

*Harold Buchanan graduated from Swarthmore in 1969 as one of the first five students to receive a concentration in Black Studies, in addition to his major in Mathematics. He was a founding member of SASS and was consistently involved throughout his time at Swarthmore. During the takeover of Parrish, he was the photographer who documented life inside the admissions office. Interview conducted by Nora Kerrich and Laura Laderman on September 27, 2014 at the Swarthmore Black Cultural Center. The transcription is word for word with the exception of unnecessary conversational "words" such as "um" and other expressions used in conversation, which have been edited for the sake of cleaner reading and clearer understanding.*

NK: This is the interview with Harold Buchanan, interviewed by Nora Kerrich and Laura Laderman. The date is September 27th, 2014, and it is at 11:30 in the morning. So I guess our first question was about how did you decide to attend Swarthmore College and what was your admissions process like to the school?

HB: I have to think about that. I attended a small high school in Long Island, and worked with the guidance counselor there. And I think he was probably my primary source of selecting schools. I think he initially recommended several schools. I was the first in my family to go to college so I didn't know a lot about the different schools and different options other than from reading. I ended up coming to Swarthmore to visit because I had a friend from my high school who moved to Philadelphia. So I came down to visit the school and stayed with him. The reason I really picked it first is because I fell in love with the campus. I really love nature and I loved the open surroundings, and the campus is really beautiful so that had a lot to do with my picking it over similar schools.

NK: Cool. And so what was it like to apply and be accepted to the school?

HB: Nothing really stands out in my memory about it. Other than that, let's see, I did the application, wrote the essays... I did have a local interview with someone on Long Island, an alumni on Long Island. I don't remember much about it; it was not particularly memorable. The campus visit I think I remember more than anything else. It was really the beauty of the campus. I don't even remember who I spoke to at the time, any of the questions or anything like that.

NK: Me neither.

HB: It probably hasn't been as long for you either.

NK: I guess we're interested also in what was your relationship with SASS, were you involved in founding SASS, what was your role generally in the group, that sort of stuff?

HB: Now that's a good question and one I can answer. I would say I was involved in the founding of SASS. I definitely was involved in the founding. You've heard about the seven sisters; they are things that legends are made of. Do they still use the term 'giants roaming the campus' around here? Back when we were at school they used to talk about people from past years as the giants who used to roam the campus. The seven sisters were good friends of mine, and they, of course, came up with the idea of an organization. I had been involved with various

Black activities since coming to school. I first got started, well... I went to an all-white high school on Long Island and didn't know very much about... didn't know anything about Black history – because it wasn't taught. Or didn't really know much about what was going on in Black America because we didn't have many Black radio stations or they didn't have those back then. And of course the mainstream media didn't see very much, at all, anything positive any way. I was kind of in the dark about a lot of things going on in the country other than what you read in the newspapers or see on the television news. And when I got here, I did meet, was exposed to -- from people visiting the campus, outside speakers, and things like that. There was a particular one, an alumni of Swarthmore, a Black alumni from several years ago, who never graduated, he had left school, he came back, he left and got involved in Neo Black politics and he came back a couple times and talked to some of us. He was one of the catalysts in getting people like myself to understand what was going on in the country, the dynamics of the Black political scene.<sup>1</sup> And then I spent time in Philadelphia going to different organizations there, there was a Black church there that was very activist. So all of those things raised my Black consciousness probably sometime around my sophomore year. And when the idea came up around starting an organization, I joined in and helped to form it.

NK: So what sort of role did you play within SASS at the beginning and throughout your time at Swarthmore? Did you have a specific...

HB: I avoided any leadership position, I was kind of, I've been the kind of one that's always been the second in command, I don't usually get out front because I'm not a big public speaker, which is part of why our interview's not going to go nearly as long as the last one. We'll probably be done in a couple minutes here. I've never been a big speaker, don't like to talk a lot, so I kind of stay in the background and try to get things done. I'm more of an action person. So if something needed to be done, I'll make sure it gets done. The logistics and execution are my strengths. In putting things together I was at all the meetings, the organizational meetings, helped with ideas, how we should do different things, anything except be the chairman. I was involved from the beginning in pretty original meetings.

