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**Nikole Hannah-Jones Issues Statement on Decision to Decline Tenure Offer at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and to Accept Knight Chair Appointment at Howard University**

Today, award-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones announced that she has declined an offer of tenure from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). In her first extensive comments since the UNC Board of Trustees voted on her tenure, Ms. Hannah-Jones released the following statement:

“I have loved the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill since I was a child watching Tar Heels basketball on television. Two decades ago, in 2001, I learned that not only had I been accepted into the master’s program at the journalism school at UNC, but that I had received a full-tuition Park Fellowship. I cried from joy. I could not believe how lucky I was to get the chance to learn journalism at a place I had so long revered.

“For the next two years, I practically lived in Carroll Hall, spending more time there than anywhere else, even my apartment. I passed hours and hours in that building, studying, working at the Park Library, soaking in the skills of journalism – as well as its ethics and mandates – from the many generous instructors, sitting in the offices of professors – such as Chuck Stone and Harry Amana – who enthralled me with their stories and guided my steps. I met one of my best friends in the master’s program, and she became my daughter’s godmother.

“UNC took a woman with ambition but no practical journalism training and provided the foundation for all that I would become. And through the years, Carolina has been so good to me: inviting me to give the journalism school’s commencement address in 2017; honoring me with the Young Alumni Award that same year and the Distinguished Alumna Award in 2019; and last year, inducting me into the N.C. Media Hall of Fame.

“I have tried to repay the university by mentoring and supporting students through the organization I co-founded – the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting – and by regularly visiting the campus to give talks and meet with students. And so, a few years ago when Dean Susan King first raised the possibility of my coming to teach at the university, I was deeply honored. As a full-time journalist at The New York Times who had no intention of leaving the profession, I told her I could not consider it. But those who know Dean King, know this woman is relentlessly persuasive and never takes her eyes off the long game. Last year, she came to me with the idea of the Knight Chair in Race and Investigative

Reporting. Our country was undergoing a racial reckoning, and she talked about the moment we are in and how important it was for the upcoming generation of journalists to have the knowledge, training, historical understanding, and depth of reporting to cover the changing country and its challenges. She told me that Carolina was undergoing a racial reckoning of its own, that its leadership was committed to real change, and that she felt I could play an important role in this effort.

“I knew it would be a heavy load to continue my work as an investigative reporter and take on teaching, but I could not dismiss the security and academic freedom of tenure that accompanied the Knight Chair at Carolina and the opportunity to return to serve my alma mater. After giving her offer a lot of thought, the possibility of coming back to Carolina and formalizing the mentoring and teaching I have been doing for years proved too powerful for me to deny. I said yes, and then, like every other person who has been named a Knight Chair at Carolina, I began the rigorous tenure process.

“As part of the months-long tenure process, I had to write a teaching statement, a creative statement and a service statement. I had to teach a class while being observed by faculty. Dean King solicited letters to assess my portfolio of work and professional accomplishments from several academic experts in the field of journalism whom I did not personally know. I presented to the journalism faculty. Following these steps, my tenure was put to vote by all the full professors of the journalism school, who were overwhelmingly in support.

“My tenure package was then submitted to the university’s Promotion and Tenure committee, which also overwhelmingly approved my application for tenure. My tenure package was then to be presented for a vote by the Board of Trustees in November so that I could start teaching at the university in January 2021. The day of the Trustees meeting, we waited for word, but heard nothing. The next day, we learned that my tenure application had been pulled but received no explanation as to why. The same thing happened again in January. Both the university’s Chancellor and its Provost refused to fully explain why my tenure package had failed twice to come to a vote or exactly what transpired. The rest of this story has been well documented in the press.

“Being asked to return to teach at Carolina had felt like a homecoming; it felt like another way to give back to the institution that had given so much to me. And now I was being told that the Board of Trustees would not vote on my tenure and that the only way for me to come teach in the fall would be for me to sign a five-year contract under which I could be considered for tenure at a later, unspecified date. By that time, I had invested months in the process. I had secured an apartment in North Carolina so that I would be ready to teach that January. My editors at The New York Times had already supplied quotes for the press release of the big announcement. I did not want to face the humiliation of letting everyone know that I would be the first Knight Chair at the university to be denied tenure. I did not want to wage a fight with my alma mater or bring to the school and to my future colleagues the political firestorm that has dogged me since The 1619 Project published. So, crushed, I signed the five-year contract in February, and I did not say a word about it publicly.

