

Black Liberation 1969: Black Studies in History, Theory and Praxis

An interview with Robert Woodson (RW) conducted by Maria Mejia (MM) and Alison Roseberry-Polier (ARP) in Washington, D.C. on June 24, 2014. This transcription was written by Maria Mejia, and has been edited for clarity.

Mr. Woodson served as the Executive Director of the Media Fellowship House in Media, PA from 1967 to 1969. Through this position and his work as a community activist in the area, Mr. Woodson met members of the Swarthmore Afro-American Student Society (SASS). He reports helping SASS members plan the sit-in at the Swarthmore College Admissions Office in Parrish Hall. Mr. Woodson and his colleagues supported SASS throughout the sit-in, which started on January 9, 1969, and invited the group to stay at the Media Fellowship House when they called a moratorium on January 16 following the death of President Courtney Smith. Mr. Woodson remained involved with the protest until SASS returned to campus after President Smith's memorial service, held on January 20, 1969.

MM: This summer we're collecting materials, collecting research, interviewing people such as yourself that were involved –

RW: This is your summer employment?

MM: Yes.

RW: And yours?

ARP: Yes.

RW: Okay. Where are you from?

MM: I'm from New York City.

ARP: I'm also from New York City.

RW: Okay.

ARP: I just graduated, so I'm working as Dr. Dorsey's research assistant this summer.

RW: Okay.

MM: This summer we're going to create an archive of primary source materials, interviews, and first-hand accounts [about the activism of Black Swarthmore College students from 1968 to 1972]. In the fall there's going to be a class, taught by Dr. Dorsey, that's going to focus on this event [the 1969 sit-in]. Students are going to go through the materials that we put together, and create their own historical narratives of what happened based on these primary source documents.

RW: Okay. Where do you want to start?

MM: Well, do you have any more questions about the class or about –

RW: Is the purpose to just reconstruct [the protest of 1969]? I think it [this history] lay dormant for a long time. It was probably the only university activity that wasn't written up. It was covered extensively in *Life* magazine¹ and there were some other newspaper [inaudible], but there's been nothing on the part of Swarthmore, I don't think.

MM: Exactly.

RW: Even acknowledging that it happened.

MM: Exactly. Our college is celebrating 150 years and Dr. Dorsey, along with some of her colleagues, thought that this was a really important part of Swarthmore's history that needed to resurface or needed to be taught to current students of the College.

RW: It was a shock at the time that this was happening at Swarthmore, that's why there was an air of disbelief on the part of a lot of people and supporters of Swarthmore. They thought they were above the fray.

ARP: Yeah.

RW: That's why it was amazing to see the response to it.

MM: Our first question is: through your work in Chester and as the Director of the Media Fellowship House, you connected with the students who formed the Swarthmore Afro-American Student Society, also known as SASS. Just to start off, how do you remember your relationships with the Black Swarthmore students during that time period?

RW: Well, I was very active in helping [with] the civil rights demonstrations and activities in ... West Chester, Pennsylvania, Media and Chester. But Chester was the real center of activity and the SASS students were very much involved in helping out in the Chester low-income community. They were mentoring kids, bringing some of them on campus, and they really got themselves deeply involved in the life of the community. So they had established some real, strong bonds.

But they were also very active with the service personnel on campus: the janitors and the people who worked in the kitchen, and embraced them almost as a part of it [the protest]. They had a real solid relationship with the students, and I met them through these relationships because I had been serving low-income leaders. Part of my work in civil rights wasn't just to confront racism but [to] confront challenges within low-income communities, which I thought was a shortcoming of the Civil Rights Movement. Because it concentrated almost exclusively on

¹ A reference to the *Life* magazine piece "Requiem for Courtney Smith" written by Paul Good and published on May 9, 1969.

race at the expense, sometimes, of overlooking non-racial problems that existed in the community. I was involved in that and that's how I met the SASS students.

MM: At some point the SASS students approached you about what they were planning to do. Can you tell us about those early planning meetings? How did you guide them through those early stages?

