Welfare Rights Organization and the Chapel Hill Tenant Organization. Chapman co-founded the Orange County Rainbow Coalition of Conscience in 1982 with fellow activist Fred Battle. The Orange County Rainbow Coalition of Conscience focused its efforts on local school politics and the 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns of Reverend Jesse Jackson.

Chapman was the North Carolina state coordinator for the Federation for Progress, a national progressive organization formed in 1982 that broadly held the ideals of equality, peace, freedom, and justice. The state chapter of the Federation for Progress was headquartered in Greensboro, N.C., and an active chapter existed in Durham as well. The organization dissolved around 1985.

Chapman was also a leader in the Durham chapter of the New Democratic Movement, a national progressive organization formed in 1985 in the wake of the Communist Workers Party. From 1985 until it dissolved in 1990, the New Democratic Movement promoted a socially democratic agenda and took a more peaceful and broadly accessible approach to politics and economics than that of the Communist Workers Party.

During the late 1980s, Chapman was employed as a woodworker at Hill Country Woodworks in Chapel Hill, was an original member of the Orange County Human Relations Commission, and served on the board of directors of the Community Church of Chapel Hill. Chapman entered the United States history graduate program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1990 and received his masters degree in 1995 after completing his thesis, *Second Generation: Black Youth and the Origins of the Chapel Hill Civil Rights Movement, 1937-1963* .

While at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he founded and directed the Freedom Legacy Project, a student-oriented social justice organization that aimed to expose institutional racism and document the history of racial justice struggles at the university in order to make that history available to modern movement-building efforts. The Freedom Legacy Project was active from 1995 to 2001 and focused much of its efforts on publicly questioning the campus presence of the Silent Sam Confederate soldier statue and decrying on racist grounds the namesake of the Saunders Hall classroom building.

During the mid-1990s, Chapman was an organizing committee member of the People's Music Network, as well as co-manager of Internationalist Books in Chapel Hill. He was an expert witness in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Housekeepers Association lawsuit, and was instrumental in organizing and presenting the housekeepers' history. From 1996 to 2000, Chapman served on the board of directors of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Campus Y, and in 2000 he made an unsuccessful bid for director.

Chapman joined the doctoral program in United States history at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2000 and received his Ph.D. in 2006. In his dissertation, *Black Freedom and the University of North Carolina, 1793-1960* Chapman explored institutional racism and the African American struggle for equality at the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) [5]. During this time, Chapman was a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and focused much of his efforts on organizing a campaign to abolish the annual [Cornelia Phillips Spencer Bell Award](#) [6] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The award was named in honor of a 19th-century woman who advocated higher education for females, yet was also a white supremacist.

Chapman's campaign was ultimately successful, and his efforts opened a dialogue about the history of white supremacy, slavery, and racism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. From 2005-2006, Chapman founded and directed the Campaign for Historical Accuracy and Truth, a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill-based social justice organization that, according to its founder, aimed to "build a larger movement for historical honesty and inclusiveness as a component of the struggle for social and economic justice.". The Campaign for Historical Accuracy and Truth focused much of its efforts on commemorating the Lenoir dining hall cafeteria workers' strike of 1969 and campaigning against the Cornelia Phillips Spencer Bell Award.

Throughout the 2000s, Chapman concerned himself with civil rights education in the Chapel Hill community and was actively involved in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro branch of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) [7] (NAACP). He served as the historian and second vice-chair of the organization during the late 2000s. During this time, Chapman became a certified Community Civil Rights Educator and was instrumental in a number of local commemorative civil rights campaigns.

After a 30-year battle with cancer, Yonni Chapman died on October 22, 2009 in Chapel Hill.

Resources:

John Kenyon Chapman Papers #5441, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://finding-aids.lib.unc.edu/05441/> [8] (accessed October 31, 2016).

John Kenyon Chapman Collection (05441). Carolina Digital Repository, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/list/uuid:fc3f5c38-a6b1-4a81-922b-50da82e906fd> [9] (accessed October 31, 2016).

Chapman, John Kenyon, and James L. Leloudis. 2006. *Black freedom and the University of North Carolina, 1793-1960*

Chapman, John Kenyon. 1995. *Second generation: black youth and the origins of the civil rights movement in Chapel Hill, N.C., 1937-1963*. [Dissertation]. <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/indexablecontent/uuid:2ad37fba-c082-4e69-9a16-13...> [10] (accessed October 31, 2016).

Subjects:

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27 October 2016

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