“But some of those who had lobbied against me were not satisfied to simply ensure I did not receive tenure. When the announcement of my hire as the Knight Chair came out at the end of April, writers [from a North Carolina conservative think tank called the James G. Martin Center railed against the university for subverting the board’s tenure denial and](#)

[hiring me anyway](#). The think tank had formerly been named after Art Pope, an influential conservative activist who now serves on the UNC Board of Governors, who had helped birth the center. The article questioned how I had been hired without the Board of Trustees approval, and its writer argued that, because the university hired me anyway after the board stymied my tenure, the Board of Governors “should amend system policies to require every faculty hire to be vetted by each school’s board of trustees.” And yet, when that article was published, it had not been made public that I had been hired without the board approving my tenure or my hire. Even faculty at the journalism school were not aware that I had not been considered for tenure and would not learn this until some days later.

“Nine days after the James G. Martin Center published this piece, reporter Joe Killian at N.C. Policy Watch broke the story that, because of political interference and pressure by conservatives, I had been denied consideration for tenure and instead offered a five-year contract. The story about the denial of consideration went viral, and I was dragged into the very thing that I had tried to avoid as the actions of the Board of Trustees became a national scandal.

“I was the first Black Knight Chair at UNC since the position was founded and the only one to be appointed without tenure. I would come to learn that not only had there been political interference, but the school’s top donor had been lobbying against me and questioning my credentials and integrity as a journalist. I was determined to remain silent and to not comment to the press or to engage in the controversy, even as the man whose name is on the school of journalism where I would work continuously impugned my character and my work in the media, even going as far as to question whether I am a Black separatist.

“These last few weeks have been very dark. To be treated so shabbily by my alma mater, by a university that has given me so much and which I only sought to give back to, has been deeply painful.

“The only bright light has been all of the people who spoke up and fought back against the dangerous attack on academic freedom that sought to punish me for the nature of my work, attacks that Black and marginalized faculty face all across the country.

- Dean Susan King who, in a vacuum of leadership, has exhibited courage, integrity, honesty, and a refusal to be bullied even if it cost her. This is why I wanted to come work under her leadership.
- My colleagues across the country who spoke up with vigor and outrage and to whom I am so very grateful.
- The faculty at the School of Journalism and Media and across campus who spoke truth to power and stood up not just for me, but for the academic integrity of North Carolina’s flagship university.
- The Carolina alumni who sent letters, made calls, and applied public pressure to the Board of Trustees to maintain the integrity of the process and the university.
- The advocates, including members of the state legislature and the local NAACP branches.
- All the universities that reached out to offer me a home, where, as one dean of journalism put it, I would be given “tenure *and* respect.”

- My amazing legal team: the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., Levy Ratner PC and Ferguson, Chambers and Sumpter, P.A., for your guidance and for providing me with the best representation in the country.
- The New York Times, where I will continue to work as a magazine staff writer.
- And most of all, the students at Carolina, who protested and fought to hold the Board of Trustees accountable, even as you were treated with disrespect by the institution charged with serving you.

“I cannot adequately express my gratitude to you all. But I will not be joining the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as a professor.

“I cannot imagine working at and advancing a school named for a man who lobbied against me, who used his wealth to influence the hires and ideology of the journalism school, who ignored my 20 years of journalism experience, all of my credentials, all of my work, because he believed that a project that centered Black Americans equaled the denigration of white Americans. Nor can I work at an institution whose leadership permitted this conduct and has done nothing to disavow it. How could I believe I’d be able to exert academic freedom with the school’s largest donor so willing to disparage me publicly and attempt to pull the strings behind the scenes? Why would I want to teach at a university whose top leadership chose to remain silent, to refuse transparency, to fail to publicly advocate that I be treated like every other Knight Chair before me? Or for a university overseen by a board that would so callously put politics over what is best for the university that we all love? These times demand courage, and those who have held the most power in this situation have exhibited the least of it.

“The Board of Trustees wanted to send a message to me and others like me, and it did. I always tell college students and journalists who are worried that they will face discrimination, who fear that they will be judged not by their work but for who they are or what they choose to write about, that they can only worry about that which is in their own control: their own excellence. I tell them all they can do is work as hard as possible to make themselves undeniable. And yet, we have all seen that you can do everything to make yourself undeniable, and those in power can change the rules and attempt to deny you anyway.