RW: Well, when they first came to me and told me what their plans were, I said to them that they're welcome to use my office as a staging area and a place to meet and organize it. I just gave them some guidance. I said that "if you're going to do this, it's important to do it with dignity and non-violently, so that the issue stays focused and not on your abhorrent behavior" [*laughing*]. And I told them at the time that "once this becomes public, there will be people who will be drawn to you," would try to use them [SASS] for their own purposes in the name of helping them [SASS] and that it was very important for them [SASS] to remain separate from them [outsiders] and keep them away from it [the protest]. And I would help with that. That was my advice to the students.

The whole takeover was coordinated out of my office because I remember we actually had a board in there where – [it said] when the takeover was supposed to occur, what was to happen, who was supposed to do it, and then, what was the occupation strategy. How were the students going to be fed? We arranged for grassroots people in Chester to cook and provide meals that were brought in everyday and passed through the window. Also, I set up a command center at my office so that the parents of the students had a place to call and stay abreast of activities so that they would know that their children were safe and that they [students] were being responsible. My staff and I at the office, we played that role at the time. During the negotiations, we just played a back-room role with them [SASS], but they [students] were the ones who – and we helped them shape their demands. But, essentially, all we did was provide the framework; the content of what the demands were and all of that strictly [came from] the students. We just served [in] a servant role, and as to protect them.

When the announcement was made, we also helped with the coordination of the press releases to make sure that every aspect of it reflected these principles: of not attacking people, but attacking issues, and also of being respectful during negotiations. Also, to incorporate the needs of non-students in this as well - the kitchen personnel and whatnot. The students had also developed relationships [with the staff] because they used to do the income tax returns for some of the service personnel on campus. That's kind of the background about how we – the flow between us, and the parents. I talked to a lot of parents, had everyone's phone number. The parents had the phone number at the Media Fellowship House. We were like the command center.

MM: You said that SASS members were the ones [who] wrote the demands, but that you helped them [SASS] shape them [the demands]. Can you tell us more about what was your opinion of the goals that motivated SASS?

RW: They were all noble. Asmarom Lagesse was the only Black faculty member. He was Ethiopian. An anthropologist, I believe. And they wanted more Black faculty. They wanted Black administrators. Just to desegregate Swarthmore [*laughing*]. Which was what everybody was demanding at the time, to desegregate the campus. They wanted more done to attract more

minority students. They were not asking for a lowering of standards, they were just asking [for Swarthmore College] to be more inclusive. I think they were asking for scholarships for students. I'm not clear about the details, it's been a long time, but I think that was the general gist of it. I mean they were not unreasonable demands.

ARP: [*whispering to MM*] Do you want to go ahead with the next question?

MM: Okay. You were talking about your office being the command center. Can you tell us a little bit more about how that worked logistically, about your office helping [to] coordinate the communication between students and their parents. Because they [students] were in there [Parrish Hall] for some time, and there were things happening outside. We heard that one young woman had a relative die in a standoff² –

RW: Killed. Yeah. I had spent some time in California, and I knew some of the people involved in that incident. I spent three summers before, I spent a whole summer with activists groups in Pasadena, California. I knew all of the activists out in Los Angeles, so I knew a lot of people out there. And there were some real severe differences between the Us Organization, run by Ron Karenga [Ronald McKinley Everett, also known as Maulana Karenga] and Huey Newton's group, the Black Panther Party. There were severe differences, so it got – I talked to Clinton Etheridge not too long ago, and he reminded me of the name of the young lady [Ruth Wilson], he knows her. Her cousin was a student at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], and he was the one who was shot to death on campus. The mother called me, as soon as it happened, and asked me if I would get over to the campus to have the daughter – her first-cousin – call the mother before she [Ruth Wilson] saw it on the news. And as I rushed over to campus, it was just being reported on the news. She lost it. She saw pictures of her cousin being carried out, shot. I just comforted her, and then we arranged for her mom to come down and pick her up. We arranged for her to get to the airport, so that she would get home to be with her family. So that was one unfortunate situation, but that was the role we played. The mother had no other way of calling, so the mother and father called us and we rushed over there and told them what happened. But that was the role we were playing: to comfort in that situation.