NK: Do you remember any particular events including the takeover but other events prior to it that you worked on, that sort of thing?

HB: Well I remember one we participated in that was kind of controversial. There was a time when we decided to burn Martin Luther King in effigy. Have you heard about that event?

NK: No, I'd love to hear about it.

HB: I'll be the first to tell you. Of course there was a controversy at the time around Martin Luther King versus say, Malcolm X. There were two schools of thinking, you know, the turn the other cheek philosophy and the turn the other fist philosophy.

NK: mmm.

HB: We leaned more toward the Malcolm X side of things in terms of being more overt, and getting things done, and asking for what you want. So some of us, because of that, who looked

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<sup>1</sup> Delmar Scudder, later Delmar Sudarkasa [Rasaba Sudarkasa-Kyasa], named later in this interview.

at Martin Luther King as kind of lame, at the time, and I don't remember what precipitated it, what particular action of his, and it was definitely controversial, everybody was not involved with it. There was a small group that went down to Sharples patio and we got some kind of a stuffed doll made to look like Martin Luther King and made some speeches, whatever. Lit a fire, and so it was kind of controversial so... I was involved in pretty much everything that went on, from that extreme to the less extreme things.

NK: Cool. So we know that Sam Shepard graduated before the occupation of Parrish Hall, but he did return to support the sit-in and the takeover of Parrish Hall. So I was wondering if you had any specific memories of him, about his time that he was at Swarthmore, what it was like to have him present during the takeover?

HB: Actually I don't remember him being present during the takeover. I remember Sam when he was chairman, he also was pretty quiet, except that since he was older than some of us probably, so unlike me they could talk him into being a leader. And he stood up to the challenge and worked with the team and helped us make progress. So a real nice guy. But he wasn't a dynamic personality, that kind of radiates, he was a very quiet person. Easy to get along with. I don't recall him being at the takeover because during the time of the takeover I was pretty much inside the admissions office the whole time. Some people went outside for negotiation or whatever so probably Sam got involved in some of that stuff. He may have come to the admissions office but I don't recall that.

NK: Are there any specific stories you have that you remember about him. Part of the reason why we're asking is that since he has passed we're trying to get a portrait of him from folks' stories about what it was like having him as a leader at the very beginning of SASS and just trying to make sure that we get his history into...

HB: Yeah sure, sure, I can understand that. I knew him; neither of us talked very much so there weren't a lot of conversations. I can't really add too much to that, sorry.

NK: No, that's ok.

We learned that you were able to get a concentration in Black Studies prior to there being an existing Black Studies program at Swarthmore. So we were curious about what was it like to go, I assume it was to Lincoln University, to take courses and to do the study of Black history and Black sociology, that sort of stuff. So what was it like to do that work?

HB: Ok. Yeah, I do recall our trips to Lincoln University. It was a small group of us, we got the college van and went out there once a week for the class. It was good because it was an opportunity for us to get together in the van and have some social time together. Which on a busy campus, you don't get a lot of those opportunities, even with your best friend, so that was good. It was good to be exposed to that campus, which was a completely different kind of atmosphere. I'd never been in an all-Black campus, an all-Black environment, so that was a new experience for me. Of course the professor there was very good and what we learned was very interesting, so that was good as well. It was good being part of something new like that, kind of like pioneers and breaking ground for the college. And it was good to have a feeling of accomplishment at having done that. So all that it was a really great experience. There were a

few of us who drove, so we took turns driving out there with the van. We did go to Lincoln University for other things and also Cheyney University for so-called cultural events, so that was not particularly new. When they had Black artists, mainly at Cheyney because it was a little closer, we'd go out those things sometimes. I think that was the first time I'd actually been to Lincoln.

NK: How did you convince Swarthmore to give you a concentration in Black Studies or what was the academic process to getting that affirmed?

HB: I was not involved in the direct negotiations for that. Again, I was involved in saying what did we want in the concentration, those kind of things, but I was not involved in any negotiations. Pretty much, so any questions on negotiations I was usually behind the scenes. I know I did go to a meeting in Dr. Smith's office one time where we had some negotiation, but for the most part I was behind the scenes.

