Homecoming 2015 Commission Statement

Columbia, SC – October 26, 2015 – on behalf of members of the 2015 Homecoming Commission (HC), we’d like to first extend our deepest thanks to all of you who made this year’s Homecoming week possible. In light of recent tragedy, it became difficult for our commission to walk the line between allowing events to go on in celebration and being sensitive to the issues that had affected so many within our community. A week before the Homecoming events were supposed to begin, we were tasked with creating/developing/adjusting events to include a bigger emphasis on unity, compassion, and service; a task that we, as the commission, felt was our duty and gladly accepted. We were also informed that we’d need to make difficult decisions regarding our current events, being that many of the staff and personnel we were requesting to make these events possible were no longer able to be of service. We did our best to be forthright and honest regarding changes to the schedule of events to all those who were participating in Homecoming.

We were amazed at the outpouring of support from our students, faculty and staff, and community members who took the adjustments in stride and worked their best to help out a cause that was much bigger than us. In one week, we hosted 11 different events including a competitive field day, an outdoor movie night, a Homecoming King and Queen royalty crowning, a dance competition, and a trivia night, among other week-long participatory events. We also hosted three repurposed events to allow students the opportunity to connect with and serve our greater community: our “Kickoff to Support Carolina” helped students to fill four encouragement banners with nearly 2,000 signatures and encouraged them to fill out 232 thank you cards which were given to first responders in the area. During ‘Cocky’s Donations’ we collected nearly 9,000 items, in addition to several hundred dollars, all of which were donated to local charities in the area. We closed out the week with a celebration event that showcased student leaders and highlighted organizations while recognizing local heroes here at USC and in the surrounding community.

We’d also like to take this time to respond formally and respectfully to the disappointment expressed regarding our Homecoming Week of Events this year. As the Homecoming Commission, it has always been, and always will be our most sincere intent and mission to provide a week of events that promotes and encourages diversity, inclusivity, and the upholding of USC’s most recognized tradition. It is our deepest regret that individuals on this campus were in disagreement with this statement and frustrated with our handling of Homecoming week as a whole.

Through analyzing written press and social media, we decided it best to specifically address the facts as they pertain to the overall schedule of events. To begin, it was always the desire of the HC to have a Step Show on campus during Homecoming week. A meeting was held on March 5th between campus partners representing both the HC and the Colonial Life Arena (CLA) to discuss the event. During that meeting, the dates of October 15th and October 16th were given to the HC for use as event dates that would be put on hold with CLA for the fall.

On April 13th, a HC representative found out through a friend that there was a concert scheduled for the night of October 16th, and immediately an email was sent by the HC to the CLA representative, inquiring about Homecoming events on the CLA calendar. CLA responded confirming that a concert had been booked on that day because, as the representative stated, “nobody told me it was Homecoming.” The HC immediately began searching for any venue in the area that would be able to host the event (keeping in mind venue capacity and budgetary restrictions) for Friday (10/16), and all were unavailable. A meeting was then hosted on April 24th between the HC and NPHC leaders within the Leadership and Service Center to address those scheduling conflicts and discuss possible solutions for the event.

On June 15th, advisors working with the NPHC organizations were notified of options we’d be able to offer concerning the Step Show. On June 18th, an email was sent to all NPHC presidents with an invitation to participate in a Step Show to be held on October 11th; they were asked to confirm their participation by the deadline of the 30th, which was then extended due to no reply until July 7th. Negotiations made with NPHC leaders were unsuccessful. On July 9th, NPHC leaders confirmed in an email to the HC that they, after speaking with NPHC presidents, would no longer be participating in the Homecoming Step Show; they would instead hope to participate in a Stroll-Off, in which proposal ideas were then set in
motion. Both parties respectfully agreed there would be no Step Show this year and intended to move forward in other directions to accommodate.

In mid-July, student leaders representing the NPHC organizations emailed a proposal for a Homecoming Stroll-Off to the HC advisor, who then looked over the proposal in order to confirm the event request. A meeting between the Stroll-Off organizers and the HC was held on August 14th, to discuss the feasibility and details of the event. The Stroll-Off proposal was tentatively accepted on that same day via email, pending the confirmation of a date, time, funding, and sponsorship.