MM: When President Courtney Smith suffered a fatal heart attack, SASS ended the occupation, they left campus, and they stayed at the Media Fellowship House. This is correct?

RW: Yes. But even before that, I think there's something else you should know. There were two groups that tried to almost use SASS to turn that demonstration into something else, and that was the Weather Underground [the Weather Underground Organization]– they were on campus, a White radical leftist group – and also the Black Panthers tried to come and coopt it. But I brought a friend of mine, Jim Woodruff [Reverend James Woodruff] – he was an Episcopal priest, a very well known Black Episcopal priest and a very forceful leader in the Black Power movement in

² The standoff referenced was a confrontation between the Us Organization and the Black Panther Party that took place on January 17, 1969 at the University of California, Los Angeles. During the gunfight, two people were killed: John Huggins and Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter. The young woman was a Swarthmore student and SASS member, identified as Ruth Wilson, who was related to one of the victims.

Philadelphia who was a good friend of mine. To kind of blunt that [outside influence], I brought him on campus and he met the students early on. He was just well known and well respected by everybody, so Jim and I agreed that we had to protect the students from both the Panthers and the Weather Underground. The students listened to us and told them [the Weather Underground and the Black Panther Party] that they [SASS] did not want their [the outsiders] help. The students just told them they didn't want their help because they [outsiders] really wanted to turn it [the protest] into something violent. That's what they wanted, but the students listened to us and just kept it that way [non-violent].

Then, when Courtney Smith died – I think he was 46 years old and he had the heart attack – the students called and said, “what should we do?” Well, first of all, we said that we're going to call a moratorium. It's not ending, but there was to be a moratorium. We wrote a press release that said, “we mourn for the death of Courtney Smith, the way we mourn for the deaths of kids in the inner city.” I think there were some members of the football team, and others, who really wanted to take violent action against the students. To neutralize that, I called a lot of the fellows in the community to come up and protect the students. We said to them, “it's important for you to leave the facility and come to my office,” that way [we could] just keep tensions low. Rather than having the fellows from Chester come, and perhaps get into a violent confrontation with the [White] students, it would be better for the [SASS] students to leave. So, I arranged for ten cars to come up – caravan on campus. Two of the cars collected the luggage and the other eight - the students filled those. But these men also made certain that there were no confrontations between the student athletes and the young people [of SASS]. They made sure they were protected. So we caravan out.

We also said to them, “it is important to leave the office the way you found it;” and the students cleaned it, put everything back in place, and left. Of course, the photographers rushed in and the *Philadelphia Daily News* reported that the students had trashed the office. So it was first reported that they trashed it, which was a lie. But then other television stations and others came out and corrected it. They showed pictures of everything in order. We went into a retreat for about two days, where we had some sessions talking about where do we go from here, and the state of the movement, etc. I remember saying to Clint [Clinton Etheridge] and others – the question is do they go to the memorial service – and I said, “it is absolutely necessary for you to show your respect and go to the memorial service.” So I picked up Clint and - Don Mizell? Yeah?

MM: That's his name, yeah [*laughing*].

RW: Yes, Don Mizell. I think he was a cousin to my first wife.

MM: Oh, really? [*laughing*].

RW: Yes, Don Mizell is my first wife's cousin. I said, “I will come and take you to [the memorial service]” – because Don [Mizell] was really one of the leaders and Clint was the public spokesperson. Don [Mizell] had more of an organization personality. I remember taking them to the memorial service and sitting in the front row. We said we would not comment to the press, but that we would just have a presence there. And just having their presence there really won over a lot of students. A lot of the bitterness and rancor that was attending a wrath of the word of his [President Courtney Smith] death was just really neutralized by Don Mizell and Clint coming

to the memorial service, and that sort of set the tone. A lot of students were coming up, praising them for coming to the memorial service, and showing the respect for Courtney Smith. Talking about how they mourned him and wished only the best for his family, and whatnot. After that, my role just kind of ended with the students. I don't think they took up the occupation again, but I think negotiations continued between the students and the faculty, and some changes were made. I sort of ended my participation right after that, when Courtney Smith died. But my participation was very active from the beginning, during the prelude, and at the end.