LL: Do you remember which courses you took at Lincoln University or at Swarthmore for your concentration in Black Studies?

HB: I got my transcript to help jog my memory but I didn't think to review that on the way here. It was a Black Literature course was the one I took at Lincoln University. It was a survey course in Black Literature, that covered Langston Hughes, and other Black authors from the beginning. Some poets and literature. I forget the professor's name, it escapes me at the time, he was one of the leading authorities on Black Literature.<sup>2</sup>

LL: Just to follow up on that, do you remember any specific events that you went to at Lincoln University that stand out, or any of the social or arts events that you attended at Lincoln or Cheyney that you want to talk about?

HB: Let me think about that. It's hard to separate because around that time, after I graduated, I continued to go to Cheyney when they had events. I know I was once there, I saw Charles Lloyd the flautist there, and I also saw James Brown at Cheyney. Those are the two that come to mind. I don't remember the exact...it was around that time, I don't remember exactly when.

LL: So we also know about the student run Black Studies course that was happening at Swarthmore at that time, you were involved with that right?

HB: Ummm, I don't remember that one.

LL: Oh ok. Cool.

HB: I probably was, but...

LL: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about your process of political education and sort of what, attending these courses in Black literature, Black history and whatever, how that affected your political development or how you saw the world?

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<sup>2</sup> J Saunders Redding

HB: Okay. Yeah. As I said I, before SASS was created, or maybe around the same time we were creating it, I was spending a lot of time in Philadelphia. And I probably was spending, my attention was focused as much external from the college on what was going on with Black things throughout the nation as it was on college and academics, which is probably one reason why I ended up flunking out briefly. My attention was kind of diverted away from academics and more on what was going on in the Black community. I spent a lot of time in Philadelphia with different organizations. I know there was a church called the Church of the Advocate<sup>3</sup> where there'd be a lot of community meetings. And I met a lot of the community leaders in Philadelphia and went to different workshops and lectures that they had, talking about Black history and all those kind of things. And learned a lot about Black history and the Black situation in America. And what was going on on campus was just more kind of moving Swarthmore one step in the right direction. I was glad to be able to get the college moving along something that I felt they needed to do. Was there part of your question I missed? Or...

NK: I guess what we're also interested in is are there any particular texts that you read, or people that sort of inspired the work that you did with SASS or that SASS generally was interested in? Or for you personally texts that you read or people that did a lot..

HB: No, I really became an anti-intellectual at the time. I never have been a big reader; I was a math major for a reason. And math and science were my things, I stayed away from reading courses. Of course I can read, read and write well enough to get into Swarthmore, but I didn't go out of my way to read. I did read some things around Black literature. I learned more from speaking to people and listening to leaders and things like that. A lot of the great books that other people may have read, I knew about them but I didn't read them all. I was more educated in the oral tradition.

So that's...and as it turned out as things developed around the campus, that kind of anti-intellectualism is kinda what got me into trouble academically. Originally cuz I wasn't inclined to do the kind of stuff anyway. Somewhere between high school.. well in high school it was so easy I didn't really have to work, and then get to Swarthmore and you really have to work. But I wasn't really used to it. And for the first couple years when they had my attention, that wasn't too bad, but once my attention got diverted, it became increasingly hard to keep up with stuff when it was only given half my attention. So that's how things affected me. It was a different experience certainly than the average Swarthmorean. I ended up being really alienated by a lot of the mainstream things going on at Swarthmore. I even dropped a course once. I, for whatever reason I had a philosophy course, I took Philosophy 101 with Hans Oberdiek, I don't know if you know him, I think he just retired not too long ago. Anyway, he was a great philosophy professor, and I enjoyed that course and I thought I liked philosophy and so I said I'd take another philosophy course. They had one called the Philosophy of Language which was taught by a visiting professor from Australia. So I had a couple classes with that, and I think it was probably junior year, and I had this visiting professor talking about what was language all about and I couldn't even understand with his Australian accent. I just kind of what am I doing here, that kind of thing. I think maybe the second or third class he was talking about something so erudite that I just could not relate this to what was going on in the country, you know we got presidents being assassinated, other leaders being assassinated and here we're talking about

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<sup>3</sup> George W. South Memorial Church of the Advocate

this. And I kind of asked him, what did this have to do with the world and he didn't have a good answer, he just kind of looked with some blank stare so I just got up and left and never came back again. So that's probably a good indication of how things were affecting me at the time. Had nothing to do with books or reading, just kind of what are the things going on in the country and things I learned from speaking first-hand to more the Black leaders in Philadelphia than anything else.

