

Nashville Scene

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A Tiger Fights the Tide

by STEVE HARUCH

Around 10:30 a.m. Sunday, Tennessee State University President Dr. Melvin Johnson got a phone call from campus police: Dr. Richard Browning, a professor in the Department of Agricultural Sciences, was adrift in rising floodwaters near the Cumberland River, clinging to a bale of hay for survival.

Like any university president, Johnson was concerned. Like any university president, Johnson wanted to help. Realizing that Browning — who had been partly submerged for more than two hours — was reaching his physical limits, and that the help requested from Metro was not coming quickly enough, Johnson asked campus police to bring a flat-bottomed canoe to what had been open farmland just a few hours earlier.

And that's when he stopped being like any university president.

Along with Quinton Puckett, a graduate student in Ag Sciences, Johnson canoed out into the roiling waters and brought Browning — and his two dogs — to safety.

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Along with two department colleagues, Mozell Byers and Roy Avery, Browning had been trying to rescue some goats from his research herd when the swiftly rising waters captured him. When Johnson and Puckett reached Browning, he was hypothermic. (He was treated at Baptist Hospital and has since been released.) Why did Johnson — an administrator, not a first responder — decide to take on this dangerous job? In his mind, it was pretty simple: He just happened to be the most qualified person there.

"I asked the question: 'Anyone with boating experience, any strong swimmers?' — and it was me," he says.

As a 22-year military veteran, Johnson says, "you're trained to assess situations and take appropriate actions." Most university presidents probably wouldn't consider canoeing out into floodwaters "appropriate actions," but then Johnson is not most university presidents.

"You just react," he says. "I don't look on it as any act of heroism."