

Interview of Clinton Etheridge (CE), class of 1969, conducted by Davis Logan (DL) and Patricia Gutiérrez (PG) at the Swarthmore College Black Cultural Center on September 27, 2014.

Clinton Etheridge was vice chairman of SASS in the year of '67-'68 and chairman of SASS during the year of '68-'69. During his time as chairman, the SASS organization conducted the occupation of Parrish Hall. He wrote an article in the March 2005 issue of the Swarthmore Bulletin titled, "The Crucible of Character" in which he gives an account of his experience as SASS chairman during the occupation of Parrish Hall.

DL: Thank you for coming. Thank you for doing this interview with us, we really appreciate it as we try to piece together a story of the history of Swarthmore College, one of the most important stories perhaps in the history of the 20th century, as you say. First of all, I'd like to start with the question:

Could you talk about how you came to be involved with SASS? We are also interested in your relationship with Sam Shepard and we're also interested in your experience with the A. Philip Randolph Educational Fund Young Militants Conference and whether or not that played a role in your activism at Swarthmore?

CE: OK, so that's really three questions, right?

DL: It is three questions.

CE: OK, so which one should I tackle first?

DL: First, how did you come to get involved with SASS?

CE: When I entered Swarthmore in September of 1965, I had no idea that I would become chairman of the Swarthmore Afro-American Students Society and that I would be helping to lead the takeover of the college Admissions Office in January of 1969. I came from New York City, graduated from Stuyvesant High School, was very interested in engineering, but engineering in the context of a liberal arts college. But then, my sophomore year, in the fall of 1966, black students started meeting and I was very interested in that and I wanted to be a part of that. I was raised in Harlem for the first ten years of my life, three blocks from the Apollo Theater, 273 West 122nd Street and even after we moved away from central Harlem I had friends and relatives who still lived in Harlem so I tended to identify with Harlem very strongly and the black cause. Also my parents were from North Carolina, small towns in North Carolina, and during the late '50s and early '60s I went down to my mother's home in Plymouth, North Carolina to visit the ancestral homelands, so to speak, the ancestral home spread, and that was a revelation for a young black boy from New York City to go down south in the waning days of

Jim Crow and segregation. So there was only one movie theater in this small town and all the blacks had to go upstairs and sit in the balcony and all the whites sat downstairs. And then, also, when we were coming down south, there was a ferry that crossed the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia, coming down from New York to North Carolina, and in those days, '56, '57, '58, in the waning days of Jim Crow, they had two sets of bathrooms, "White Gentlemen," "Colored Men," "White Ladies," "Colored Women." Of course the white bathrooms are always cleaner, I used the white bathroom, but nobody threatened to throw me overboard the Chesapeake Bay ferry, but as a result of those incidents, which were demeaning and dehumanizing to me as a black person, although nonviolent, I had my black consciousness I think was strengthened in the late '50s, early '60s. And so when the Civil Rights Movement got really going in the '60s with the Freedom Riders in 1961 and the killing of Medgar Evers (assassinated June 12, 1963) and the marches, Dr. Martin Luther King and others, I could identify with that. I identified with that very closely. So, I think that was part of the background and part of the influence that shaped me as a leader in SASS, even though when I first arrived at Swarthmore I had no idea that I would be involved in the Swarthmore Afro-American Students Society occupation of the Admissions Office.

DL: What was your relationship with Sam Shepard?

CE: Sam Shepard, Sam Shepard is one of the unsung heroes in SASS. He was the first chairman of SASS, I was the second chairman of SASS when Sam was the first chairman, and that was his senior year of '67-'68, my junior year. He and I were roommates down in the preps and I was the vice chairman and Sam and I were two of the Founding Fathers of SASS. There were Founding Fathers of SASS and there were Founding Mothers of SASS, but Sam and I, I think, were two of the most active Founding Fathers of SASS. Sam was from Philadelphia, he was a Sociology and Anthropology Honors Major, I was an Engineering Major. I was tall, he was short, but somehow we hit it off very well. We both thought a lot about SASS and the Civil Rights Movement, the coming Black Power movement, so we were very simpatico. As I said, I think Sam is one of the unsung heroes of SASS. More people know about me, more people know about Don Mizell, more people know about the Seven Sisters, but he was very very critical in the early days. I think he might have drafted one of the early articles of organization of SASS, he was one of our better writers back in those days. And so, as I said, he's one of the unsung heroes of SASS and there were a lot of people who were dedicated to the welfare of SASS in the early days, Founding Fathers, Founding Mothers, but Sam and I were very dedicated to SASS, so I don't think there was anybody more dedicated to the welfare of SASS in the early days than Sam Shepard and myself, but there were a lot of people who were very dedicated to the welfare of SASS in the early days.

PG: Could you name, quickly, just for our records, the two Founding Mothers of SASS?