NK: Do you remember any of those leaders in particular that you worked with or spoke with?

HB: As I said the Church of the Advocate was Father Paul Washington. Trying to think who some of the other people were. I don't remember the names of all the people. I know there was a guy I really liked, he was a physicist, which was nice, he was a physicist really, someone I could really relate to on an intellectual level. He was involved in teaching Black literature, I really connected with him, I don't recall his name, but I learned a lot from him. As I said there was the Black student who had graduated a couple years before, not graduated, not graduated from Swarthmore a couple years before, named, I think his name on record was Delmar Scudder, which he changed later to Delmar Sudarkasa [Rasaba Sudarkasa-Kyasa], I learned a lot from him. Those are the ones that come to mind.

LL: Do you remember any specific activities or events or rallies or anything that you took part in while you were in Philadelphia or in any of the surrounding communities you would engage with?

HB: Well the one I remember the most was is going to an event in Washington DC, they had bus rides to Washington DC to demonstrate against the Warren Commission report on the assassination of President Kennedy, which Arlen Specter<sup>4</sup> was involved in that. We got a group of folks together, this wasn't obviously just a Black event, but it was a political event that was organized out of Philadelphia. Went down on the steps of the capital, all the television cameras were there, we were protesting against that. We did go, there was another event in New York City when they had a march that a bunch of us went up there. I went separately because I had an aunt that lived in New York City. I know a some of the other students said the police on horses were knocking them over, but I wasn't with them at the time. I don't remember what that one was, what that event was about.

LL: So in the documentary Minding Swarthmore, that we watched a chunk of in class, Marilyn Allman Maye discussed a December planning meeting that happened at her house in New York in January before the action in Parrish. Were you there?

HB: In December before the January action?

LL: In December before, yeah, before the action.

HB: Yes, yeah, I was there.

LL: Can you tell us what you remember about that discussion?

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<sup>4</sup> District Attorney of Philadelphia at the time, served as assistant counsel for the commission

HB: Yeah. I don't remember who was there, other than Marilyn because it was at her house. I'd been there before because I lived on Long Island and used to go through New York City to get to Long Island. So I'd been to Marilyn's house a couple times over the years. Bridget<sup>5</sup> may have been there because she lived in the Bronx as well, she lived in New York City. I don't remember who was there. We were just talking about more the logistics of what we were going to do if we were going to take over the admissions office what would we need supplies-wise and people-wise in order to make sure everything was successful. Someone had gotten maps of the campus and the building that we looked over to figure out a strategy and write down the timeline of what we had to do and who was going to do what. Those sort of things.

LL: You were the photographer during the takeover, we've looked at a couple of your photographs. And we were wondering about what it was like being a photographer and how you decided what to take pictures or what to taking pictures of, or what the experience of being the person being the camera, rather than in front of the camera was.

HB: Uh, I've been taking photographs ever since high school and it's just a thing I enjoyed to do. so I always had a camera with me, so it wasn't anything I wasn't an appointed photographer. I just always had a camera with me, ever since high school and I just. I like at the time, I used to take pictures of people, so that worked out pretty well. Since that time, I stopped taking pictures of people and focused more on nature and animals, because there are less issues in deciding what to take a picture of. But yeah, just took pictures of what interested me and what was going. probably to kind of document what was happening, not for historical purpose, just for my own purpose. Just to capture was was going on, and of course it never occurred to me at the time that you know, that the college would want the pictures years later.

LL: Did you share them with other students once they were developed?

HB: Yes, yes I printed my pictures, there was a darkroom here on campus and I used to go there and print my pictures. And I think I even once had an exhibit on campus at the time. Unfortunately we didn't have the digital stuff that makes it really easy [to share things].

