

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
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Q. Can you talk about what you were involved with at Ohio State prior to the takeover? Black Student [Union] activities – tell us what that was all about.

A. Well, I would say in the fall of 1967, we somewhat began to realize that black Americans on the campus were being denied housing. That was our number one priority at the time, was the discrimination, both on and off campus. That along with the fact that there were no black teachers and very few limited classes, if any. And as I said earlier, we had to fight just for simple things, like two hours of jazz music [broadcast at the Ohio Union] on Friday afternoons. So, we started congealing around the lack of black participation in many events. And it escalated. We had a series of demands on the University – that we wanted to incorporate more black teachers and such. But everything came to an abrupt halt April 25, [1968, the day when] four ladies on the campus bus were assaulted. This somewhat broke the camel’s back. We were adamant that we were not to be overlooked, and we were to be taken serious. After that incident occurred, we immediately walked or marched on to the campus police precinct. And we had a tumultuous meeting with the police. And right after that meeting, we went to the student union building. And it was a mass meeting, group meeting, that evening in which we all had agreed that enough was enough. We were going to be heard the next day. So, the next day being April 26, 1968, the day I refer to as a day black American students at Ohio State fought the power. We were not to be denied. We took our concerns straight to the second floor in the Administration Building, where we thought all the officials would be. And they were. And at such point, we confronted them with our concerns. There was a great schism

between, I think Mr. [Gordon B.] Carson [who was Vice President of Business and Finance] and John Corbally [who was Provost]. So, there were two very contrasting characters and personalities that we were dealing with. One somewhat amicable, and the other very hostile, Bonner [Note: John Bonner was Executive Dean of Student Relations and was seen by students, like Carson, as not very receptive]. So that day, things heated up, yes.

Q. What happened?

A. What happened was, we went up to the top, the second floor, and as I recall, as you notice it's 50 years later, immediately Bonner and the Chief of Police, I forget his name at this point, they were taken to a secure area. And John Corbally was left in his office for some miraculous reason. We didn't really have a conflict with him. Maybe it was his personality that was not abrasive, but in any event, he was unrestricted from movement. The building, of course, was now becoming overrun with students coming for various reasons, whether it was inquiring, inquisitive or participating. And I would say between 9 or 10 in the morning until about 12:00 the building was open to people to come and go. However, at about 12:00 the building was somewhat contained or sealed off. No one was able to come in and out freely because the doors were closed. People that were in the building were given an opportunity, the secretaries and the people that just happened to be in the building, were given the opportunity to leave. It was the first-floor female bathroom, they were able to go out the window the back way. And so, of course, certain people were not allowed to leave. And of course, things got very tense. As I recall, the students, we used various ways to secure the building. And things got very heated for a while. Of course, we were in one area, in a large room as I recall. And John Corbally was

in an exterior room, another room adjacent to that area. And all day long they were shuttling between one room and the next. Now at this point, people took their various roles. I, for some reason, became, I was involved very intricately throughout the total movement from the beginning, but that particular day for some reason I had made my decision. The night before people were making all kinds of threats and things that they were going to do. However, I cautioned them to be very cautious about what they said in the open. And I wanted to be as discreet as possible, as to what I was going to do because I really didn't have a firm plan. But I did know that we had to address the issues that were in front of us. And that I, being one of the people that was very much involved with this, would have to play a role. And my role that day was to be the moderator or the negotiator between John Corbally and the Bonner people, representing the University. I shuttled between the two rooms. The students were in one room, a large room, and Corbally was in another, shuttling back and forth with demands and questions and what have you. I played that role, yes.

Q. And what were the demands?

A. Our key demand, of course, was to establish a Black Studies department, to have black teachers and faculties to be involved. That was our primary concern. However, I think one of the overriding issues that was not spoken that much at that time, but the housing discrimination on and off campus was a very top priority. Housing was of limited resources to black Americans. In answering the question, the primary concern that day was to address the four women being accosted on the bus, as well as demanding Black Studies for the University.

Q. So, I heard, I think his name was Mr. Flagg, yesterday. He was talking about kind of the sense of conviction that a lot of the students had and the need to take a stand. And as you say, not be dismissed. At what point did you feel it turn from a meeting to a takeover? What were the emotions that people were feeling?

A. Well, because of the recalcitrance of the Administration, it heightened. Things happened in a very short period of time. No one at the time thought about a takeover. That wasn't the plan. The plan was to address the issues that I spoke about earlier. However, with the recalcitrance of the Administration, things got more and more tense. As it escalated, so did the temperature in the room.