CE: Well, there were many Founding Mothers of SASS. There were more Black women at

Swarthmore then there Black men and there were more Black women in SASS than there were Black men. This would be Marilyn Holifield, Marilyn Allman, Janette Domingo, Andrea White, Joyce Frisby, and I know I'm forgetting some names, but those are some that come to mind.

DL: And then, also, we have documents that say you were at A. Philip Randolph Educational Fund Young Militants Conference and we'd like to ask you if that played any role at all in your activism at Swarthmore.

CE: I think I went to two conferences, one in '68 and one in '69, so you're referring to the one in '69?

DL: This one happens to be '68.

CE: '68, OK. Yes. I was privileged to be invited to that conference, it was in Atlanta, and on the campus of Atlanta University, and I got a chance to meet other Black student leaders from around the country and some of the people in the movement. It was an eye-opening and educational experience for me. Yes, it helped broaden my perspective about the Black student movement and the Civil Rights Movement at the time.

DL: Could you please describe to us the roles that were played by the various members of SASS and whether or not there were tensions in leadership strategies or in strategy in general within SASS?

CE: As I mentioned before, there were more Black women in Swarthmore than Black men and there were more Black women in SASS than Black men. The Seven Sisters, as they were affectionately known, and others, a lot of the Black women who were the core of SASS, made a conscious decision that the chairman and the vice chairman should be Black males. And so, as I mentioned before, Sam Shepard was the first chairman of SASS during his senior year, '67-'68, my junior year, '67-'68, I was the vice chairman. I can best speak for myself in that, when I was elected chairman, in the Spring of 1968, I think, the reason I was selected was because I had been the vice chairman and I had been a sort of consensus candidate to assume the chaimanship. There were tensions in SASS, I think everybody was dedicated to the overall goals of SASS, which were to increase Black enrollment at Swarthmore, improve the quality of Black student life at Swarthmore, to recruit Black faculty, recruit Black administrators, and to bring Black Studies courses into the curriculum. I think everybody was committed to those overall goals and that overall vision of SASS, but there were differences of opinion. Some people tended to take a more militant view of things, some people tended to take a more moderate view of things, and I think one of the reasons I was elected vice chairman and then chairman is that I had an ability to speak to most of the Black students on campus, whether they were in SASS or not. So, I could talk to Don Mizell, I could talk to the Seven Sisters, I could talk to somebody who was on the fringe of SASS, or I could talk to somebody who was not in SASS and they would at least listen

to what I had to say, they might not agree with what I had to say, they might not do what I was asking them to do, but I was sort of a man of all seasons, if you will. Whereas there were some other people who, if they had been chairman of SASS, I think would not have had that ability to reach out in a broad way. So, yes, there were tensions within SASS, but I think we were all committed to the overall goals of SASS concerning Black student enrollment, quality of Black student life, recruitment of Black faculty, recruitment of Black administrators, and the bringing of Black courses and Black studies to Swarthmore.

DL: Mr. Robert Woodson reports that there was an eagerness on the part of outside groups, such as the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panthers and others, to be involved in the Swarthmore protests. Can you talk about how SASS had addressed the issue of collaboration with outsiders and any information that you would like to share with us about Robert Woodson?

CE: Yes, so why I don't I speak about Robert Woodson in specific first?

DL: OK.

CE: He was a community person and he contacted SASS around the time of the occupation and he was very helpful to us. So, among other things, on January 16th, 1969, when we vacated the Admissions Office, Robert Woodson organized a caravan of cars and vans to take us from Swarthmore. We vacated the Admissions Office and we left the campus because we wanted the campus to be able to devote itself fully to the death of Courtney Smith and we read a statement at the time, I don't have it in front of me, but we said something like, "We're asking for a moratorium on dialogue so that the college can give its full attention to the death of Courtney Smith. We believe that any person, be he the good president of a college or a black person trapped in America's ghettos, their situation is a tragedy and we remain firm in our conviction that the legitimate issues that we have raised remain unresolved and we seek to continue the dialogue at the earliest possible opportunity, but we were going to vacate the Admissions Office in the death of Courtney Smith. So, Robert Woodson was very helpful in that regard. A lot of people have said, then and over the years, and thought, then and over the years, that there were outside agitators who had infiltrated the campus at Swarthmore and brainwashed the Black students into doing this and that and the other, and that is totally false. The occupation of the Admissions Office in January of 1969 was a result of a specific set of homegrown facts and circumstances at Swarthmore, involving the then Dean of Admissions, Fred Hargadon, and a report he wrote on Black student admissions and issues concerning invasions of privacy with very specific data that was in the report on family incomes, SAT scores, grades, and things like that. So there were very specific issues at Swarthmore that led to the occupation of the Admissions Office in January of 1969. And, in my article, "The Crucible of Character," [article in the March 2005 Swarthmore Bulletin] which came out in 2005, I detail some of those events, the back and forth of the issues that finally led up to the occupation of the Admissions Office in January, 1969. There is a biography of Courtney Smith [*Dignity, Discourse, and Destiny: The*