MM: Just to backtrack a little bit, so that I can understand what happened right after Courtney Smith's death: how many students left campus with the cars that you organized?

RW: All of them.

MM: All of them?

RW: All of the students.

MM: All of the SASS students or all of the Black students?

RW: All of SASS. That's a good question. I was only involved with the SASS students. Most of the Black students were in SASS. There were like four or five who refused, but then the White students distanced themselves from those students and that kind of radicalized them. I remember four [Black] students were in the lunchroom – I was told – and White students asked them why they weren't with SASS. And they [Black students] said, oh they don't agree with SASS, so they [White students] just got up and left them because they said, "oh, we can't respect you if you can't even respect your own folks." So that caused some of those four students to join SASS at that point. I mean, there weren't that many Black students on campus at the time, so I think all of them were part of the demonstration. There may have been one or two who weren't, but I don't recall. I think that 99% of the Black students were a part of SASS.

MM: So –

RW: If they were not involved, they were supporters.

MM: Sorry to interrupt. So, all of the SASS students leave campus, and only Don Mizell and Clinton Etheridge attend the memorial service?

RW: Yes. They were there to represent SASS. Just the two of them came to it [the memorial service]. We didn't want to create a spectacle of all the students coming on down. We just felt that the leadership needed to be represented, so they [Don Mizell and Clinton Etheridge] were representing all the students.

MM: And did you stay with them throughout that event?

RW: Yeah, I drove them there and stayed with them – stayed in the background. I never made any public statements. That wasn't my role. They were the ones who engineered it. They were

the ones who shaped it, [and] provided the content. I just supplied logistical support and tactical suggestions, and that's all - just kind of coaching them on the tone. Acting to protect them, because they had no way of knowing about the Weathermen [colloquial name for the Weather Underground Organization]. But having Jim Woodruff there served to reduce any possibility of confrontation between us and those two groups [the Weather Underground and the Black Panther Party]. We had a real strong following in the community - I did - and Jim Woodruff was a very influential social force in Philadelphia at the time. A lot of people listened to him.

ARP: Just to back up quickly, were the SASS members who didn't go to the [memorial] service still at the Media Fellowship House or were they back on campus?

RW: Yes, they were at the Media Fellowship House. All of them - all of their belongings, their clothes and personal effects. The Media Fellowship House at the time had a large recreation room where there were showers and, because it was Quaker-oriented, it was really built to house. It was an old mansion that was modified, so it had a huge dining hall with bathrooms and showers to accommodate the weekend work campers who came in from around the country. So the facility was just perfectly suited for them.

ARP: Yeah

RW: We just put sleeping bags all over the floor, everyone had plans to sleep and it was sanitary. We supplied meals for them.

ARP: How long were they there for?

RW: I would say four or five days. Until the memorial service was over, and then right after that they began to move back on campus.³ Maybe two or three days. Not very long because I think [SASS returned to campus] as soon as the memorial service was over. There was a level of camaraderie among the SASS students, as they began to filter back to campus, [and] old friendships began to get re-established. But they still were engaged in negotiations with the administration over their demands. They never did drop their demands nor did they pull back from them. I have no idea what happened after that or how many [demands] were met. My role was to get them through that. That's what they asked me to do, and I limited my role to what they asked me to do and the things I felt I needed to do to protect them. I think it was one of the few takeovers in the country that remained peaceful and dignified. [In] the others, at Columbia [University]⁴ and other places, students were arrested, [there was] violence, people were gassed,

³ Based on Mr. Woodson's testimony and other evidence collected during this research project, we know that the students left campus on January 16, 1969 when President Smith's death was announced and did not return to campus until after the memorial service in Smith's honor was held on January 20. If they returned the day of the memorial service or the next day, then the members of SASS were in the Media Fellowship House for five or six days.