LL: So, we have a question that might be sort of irrelevant, based on the fact that you said that you've been inside the admissions office the whole time. What was your experience of what the atmosphere on campus was like during the takeover, sort of outside the admissions office. And what kind of communication did you hear being within. Just what was your experience of that time.

HB: Okay, yeah I think probably most of my information was kind of second-hand. Since I wasn't walking through the campus, you know, I may have left once or twice. But most of my memories were from being inside the office, and uh keeping watch and things there. You know, it was obviously very tense at the time, and there was a sense that the majority of the student body was supportive of what we were doing. But there were definitely a large faction, that was not supportive of what we were doing. And same thing for the faculty, who was kind of split. Probably not as much in favor as the student body. So there was tension all around, and about what we were doing why we were doing it, and of course the president suddenly died then things

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<sup>5</sup> Bridget Van Gronigen, '70

got even more tense. You know people wondering well, of course blaming things on us, and then there were concerns about people were retaliating and things like that. I think the tension was probably the biggest thing. Hoping, wondering, how the college would eventually respond to our demands. Hopefully, hoping that we would be able to hold out longer than they would.

LL: And do you remember any specific things from the time that you were in the admissions office. What people spent their time doing, or what sort of conversations there were. Any stories from then?

HB: Well one of the nicest things about the experience was that there were a lot of students who were kind of on the peripheries of things going on. The core group of people running SASS and planning what we were going to do, and deciding on getting involved with the academic concentration, what the list of demands were. There was a core group of maybe a dozen students who were involved in that on a day-to-day basis. And then there was another group that would come to meetings, but didn't do anything else. And there was probably about a fourth to a third of the Black student body who kind of didn't really want to have anything to do with this political stuff. And they wanted to graduate first of all and kind of stayed in the background. When we kind of drew a line in the sand and took over the admissions office, it was a really reassuring to see that almost all of the Black students on campus came out publicly, and some came who had been on the peripheries and joined the sit-in in the admissions office. So it was a good chance to get to know some of those a little bit better. And it helped increased the bonding among the Black students that were there. People just of course brought their books with them and most people spent a good amount of time reading the books and studying and working on papers, whatever they had to do, whatever they had brought with them. And then from my pictures there was some other social things going on, there was a picture with Myra combing somebody's hair or braiding somebody's hair or something like that. And then there was of course the music, somebody brought music and played, I remember Jose Feliciano playing when we were going to sleep several nights. That's the only song I can remember, they must have played it a lot. Right, because it was around Christmas time, and playing Feliz Navidad, you know.

NK: I guess one thing that I'm interested in is where did you sort of see yourself within the political spectrum of SASS. Was there was a homogenous understanding of politics and black politics on Swarthmore's campus? Or did you have a specific standpoint that was sometimes in conflict with other people? In terms of where you politically fell at that time and maybe how your thinking about that has changed.

HB: Well, my political thinking at the time was would have been considered at the time radical. I wasn't a Malcolm X kind of radical but in terms of armed intervention and that sort of thing. But I wasn't a turn the cheek kind of person either. I felt strongly that we had to take direct action in order to get things done. And although intellectually I could understand that consensus was a really great way of doing things it was clear that it has its place [laughs] and time and that consensus wasn't going to work in this situation. And it only works when people accept each other as equals, of course. So, I felt that there are times when you need to stand up and search yourself and be what some would call aggressive, but I, as I said, didn't think that violence was going to accomplish the ultimate goal as quickly as--well violence in terms of armed violence,



some people might say that taking over the admissions office is a form of violence. And I guess I probably wouldn't agree that you could call it violence, but it's aggressive, I guess that's kind of where I fell. And so I was involved in some other organizations in Philadelphia that were trying to do things in Philadelphia, there were things going on at Girard College with integration there. Swarthmore, the black student situation at Swarthmore was one of the priorities, my biggest concern was on the bigger scene within the country and I was focused on that and wanted to do something about that. And really you want to graduate, and I moved to Philadelphia and stayed involved in the black community. It was a continuation of work that I had done while I was a student. So the things that I did on Swarthmore's campus were just a small part of the equation for me.