“Since the second grade when I began being bused into white schools, I have been fighting against people who did not think a Black girl like me belonged, people who tried to control what I did, how I spoke, how I looked, the work I produced.

“I have never asked for special treatment. I did not seek it here. All I asked was to be judged by my credentials and treated fairly and equally.

“I do not come from a wealthy and connected family. I did not arrive at Carolina with the understanding that no matter how I performed, I would have a job and prominent position guaranteed. My dad drove a bus and my mom was a probation officer. I got into Carolina on my own merits. I scraped to secure internships at small papers like High Point Enterprise. I got my first job covering schools for the Chapel Hill News. At age 27, when a certain wealthy donor was inheriting the publishing gig from his family paper, I was interning at the News & Observer while working a second job as a mattress salesperson to make ends meet.

“I worked my way up from newspaper to newspaper, and have worked as a journalist for 20 years, traveling from North Carolina to Oregon to New York City before landing at The New York Times. In 2016, I co-founded a journalist organization to help others succeed in the field of investigative reporting. That organization, the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting, is housed at the University of North Carolina. I did not have \$25 million to give, but I brought what resources I had, not to force my beliefs about journalism on anyone, but to help train eager journalists in the tools of investigative reporting and the skills necessary to cover a deeply divided and unequal multiracial democracy.

“Every Knight Chair at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill since the 1980s has entered that position as a full professor with tenure. And yet, the vote on my tenure had to be forced by weeks of protests, scathing letters of reprimand, the threat of legal action and my refusal to start July 1 without it. Even then, the Board of Trustees had to be led to this vote by its youngest member, Lamar Richards, the student body president who publicly demanded the special meeting. The board then chose to wait to vote until the last possible day at the last possible moment.

“If I had any doubts about whether I should come to UNC or not, watching the proceedings affirmed my decision.

“I watched as student protestors, who for weeks had been expressing their pain and hurt, were forced to wait for more than 20 minutes before they were let into the meeting room. I watched as not a single official in the room bothered to explain that the meeting they had advertised as a special meeting that would be livestreamed would in fact be held in closed session because that is the rule. I watched as their response to the shock, hurt, and outrage of students, who thought they’d come to a public hearing, was to remain silent when any adult in the room could have calmly explained what was happening. I watched as the Chancellor and other officials looked down and did nothing as law enforcement shoved, pushed, and pummeled the students they are supposed to serve. I watched as student protestors were forced outside in the heat to wait for nearly two hours as the board argued over my tenure. And then I watched as one of the trustees came out and falsely claimed that June 28 had been the first time the board had ever had the opportunity to review my application, and that it was the *board* that had been treated unfairly in this situation.

“To this day, no one has ever explained to me why my vote did not occur in November or January, and no one has requested the additional information that a member of the Board of Trustees claimed he was seeking when they refused to take up my tenure. The university’s leadership continues to be dishonest about what happened and patently refuses to acknowledge the truth, to offer any explanation, to own what they did and what they tried to do. Once again, when leadership had the opportunity to stand up, it did not.

“At some point when you have proven yourself and fought your way into institutions that were not built for you, when you’ve proven you can compete and excel at the highest level, you have to decide that you are done forcing yourself in.

“I fought this battle because I know that all across this country Black faculty, and faculty from other marginalized groups, are having their opportunities stifled, and that if political

appointees could successfully stop my tenure, then they would only be emboldened to do it to others who do not have my platform. I had to stand up. And, I won the battle for tenure.

“But I also get to decide what battles I continue to fight. And I have decided that instead of fighting to prove I belong at an institution that until 1955 prohibited Black Americans from attending, I am instead going to work in the legacy of a university not built *by* the enslaved but *for* those who once were. For too long, Black Americans have been taught that success is defined by gaining entry to and succeeding in historically white institutions. I have done that, and now I am honored and grateful to join the long legacy of Black Americans who have defined success by working to build up their own.

“I will be taking a position as the inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Reporting at Howard University, founded in 1867 to serve the formerly enslaved and their descendants. There, I will be creating a new initiative aimed at training aspiring journalists to cover the crisis of our democracy and bolstering journalism programs at historically Black colleges and universities across the country. I have already helped secure \$15 million for this effort, called the Center for Journalism and Democracy, with the generous grants from the Ford, Knight, and MacArthur foundations, and have set a goal of raising \$25 million. In the storied tradition of the Black press, the Center for Journalism and Democracy will help produce journalists capable of accurately and urgently covering the perilous challenges of our democracy with a clarity, skepticism, rigor, and historical dexterity that is too often missing from today’s journalism.