⁴ Columbia University students protested the school's connection to the military and racist policies, specifically the University's involvement in the Institute for Defense Analyses

and cops came on campus. There were some people killed [in those student protests]. Swarthmore's [protest] was, I think, one of the few that proceeded the way that it did.

MM: Don Mizell said something similar at an Alumni Weekend event that happened a couple of weeks ago. He said he was pleasantly surprised that SASS' protest wasn't met with more of a violent reaction, and I was wondering if you could talk more about threats of violence or violence that you were worried could happen when SASS decided to occupy Parrish Hall.

RW: The concern that I had was not from SASS members, but that on our side that people like the Weather Underground and the Black Panthers - because what they do is come in and seize situations in the name of helping you but end up - and a lot of people that they encounter are naive. They're not sophisticated enough to see through all of the trappings of revolution and all of this kind of stuff. They were not sophisticated [enough] to see through it, we were. So the danger came from outside, but it also came from inside: students, particularly student athletes who felt offended by all of this. And I'm sure there were some [Ku Klux] Klan elements in the larger community that perhaps would have come. I don't know too much about that, but my experience is that there was a lot of Klan activity in West Chester where we did our demonstrations, so in that whole area of Delaware and Chester Counties we knew that there was always the threat that white supremacists would come and take advantage of the tensions. They were always looking for flashpoints. So we had to be vigilant about the threat from within and the threat from without.

We were certain having the proper external leaders, like Jim Woodruff and myself, at the helm of this - and also Diane Palm [also known as Diane R. Palm]⁵ and Bob Johnson [Robert Johnson]⁶. These were prominent community leaders in Chester who were well known. The very fact that they had a presence with the students really served to fend off anybody who would attempt to use [the protest] and turn it into something violent. So it was an impromptu, spontaneous wall of protection that we built around the students, that even they weren't aware of. But at least they trusted me [enough] that anyone that I brought to the table, they felt confident that they would be operating in their interests.

MM: Can you talk more about that outside influence that you were worried was going to hurt SASS' goals?

RW: Yeah. In the movements at those times, you had all kinds of radicals - you had the "two-percenters." These were just anarchists [and] they were more in the West Coast than in the East Coast, but they were people who believed in radical revolution and anarchy. I have been personally involved and I wrote about stopping a riot when they actually tried to firebomb a chemical plant right in the middle of the Black community, even though it was going to destroy a lot of Black families. But they felt it would inflame the passions of Blacks, who would then react and create a race war. There were just some crazy people around. I have personal experience seeing radicals on the left and radicals on the right. You had the Two Percenters, you had the

(IDA), its construction of a gym in Morningside Park with limited access for Harlem residents, and the discrimination against Black students on campus.

⁵ Former Director of the Community Assistance Project (CAP) in Chester.

⁶ Former Director of the Friends Settlement House in Chester.

Weather Underground. White radical groups who bombed libraries at Harvard [University], shot at police officers, and did all kinds of things. Symbionese Revolutionary Army [United Federated Forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army] in San Francisco that killed Marcus Foster, a Black principal because he was requiring students to have identification badges in order to be on campus [and] they felt this was fascist.⁷ So you had, at that time, a lot of crazy elements operating around the Civil Rights Movement. Any time you had a demonstration where there was a takeover, there was always a danger of it devolving into a violent confrontation. You had to work hard, every day, to make certain that it [the protest] stayed [non-violent] and the secret was having strong leadership. Clint, Don Mizell, and the [SASS] students were clear that that's what they wanted, that they didn't want this other stuff. They weren't, I think, knowledgeable enough to know what help they should receive and what they shouldn't. But they listened to us and as a result of this relationship, it was fine.