LL: So you talked a little bit about violence and how it was violent and we read some of the newspaper articles published about the takeover, and how it was perceived. How did the members of SASS react to the way that the takeover was perceived by the campus? And in the media regionally and nationally?

HB: This was a good example of – Of course you can intellectually talk about the media and how they twist things out of shape. But actually seeing how good a job they do, it was very insightful. It's just unbelievable that they could take something and twist it so far out of shape. It's a good learning opportunity to know that a lot the stuff you read in the newspaper had no relation to reality. And people attribute comments and actions to people who have no basis in reality. And it's just kind of to get their point of view across.

LL: I'm interested in what the rest of the semester felt like after the takeover had happened. With Courtney Smith's death, you didn't have the resolution or any of the options that you might have been expecting related to the takeover. And how SASS...

HB: I finished that fall semester with an A, a withdrawal and three incompletes. So I finished the incompletes, and we had a semester to get ready and get graduated. I ended being one course short for what I needed for graduation so I enrolled in a math course at University of Pennsylvania at the same time so I went to Philadelphia and took that course, at the same time to get extra credits. There was a lot of pressure to get things done and graduate. Unfortunately, the Penn class ended I think about a week or two weeks after graduation, and so I wasn't able to graduate on time. But they considered me still '69.

LL: And the unity of black students that emerged during the heat of the takeover, did that stay throughout the rest of the spring semester, or did everybody go back to their own corners and friend groups? Did the black community feel different before and after the takeover?

HB: Well people definitely had to go back to their things, particularly the seniors. Because they had to hurry up and get graduated, and so there wasn't a lot of time. There were some activities that had to be done. There were a lot of things given the time, the calendar, we were on the calendar, a lot of things had to be done that kind of dictated people's time. Graduating for the seniors was one, finishing up the things with the new black studies curriculum, and making requirements for that. And in the process of hiring the first black history professor, and so the interviews around that. So a lot of things like that had to be done, made the time pass very quickly. Of course applying to graduate school, for the people going to do that. A lot of things

were going on there. But the cohesiveness that came about, it didn't just completely go away. That bonding did carry out throughout the rest of the semester. There weren't a lot of opportunities to act upon it and spend a lot of time as a group, other than the regular SASS meetings that we had and special meetings. It ended up the people who were most active were still the ones that were working on interviewing the professors and finishing up the negotiations as far as implementing the demands and those kind of things, practical things that had to be taken care of. Most of the other students, although we had formed an affinity, time-wise they were back and finishing up their graduation requirements. There was a feeling that did persist.

LL: Is there anything you would like to add that's still remaining?

HB: Let's see, I probably covered most of the bases. Let me just say a few words about after graduation. Probably, in my path after graduation was probably different than a lot of students. I did for practical reasons, I had to continue students because this was the time of the Vietnam War and the draft and you couldn't just do nothing or you'd end up fighting in a war that you didn't believe in. Of course that was one of the things that we protested against. The black leadership was involved in protests against the war, and the assassination of President Kennedy. It wasn't just black issues, we were just politically active more than the average student. There was the SDS, the students for a democratic society on campus that was very active. And a lot of them were our friends as well. I for practical reasons had to go to graduate school. I was in the teacher corps in Philadelphia for a couple of years and got my master's degree there. It allowed me to be in Philadelphia and spend a lot of time on continuing work with the black community in Philadelphia. I ended up, after graduate school, working in the black community. They started a co-op there, and continued to work with the black community for a long time before I decided to go get a real job. Maybe ten years later, and begin a real career. Probably I'm alone in that aspect. It's an indication of how much the political activism was a part of me, and the things that happened on campus did have a big impact on me. Not just on campus, but my experience being at Swarthmore was the catalyst in getting me involved in all the things in Philadelphia and in Chester as well. It affected my life for quite a while afterwards, and probably for the rest of my life because having spent those ten years doing those different things, in some ways put me ten years behind other people in terms of accomplishments. I definitely don't regret any of the things I did. It's good to be able to see the ways that the country has changed and the improvements that have come to pass.