On August 20th, an email was sent to the Stroll-Off organizers confirming that the HC would not be able to directly sponsor their event because we didn’t have any hand in actually planning the event itself, and we couldn’t directly sponsor an event to happen without having a HC Director in charge. All other collaborative events held that week followed the same rule. Also, Stroll-Off organizers expressed their desire to have the event be exclusively open to only NPHC organizations in regards to participation, and because that fact prevented the event from being holistically inclusive, the HC could not serve as a sponsor. The HC was happy to agree to help fund and promote the event as part of Homecoming week. It was agreed upon by both parties on September 4th that the HC would provide the needs of the stage, AV/lighting/sound, and security for the Stroll-Off.

The HC and the Stroll-Off organizers met to discuss the Stroll-Off again on September 17th. After that meeting, it was confirmed that the HC would still be providing the stage, AV/lighting/sound, and security for the event that would be held on Friday, October 16th, time pending the confirmed Carolina Productions event. Stroll-Off reps solidified a venue and a sponsor for their event shortly after that meeting. On October 1st, after releasing a statement regarding our Homecoming Week of Events that included the Stroll-Off, we were informed via email by Stroll-Off organizers that we had wrongfully adjusted their description before posting online, which we sincerely apologized for as a grave mistake on our end, and made immediate amendments so that an updated press release could go out the next morning.

After the flooding occurred, the HC was tasked in making extremely quick decisions regarding the Homecoming Week of Events to not only accommodate the students coming back, but to also remain sensitive to the needs of this community. Due to already-taxied responders and infrastructure within our community, the parade was cancelled, the Kick-Off/Pep Rally event was altered, and adjustments were made to our week-long events.

In the midst of these changes, the HC was also informed around 4:00 PM on October 9th by the sponsor of the Stroll-Off that the Stroll-Off organizers had decided to move the location of their event to Greene Street to accommodate the already taxed infrastructure of the community. The HC then sent an email confirming that information at 4:59 PM. In that same email, we also included that we’d secured for them a DJ and the stage for their event to hopefully help the organizers out with these last minute changes to the schedule. The HC received an email at 6:32 PM that stated the organizers respectfully declined to have the event at that time. Confused by this, we were informed later that same evening that the decision had not, in fact, been made by the Stroll-Off organizers to switch the location, and that it had instead been a miscommunication to the HC. The decision to cancel the Stroll-Off was made by the Stroll-Off organizers in accordance with this confusion. As this event was a Homecoming promoted event and was not planned by the Homecoming Commission, we could not move further with any plans.

In the past, USC Athletics has granted us the opportunity to be present on the football field during halftime of the Homecoming game; this also became a contested topic as it was suggested that the HC decided to change things this year in choosing to appear on the field during pregame instead of halftime. However, this was actually something completely outside of our control. The HC requested the use of the field during halftime this year, and our request was denied, as local responders in the surrounding community were being honored and recognized. As the men and women being honored were risking their lives each and every day to keep this community safe, it was appropriate that the halftime be dedicated solely to their efforts. Instead, we were offered the pregame show, which we gladly accepted. The week took on a whole new theme, and we did our best to stay as organized and diligent with it as possible.

For any miscommunication on our end, we sincerely apologize. It was an unfortunate series of situations that led to this point, and to the ultimate cancellation of some of our most treasured events. On behalf of the 2015 Homecoming Commission, it is and will continue to be our responsibility to supply you all with the facts to better explain the situation that had unfolded.
CALL TO ACTION: If this year taught us anything, it has taught us first and foremost that we have incredibly passionate students, who long to make a difference on campus. We strongly encourage those of you looking to make that difference to stand up and apply to be on the commission, in order to voice your concerns and offer suggestions as to how we can make future homecomings the best, most inclusive programs for ALL students.

We hear your disappointment, and we want that feedback. Attacking the individuals who are often merely messengers in these situations is not only unfortunate, but it’s unfair. We ask that you please act – don’t just react, and we’ll all continue to become better USC students and Carolinians.

All of that being said, it is our commitment to you all that future Homecoming celebrations encourage ALL students to get involved and to have a voice in how we showcase USC to the community and to our alumni. We want as many students to have a say in the planning process, and we hope to encourage future discussions, specifically regarding USC Homecoming 2016 events, inclusion and diversity, service opportunities, theme, and competition.

OPEN FORUM: Please join us on Wednesday, November 4th at 8:00 PM in the Leadership and Service Center (located on the 2nd floor of the Russell House across from Einstein’s bagels) for a discussion on USC Homecoming 2016 and all that it can be. We look forward to seeing you there, and making next year’s Homecoming experience the best yet.

Respectfully yours in sounding off,

The 2015 Homecoming Commission
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