ARP and MM: [*Speaking simultaneously*].

MM: Oh, sorry. Go ahead.

ARP: Could you maybe give us some more details of what was the specific advice you gave them [SASS] about how to navigate those outsiders? How were you suggesting that they handle that?

RW: Stay away from them! Tell them, when they come and offer help: *no, thank you*. Don't start the conversation in the first place. When they say: "well, we want to come and help," say: "no, thanks, we have our own advisors." "Can we come to meetings?" *No, meetings are closed*. "Can we help you with some money or something?" *No, we don't need your help*. I just said to them, "you cannot accept any help at all of any kind."

ARP: Yeah.

RW: Even to engage in discussion. Just say "no, thank you" and just turn and walk away. And that's what we did. They will ask, "can I address the group?" *No, you cannot address the group. You cannot appear at any meetings*. Just total isolation, you've got to just not give them any pretense for coming and taking over or participating. Just total isolation. And I said, "if there's any threats or anything like that, let us take care of that." But when people see who is standing with you, it serves to neutralize that. So you don't have confrontation if the composition of the people around you is strong enough, you don't have confrontation. And they had no way of knowing that, but those of us who had been in the streets knew that, so that's the expertise we brought to the table. We know how to keep people away from them, but they had to cooperate. They had to agree to do it. what I love about SASS [is that] they were not interested in just getting headlines, because a lot of people get involved and they take themselves a little too

⁷ Members of the United Federated Forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) protested the Oakland, CA public schools' proposal to require students to carry identification badges by shooting school officials Marcus Foster and Robert Blackburn on November 6, 1973. Blackburn survived, but Foster did not. Foster, a Black man who served as superintendent at the time, previously worked as a school principal and associate superintendent in Philadelphia, PA.

seriously. Then, they get caught up in the media hype. But, SASS never did. They were more interested in content and not making headlines.

MM: Earlier you contrasted the influence of these outside activists with the influence of community members such as [Reverend James] Woodruff, and I was wondering if there were other ministers or churches, or people in the community who supported SASS or who worked with SASS?

RW: I didn't know any others. All the people that I know helped, who were a part of our movement, were all neighborhood leaders. Diane Palm, who I'm still close to. She lives in Houston, Texas now. She was a teacher and we ran a program called Community Assistance Program. We helped ex-offenders on the streets. So, Diane was very happy - and Bill Sanders. There were about ten people who were very active in Chester at the time, but they were supportive of SASS. That was sort of our group. And these were the people who know people, so that I can in ten minutes, when Courtney Smith died - within half an hour - I had ten people identified with cars ready to come up on campus.

ARP: Yeah.

RW: [*laughing*] Yeah. I think that people like the Panthers knew we had that kind of influence also, so they didn't challenge us. But, we couldn't have done it if SASS wasn't cooperative, if they were not coachable. And they were always very, very coachable. An intelligent person knows their limits, and a secure person knows their limits. They were all, I think, very intelligent, and very secure in who they were. Not a single one of them, I think, ever just wanted to make headlines. That's why I found it easy to deal with SASS.

MM: Earlier you mentioned that SASS had a good relationship with the Black staff members on campus, and we actually found a document titled "Open Letter to the Parents of Black Students of Swarthmore College," which was signed by a few Black staff members. Specifically: William and Eileen Cline, Edwin and DeLois Collins, Harold Hoffman, Robert and Lee Williams, and Rachel Williams. I'm just wondering if you remember any of these people?

RW: No, I don't.

MM: Do you remember the kind of relationship that SASS had with the Black staff on campus?

RW: I really didn't even know any of the Black staff, but I heard [of their relationships with SASS] because some of them lived in Chester. The word I got on the street was: the reason that the community supported them [SASS] was because they supported some of the Black staff and never acted as if they were better than them [the staff] because they went to Swarthmore. They never took themselves too seriously because they were students of Swarthmore, and that helped a great deal. They obviously didn't get in a class divide and that's the reason there was so much affection between the low-income neighborhood leaders - Chester, remember, is one of the poorest communities in the state. For SASS to have a good, solid relationship with the people like that was pretty amazing at the time.