Life of Courtney C. Smith, Stapleton, 2003] that was written by one of my classmates in the class of 1969, Darwin Stapleton, I forget the exact title of the biography, but it was very helpful in that he had access to the records and internal information from the Smith family and he discloses in the book for the first time that President Courtney Smith had a preexisting heart condition. Nobody knew this publicly until it was disclosed. So, that was, I think, a very important piece of information, and I mention that in my article, “The Crucible of Character.” But, in that biography of Courtney Smith, Darwin Stapleton also discloses that during the takeover of the Admissions Office, the college was consulting with the Pennsylvania State Police, but obviously I don’t know what the Pennsylvania State Police told Courtney Smith or the administration, but Courtney Smith and the administration were in charge. So, they might have been consulting with a lot of people, including the Pennsylvania State Police, but they were the ultimate decision-makers. I was a banker for most of my career, a commercial banker, and whenever we did a loan, a commercial loan, we would have our lawyers involved and lawyers are very smart and aggressive people and they would make suggestions on what should or should not be in the loan agreement or how to negotiate certain terms and conditions. So, we always listened to our lawyers because they are our lawyers and we were paying them and they were very competent, but we, as the bankers, were the ultimate decision-makers about what would be done or not done. And so, similarly, I think that was the case with Courtney Smith at Swarthmore in consulting with the Pennsylvania State Police. And, similarly, Don Mizell and I as chairman and vice chairman were the ultimate decision-makers about what would be done and not done during the occupation of the Admissions Office, although we did this obviously in consultation with the other black students. So, this notion that there were outside agitators who had infiltrated the campus and brainwashed the Black students is just false, untrue, but it was a myth that persisted for a long time and it might still persist today in the minds of some people.

DL: Did any of those [outside] groups offer to help?

CE: Our main liaison to the Black community was through Robert Woodson. And so, he was dealing with a wider set of interests, people who were interested in what was happening, but he was our main liaison or link to the Black community. We had a good rapport with him, we had confidence in him and we worked through him for the most part.

PG: Can you describe, just quickly, how you came to make that connection with Robert Woodson?

CE: That’s a good question. He just showed up in the early days and we started talking to him and we seemed to establish a rapport and trust and confidence and it went from there¹. As I said,

¹ Members of the Seven Sisters, Joyce Frisby Baynes and Marilyn Holifield, reported traveling to Chester to work with Robert Woodson’s CHIP Program and to serve as academic tutors for black children in the years before the 1969 occupation of the Parrish Admissions Office. Clinton Etheridge himself had met Robert Woodson and organized an event on campus, “Accent Africa,” on behalf of the Media Fellowship House on November 30th, 1968.

probably the most important contribution Robert Woodson made to the SASS occupation of the Admissions Office was the organizing of the caravan of cars and vans on January 16th 1969, the day that Courtney Smith died of a heart attack, unfortunately. That was very important because we were ending our occupation, which had been a disciplined, dignified, nonviolent event, but we were going to end the protest and we were going to vacate the Admissions Office and we were going to leave the campus for a couple days so that, as I said, the death of Courtney Smith could have the full attention of the college without any distractions.

PG: So SASS ended the sit-in in Parrish Hall upon receiving the news of Courtney Smith's death.

CE: Yes.

PG: Were you or other members of SASS involved in drafting the message that Don Mizell read as the group was leaving the building?

CE: Yes. Yes. So what happened that morning, January 16th 1969, uh I think can be thought about in a number of steps. So the first step was that we heard the news that Courtney Smith had died of a heart attack and this was just incredible news to us and there were some people in the Admissions Office, in SASS, that thought maybe it was a trick to get us out of the Admissions Office. But it wasn't a trick. Unfortunately Courtney Smith had died of a heart attack. So step one, we learned of the death of Courtney Smith as a confirmed fact. And then step two; we made the decision to vacate the Admissions Office. And then step three; if we were going to vacate the Admissions Office, we should make a statement and explain what we were doing and why we were doing it. Otherwise, there would be uncertainty, ambiguity. We wanted to tell our own story about why we were leaving. We didn't want others to try to tell our story about why we were leaving. And so, Don and I started drafting something and we came up with the statement that Don read and he read the statement right before we vacated the Admissions Office.

PG: So Mr. Woodson had arranged to have the black students the black students taken off campus to the Media fellowship house.

CE: Yes.

PG: And he remembers also taking you and Don Mizell to the memorial service for Courtney Smith.

CE: Um-Hum.

PG: Were other black students at the event and can you share your memories of the experience and talk about how other students reacted to your presence.