Q. So how did you feel coming out of the building at the end of the day? What was the feeling? What was your feeling?

A. Well, we had reached an agreement. There was an agreement made between the University and the students. And it was a time of elation in that we had made some victories. However, I still was not prepared to be as open. I wasn't jubilant. I surreptitiously left the scene and didn't want to bring attention to myself. I knew what [role] I had played [in the sit-in], but that was past. Now it was time to go on. And you had to survive. And survival for me was to be discreet. That was the program. However, I must note this. There were – and this is probably one of the issues that I really played a big role in – in that I had heard by phone and some of the discussion around me, that we were in great peril, in that the National Guard had been alerted. The state police were alerted. And it was a precarious situation. We had put ourselves in a very precarious position. And that became very apparent to me. So, I would say about 1:00, when the building was sealed off and I knew of this precarious position, or at least felt a sense of it,

I left the building, leaving out the back window. I went to the Oval and I made a speech to students that were on the Oval. Many of the students that attended were radical students, whites. They were called the SDS – Students for a Democratic Society. They had a platform, a stage, on the Oval. And I mounted the stage and I made an appeal to the whites, that now was the time for them to assist their comrades, their black comrades. So that was an attempt basically to provide some type of buffer between the forces that I saw that were out there and us. So, I came back with quite a few people and I told them to assume the first floor, in an attempt to provide some type of buffer for opposition. And they did. And of course, things continued.

Q. What were some of the results of the 26th? The “wanted results” and the “unwanted results.”

A. As we were talking about this past weekend, there was an immediate moving of the needle, in that the Administration became a bit more amicable to us in terms of listening at least. So, there was a positive effect from the University side. However, because of the fear factor – that they had intimidated my peers – there was a reluctance for people to stand up now because they knew that they may face the same consequence. Students were indicted that were involved in this particular incident, they were indicted with charges that mounted up to 304 years. So, there was a great intimidation factor that entered in from that point. However, we did see the University became, at least showed itself, to be more amicable to us.

Q. Several months [later] the indictments came down - were you and others surprised? I've heard people talk about, “Oh, the Administration is not going to take any action.” And then in June, people started getting arrested. What was the feeling around that?

A. Well, that I don't recall that as vividly as the day itself. However, when we did hear of the indictments I recall it was mass shock. People were of course afraid. It wasn't a good time on the University. They had thrown a cup of cold water on us for a minute and we had to take a defensive position, and we did. So, things changed. The University seemed to be more amicable towards us. They were listening. However, they were still inquiring. I was telling some people today that after that takeover they had identified many of us. And the University, in an attempt to rectify their position, they wanted to know more about us as they are doing today. And they had, as I recall, and I don't know how many of us, but I was one of those, they were very interested in finding out what made us tick, what made me tick. And they offered us some type of stipend to be involved with a conversation with the University. Little did I know, and I came to find out later, they were really observing us through two-way mirrors in the Stadium. I at one point took a wrong turn in one of the hallways and found out that we were being observed by two-way mirrors in the Stadium. So, the University, they wanted to know what made us tick. And so, I do know that happened. Of course, at that time the fear had been placed in all of us. We were all afraid for our own safety. So, we sort of retreated from being [on the offensive]. But then at that point I became more focused on graduating. I knew it was incumbent on me to buckle down and to graduate. So that sort of dominated my thinking at that point.

Q. When did you graduate and what was your major?

A. I graduated in 1970 in Psychology. I got a Bachelor of Science. I had taken some additional science classes, so most of my peers in Psychology got a Bachelor's of Arts.

But I got a Bachelor of Science in 1970. I returned immediately upon graduation to New York City, where I've been for the last 50 years.

Q. What did your family think about the events going on? Did they know about your activism?

A. No, my mother and father did not. It's strange. My mother and father gave me a lot of latitude, and they didn't know of my involvement in many things. I had come to Ohio State with a much longer history of protests that preceded coming here. In New York City, we had several situations, and I was involved as a young man, maybe 14-15 years old, with protests, discrimination protests. White Castle, for instance, wouldn't serve black Americans at the counter. We protested that. There was a building site in New York City, Downstate Medical Center, that was being built. We, under the leadership of Reverend Jemison, and Malcolm X by the way, marched with us in Brooklyn, protesting the lack of opportunities for black men getting employment at Downstate. I remember as a young man, maybe 14 or 15 years old, lying in the mud in front of dump trucks, saying, "We want jobs for black men, for black people." And I remember one of the officials coming over to me and saying, "How old are you?" I told him I was 14. He says, "You're too young, get out of here." I mean my activism was from an early age. My parents didn't know what I was doing. I didn't try to involve them. Of course, my father was very nationalistic. And the stories that he told me about the Second World War and black Americans being deprived of opportunities, really sickened me. And so, I came to Ohio State with some type, I had a background in Civil Right protests. But it all was heightened when I came here to Columbus and subsequently the events that I spoke of occurred.