MM: Do you think it was risky for these staff members to openly express their support for SASS?

RW: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. I mean, it was risky for them and that's why I think SASS wanted to make sure that they were protected by including them in it, so that anything that happened to the staff members happened to SASS. I haven't seen that happen before. A lot of these movements are just self-centered and were not expansive to include others, you know. That's, again, what was unique about the SASS movement. They were very, very inclusive in terms of class. Very, very inclusive.

ARP: [*whispering to MM*] Can I move on to question six?

MM: Yeah, do you want to - ?

ARP: Sure. So we were reading that on January 10th, the day after the sit-in started, SASS representatives Clinton Etheridge and Don Mizell met with President Smith's assistant Gilmore Stott at the Media Fellowship House. According to the campus paper [the *Phoenix*], it said that the press conference was open to any press person but that you had asked that they not come into the meeting between the SASS representatives and Mr. Stott. Is that an accurate portrayal?

RW: Yeah. When you're negotiating, you want people to negotiate on issues -

ARP: Yeah.

RW: And not get sidetracked by trying to pitch to press. It's very bad to have press in when you're negotiating because you're going to be changing your mind, you're going to be shifting around, and you don't want people to play to the press.

ARP: Yeah.

RW: Then you can make a statement afterwards. But I thought the worst thing in the world was to have the press in when you're negotiating.

ARP: Yeah. Had you been in contact with Swarthmore administrators before that? Were they familiar with you? Had you worked with them at all?

RW: [*laughing*] Not directly, but our reputation was pretty good in the area. The Media Fellowship House was started by Quakers, as was Swarthmore, and many of the members of the board are Swarthmore - some of them are Swarthmore trustees, some of them either attended Swarthmore or had kids in Swarthmore - so there was a symbiotic relationship between Media Fellowship House and Swarthmore. No formal relationship, but just an informal one because people went back and forth. The Biddle family, from Bailey Banks & Biddle, they were one of the founders of Media Fellowship House and, I think, a large supporter of Swarthmore, for example. Then, a lot of the work camps - I was a member of the American Friends Service Committee and did a lot of work with the Friends Service Committee, so I knew Swarthmore people and they knew me through the American Friends Service Committee. There's a retreat, I

forgot the name of it, but there's a Quaker retreat right in the area⁸ and I met Swarthmore faculty at these presentations at retreats and things like that. But that was about all. But, I know everyone was in shock when this happened at Swarthmore. It was the biggest shock because of Swarthmore's liberal reputation. They just didn't expect it to happen. Interesting time.

MM: So you were talking about organizing this luncheon, and organizing the communication between SASS students and their parents. How else was your office, as the "command center," supportive of SASS during the actual -

RW: Just raise money to provide resources that they need for press releases and food. We had a budget for that [*laughing*] People made donations to help them, from Chester and from my organization. That was about all. It was pretty much limited to making our facility available to them. We did nothing else during that period but support SASS. I mean, all of our time and energy was spent helping them. We suspended everything else, and just helped them.

MM: And besides the Media Fellowship House, you were affiliated with CHIP [Chester Home Improvement Project]⁹ during that time?

RW: The what?

MM: With CHIP. What was the other organization you mentioned?

RW: Yeah. I forgot CHIP. I forgot. Yeah, there were a couple other organizations. CHIP - I forgot what the acronym was, but I know that was in Chester. There was CHIP, and there were quite a few organizations. Everybody had an acronym.

RW and MM: [*Laughing*].

MM: So these organizations were in Media, Chester, and -

RW: Chester mostly.

MM: Mostly Chester?

RW: Yeah. Media is kind of a sleepy, little middle- and upper-income enclave. I think South Media had a little, small - but all the families go back centuries, almost. You see a name of a Black family Darlington and a White Darlington, then you see Darlington Road [*laughing*].