CE: Now you're talking about the memorial service for Courtney Smith?

PG: Yes.

CE: OK. Umm. I do not remember attending the memorial service for Courtney Smith. I'm not saying I didn't attend, I just don't remember attending it. At my age there are some things you remember and some things you don't remember and the things I do remember about the events of January 1969, I remember very distinctly and very clearly. But I obviously don't remember everything.

PG: Right. Can you just talk then about the reaction that other students had in general to both the takeover and at its closing the death of Courtney Smith and how they sort of reacted to or what their response was to the black student activists specifically.

CE: So we were in the Admissions Office for about a week and we occupied the Admissions Office it [indiscernible] it became the dominating event of campus. So, it, the whole community got engulfed in this event and there was a moderate caucus of students that were meeting in Clothier at the time and there was a radical caucus that was meeting somewhere and the radical caucus had a lot of members in SDS, Students for a Democratic Society which was a very active anti Vietnam War organization at the time. And I believe that um, overall the students were sympathetic to the SASS demands so I think there was a lot of sympathy for the goals and objectives but I think a lot of people, students including... faculty included, had issues with the nonviolent direct action that we took. So, um, and um, I wasn't constantly monitoring, we were not constantly monitoring the activities of the moderate caucus and the radical caucus. We were mainly concerned with interacting with the administration. So, during that week most of the black students who were in there where in there for... 24/7. I think people may have gone to the bathroom or taken a shower but for the most part people were there 24 hours a day over the course of the week. Now, Don Mizell and I, as the SASS chairmen and the SASS vice chairmen, were basically the... were the intermediaries or the negotiators so we were meeting with the faculty we were meeting with the administration and some of the student organization... black, some of the moderate caucus or radical caucus. So we would be doing that during the day and then in the evenings we would come back into the Admissions Office and brief the other black students on what we had heard, what we had done, what was happening, to keep them informed.

PG: And specifically after the death of Courtney Smith was there a change in either sympathy or in just the way you were received, SASS was received by the larger student body.

CE: Well um, you know what you know and you don't know what you don't know. So what I know is what I mentioned before. I think Courtney Smith might have passed away at 10 o'clock

in the morning and then the news drifted out. We vacated the Admissions Office around 1 o'clock or 12:30. So, there were a couple of hours for us to absorb the news of the death of Courtney Smith, for us to make the decision to vacate the Admissions Office and to coordinate with Robert Woodson and others -[cough] excuse me- for the caravan of cars and vans that would carry us to Media and also for us to draft the statement. So those were our priorities, that morning after we heard about the news of the death of Courtney Smith. So, and then, after we vacated the premises and went to Media, people slowly came back to campus but I don't think there was a systematic way for us to know what was the reaction of students were. But I think people were shocked and I think people were angry and I think there were some people who blamed us for the death of Courtney Smith even though we found out years later that he had a preexisting heart condition. But the death of Courtney Smith was a very unfortunate event but I think the cause that we were championing –the black admissions, the quality of the black student life- were valid, compelling, moral position. So in the “Crucible of Character” I say that I was totally committed to being SASS chairmen. I cannot speak for others I can only speak for myself. So, I believed in our cause so strongly, back then that I was prepared to be expelled from Swarthmore, to be beaten by the police, to be arrested. And fortunately, none of that happened to me or any of the other students. But um, neither was anybody expecting the untimely death of Courtney Smith which is a tragic event.

PG: So can you talk about how your experiences as a leader and activist in the black student movement at Swarthmore College influenced your life post graduation?

CE: I was a shy reluctant, unlikely leader. As I said, when I first came to Swarthmore in September of 1965, if somebody had told me I would be president of the black students group and we would occupy the Admissions Office that would have seemed so incredible and far-fetched at the time in '65. But at the same time I was, um... how can I put this? ... I took my leadership role in SASS very seriously and I and other people were very conscious of the fact that we were black students on a white campus in the mid 1960's when all of these issues were taking place. And Martin Luther King says, ‘The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in times of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy’ [reference to King's 1963 book *Strength to Love*]. So, I didn't know that quote at the time, but I think that is how I was thinking: that this was a challenge and an opportunity and I also believe that the time comes in the lives of most black people when the opportunity comes for them to stand up for the black race. And so, this was my opportunity to stand up for the black race. And as I said, I was a shy, reluctant, unlikely leader. But I was the man that history chose for this role. And as I mentioned in the “Crucible of Character” I could not break faith with my forbearers and others like Martin Luther King who made so many sacrifices for me and the black race and America and it was now my turn to stand and deliver to the best of my ability, my humble ability at Swarthmore. And that is how I viewed it.

PG: Alright, so is there anything else you would like to add?

CE: Umm, No there's nothing else I can think of.

PG: OK

CE: But thank you very much for this opportunity.