“Historically Black colleges and universities have long punched above their weight, producing a disproportionate number of Black professionals while working with disproportionately low resources. It is my great honor to help usher to this storied institution these significant resources that will help support the illustrious, hardworking, and innovative faculty at the Cathy Hughes School of Communications and the brilliant students it draws. Thank you, President Wayne Frederick and Dean Gracie Lawson-Borders, for always treating me with dignity and respect, and for offering me a home where I can do my work unimpeded.

“Many people, all with the best of intentions, have said that if I walk away from UNC, I will have let those who opposed me win. But I do not want to win someone else’s game. It is not my job to heal this university, to force the reforms necessary to ensure the Board of Trustees reflects the actual population of the school and the state, or to ensure that the university leadership lives up to the promises it made to reckon with its legacy of racism and injustice.

“For too long, powerful people have expected the people they have mistreated and marginalized to sacrifice themselves to make things whole. The burden of working for racial justice is laid on the very people bearing the brunt of the injustice, and not the powerful people who maintain it. I say to you: I refuse.

“In the case of my tenure, the university has, begrudgingly, done the absolute minimum. In a split vote, it did what it was supposed to have done 7 months ago and, in doing so, many believe the university has resolved the issue. It has not.

“If the leaders at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill sincerely wish to redeem themselves, to live up to the university’s status as the people’s university, I would humbly suggest they do the following, at a minimum:

- Apologize publicly and privately to the student protestors treated so disrespectfully at the Board of Trustees meeting last week, and then dedicate themselves to addressing the demands issued by the [Black Student Movement](#).
- Agree to address the [demands issued by the Carolina Black Caucus](#) more than two years ago. To be effective, these efforts must include an actual commitment, with targets, for recruiting, supporting, and retaining Black faculty. While I provided an easy case for many to rally around, had I come, I would have been just the second tenured Black woman professor in the 70-year history of the UNC journalism school, and I would have been its first and only Black woman full professor. Black women account for just 1.9 percent of tenured faculty at UNC, and Black professors together account for just 5 percent in a state that is [22 percent Black](#) and at a university where the [student body is 11 percent Black](#). These issues predated my tenure and cannot be laid at the foot of a politically appointed board, since the tenure hopes of most Black professors are quashed before they even reach the Board of Trustees.
- Advocate to change the role that the Board of Trustees and the Board of Governors have over faculty governance and commit to respecting faculty governance and academic freedom at this institution. This requires a change to the way the boards are appointed so that they actually reflect the demographics of the state and the student body, rather than the whims of political power.
- Provide transparency around the tenure debacle that led us here. To date, neither myself, Dean King, my legal counsel, nor the public, have ever been told directly by the university why my tenure was not voted on in November, in January, or at any time before the forced vote in June. Public records requests by both journalists and residents have gone unfulfilled. This is unacceptable for a public university. University officials cannot rebuild trust without first providing truth and transparency in a public accounting of what went wrong and why.

“To Dean King, you are a champion for women journalists, a trailblazer in your own right. We did not ask for this fight, but we were determined to see it to victory. It would have been an honor to work for you.

“To the UNC faculty, especially the consummate professionals in the journalism school, I so looked forward to being your colleague and to learning from you and working with you. You welcomed me from the start. Our students are lucky to learn from you each day, and the university is lucky to have you.

“To the students, I am deeply sorry that I will not have the privilege of teaching you and learning from you. You are brave and full of grace, and I am so very proud of you all. My commitment to you has not wavered, I just will continue to do it as I have in the past, as an alum of the school and not faculty. I hope that you will consider Howard or another HBCU if you ever seek a new educational home, but whatever you do, I know you will continue to fight for justice.

“I will always be a Tar Heel. I remain grateful for all the university has given me and am committed to a lifetime of paying it forward. And I am so excited to now call myself a Bison as well and join the Howard family of which I have long desired to belong.”

Ms. Hannah-Jones is represented by the [NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.](#) (LDF), along with co-counsel Levy Ratner, PC and Ferguson, Chambers & Sumter, P.A.

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***About LDF***

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