⁸ In 1930, Pendle Hill was established to uphold the educational and spiritual values of the Religious Society of Friends. This Quaker retreat center is located in Wallingford, PA, less than two miles from Swarthmore College.

⁹ Lowell Livezey, Swarthmore College class of 1966, founded the Chester Home Improvement Project (CHIP) in 1965 with the sponsorship of the Robert Wade Neighborhood House. CHIP's mission was to improve the housing conditions of working-class people in Chester, PA. SASS members involved in the 1969 sit-in volunteered with CHIP. The organization's records are located at the Temple University Urban Archives.

Quakers, as you know, let their slaves go. Released them and then gave them land, so you have like Concord and all these little Black enclaves that go back 200 years all over that area. Interesting history. Some of the old mansions, you can just see the Underground Railroad tunnels that lead from a person's house out to the field.

[Emergency service vehicle sirens in the background].

MM: Wow.

RW: You can still some of those in Wallingford and Chichester, and all like that. Some of the old mansions maintained that antebellum kind of history there.

MM: So, I think we're getting ready to wrap this up, but I wanted to ask about the end of the protest. You said that once President Courtney Smith passed away, that was the end of your -

RW: Involvement.

MM: Involvement. But, can you tell us if Black Swarthmore students continued to work in Chester, and if you continued to be involved with them through that space, like their mentoring or tutoring in Chester?

RW: No, I don't recall. I don't recall. I just know that we moved on to other things, other issues since our goal was just - *[sirens get louder]* an ambulance service. *[laughing]* So, once the service was delivered -

MM: Yeah.

RW and MM: *[Laughing]*.

MM: Once you made it out alive *[laughing]*.

RW: After everybody got out alive, and everybody was talking and whatnot, we just kind of went to other things. I saw some of them - I left and went to work in Boston for two years, and I think Don was in Harvard Law School, so I ran into Clint Etheridge and those who went to Harvard Law School. I saw them in Boston, occasionally, socially. I remember they came up. Most of them went to law school, I think. Marilyn Holifield.

MM: Yeah.

RW: And Don Mizell I know went to Harvard because I used to see him at my office. I don't know where Clint went. Someplace. But I know Don and Marilyn Holifield came to Boston. That was it. Again, mine was an ambulance service *[laughing]*.

MM: Do you have any other questions Ali?

ARP: I don't.

MM: Is there anything else you want to make sure we make a note of? Anything we didn't ask you about?

RW: I wasn't clear what role Asmarom Legesse - I know he was a very nice guy, I don't know if he's still around or no, but he was an interesting guy. He was the only Black faculty, he was very supportive. No, that's about it. We just about covered everything: how we [SASS and I] met, and then what our role was, what their role was, the incident involving the death of Courtney Smith. I think what's important for me, that I remember most, is just how sophisticated and self-confident the students were to be so young and not get caught up in the hype of the movement. Because a lot of people in movements get impressed with themselves when they're on television or in the newspapers, and that becomes an attraction and a distraction. So they get defined by the distraction [*laughing*] and not the content of what they were about. But SASS never wavered from that, and I think that's why their movement was the subject of a *Life* magazine profile. Because of the dignified way they handled it. Columbia, you don't see anything about Columbia. That was a mess. Some students got barred forever from going back to school. I knew some young people who went through that, they never went back to college. That was it.

ARP: Yeah.

MM: Well, thank you for your time.

ARP: Thank you.

MM: This has been really informative and it's really wonderful to hear from someone who was there, and who had a little more experience or a little bit more wisdom to see what was going on during that time. Because I'm sure it was an emotional, trying time for people involved in that protest. But, thank you so much for sharing your story with us.

RW: Yeah, because a lot of people who try to help people, they use them for their own purposes.

ARP: Yeah.

RW: They had to be careful. I had to be an example of what I was telling them to avoid [*laughing*]. So, I tried to be faithful to that. Not getting involved in determining what their demands were, just being on tap but not on top. That's very hard sometimes for people who try to help.