Q. Where did you grow up?

A. I was born, I like to make this clear, I was born in Manhattan. However, I grew up and was raised in Brooklyn. I went to Wingate High School in Brooklyn. At this point I think they call it Crown Heights, the greater extension of Bedford-Stuyvesant. So yeah, I went to a new school that was called George Wingate. There was about, maybe at the time I went there, it was about 8 percent black. Barbara Boxer was a famous alumni of my high school. Barbra Streisand went to Erasmus High School, which is a rival school.

Q. The battling Barbaras.

A. The battling Barbaras, exactly.

Q. I was just in Crown Heights having pizza two weeks ago.

A. Oh, I see.

Q. So how did you end up coming to Ohio State?

A. That, too, is a very interesting question. Let's see. Initially when I graduated in 1964 from high school, my primary concern right then was to stay out of Vietnam. Vietnam was escalating out of control. Thousands of my friends and peers were being shipped to Vietnam. And my father, as I said before, the experiences that he shared with me in the Second World War, were very bitter. The types of experiences black Americans had in WWII, shook me. And what really resolved everything for me was when Mohammed Ali said that no Viet Kong had ever called me the "n" word. And when he said that, that was enough for me to say, "I'm not going." And so school became the other option. I wasn't really a student per se, but I knew I didn't want to go in the service. I went to a small school not too far from here. It's called Central State College in Xenia, Ohio. And I went there for my first year. I was studying to be a dentist. And they kept saying, "Well, we

don't have the equipment here at Central State, but they have it at Ohio State." So, one day I took a ride, I hitchhiked, to Columbus, which I don't know how far it is from Xenia, maybe 100 miles or so. So, I started hitching and I got here relatively easy. I reviewed the school. And I said, "Wow, this is a big school. I want to go here." So, on my way back, I was hitching and I got a ride here, there, and the next thing I know I was walking down some road, cornfields on both sides, and I got picked up by the sheriff. The sheriff rolls by and said, "What are you doing." I said, "I'm trying to get back to Xenia, Ohio." He says, "You know what? You better get out of town by sundown. I want you out of town by sundown." So, I said, "Okay." So, he puts me in the car and takes me into this little town and he takes me to the bus station and he said, "You get your ticket and get out of here." So, I did that. I bought a ticket. But it was like maybe a three- or four-hour wait for the bus. So, I decided to go to the local public library. I said that maybe I would stay out of the way here. And I went to the library. But before I knew it, I missed my bus. I said, "Oh man, I've got to get out of here." So, I started walking out of town that night. I had a little credit card on me and I saw this motel, so I stayed there that night. And the next day I proceeded. But I got myself out of that situation. The following year, which was '65, I transferred here, to Ohio State University.

- Q. Looking back on the Administration Building takeover, how do you feel about it now, as an adult, looking back on your college self?
- A. I had made some great friends here. I had some great roommates. I had some great friends. But I didn't really have any interaction with them after I graduated. I sort of left it behind me, and for the last 40 years I always regretted that, not seeing my peers and friends. So about two years ago or less, I made a few calls and I said, "We need to have a

50th anniversary of our takeover.” And so, things were set in motion and we started to plan for a 50th anniversary, which would be 2018, this year, April 25th, which was yesterday. We commemorated 50 years of the struggle. This is a struggle. We’re engaged in a struggle. It’s an ongoing struggle. It has various facets. But the Ohio State experience was one of those parts of my struggle in my life.

Q. And what’s it like coming back now with President Drake [as the University’s first African-American president].

A. I was very much encouraged. To be quite honest, I found it to be incredulous that we had a black president. So that experience was very enlightening. I met some very wonderful students that attend Ohio State. I was very much impressed with their maturity. So, coming back has been a great experience for me. I’ve met some great people. And I saw my great friends. So, for me it’s been a wonderful return. I anticipated it to be so. And it’s been exactly what I thought it would be. So, I’m just overwhelmed with the reception that the University has afforded us – at least beginning to recognize the contribution that we attempted to make on the University or with the University. And so, I’m encouraged on that sense. However, it just underscores just how much more needs to be done. So, the struggle continues. The struggle continues.

Q. Is there anything that you would like the record to show that we haven’t talked about? That you feel is important for people to know or remember?

A. Well, as I said before, I’m encouraged with the progress that has been made. Of course, there is a lot to be done. To answer your question specifically, it’s still to be decided. We have a new president and it seems as though the country is receding, going backwards. So that’s my overall concern right now, is that we don’t go back to a dark period which we

thought we had left behind. I'm still reminiscent of problems and concerns but overall I'm encouraged with at least my University. I'm just impressed with the buildings and the people and, of course, the students. It's really just impressive to see such enlightenment and I'm encouraged, yes.

Q. Thank you very much for your time and for coming back after lunch and hanging out in the morning, and being you.

A. I want to thank you all, and peace and love.