Russell Frisby Interview Transcription

An interview with Russell Frisby (RF) conducted by Maria Mejia (MM) and Allison Shultes (AS) on October 6th, 2014 via Skype video chat. The transcription is word for word with the exception of unnecessary conversational words such as "um" and/or stutter starts which have been edited for the sake of cleaner reading and clearer understanding.

Russell Frisby attended Swarthmore College from the autumn of 1968 until he graduated with a major in Political Science and International Relations and a concentration in Black Studies in the spring of 1972. He was a member of the Swarthmore Afro-American Student Society (SASS) and served as the group's Minister of Information. He participated in the takeover of the Parish admissions office in January 1969 as well as the sit-in in the President's Office in 1970. After the departure of Clement Cottingham, Jr., the first director of the College's Black Studies program, he helped in the selection of faculty members as a member of the Steering Committee.

MM: Good afternoon, my name is Maria Mejia.

AS: And I'm Alli Shultes.

MM: And if you could just introduce yourself.

RF: I'm sorry; I didn't hear what you said.

MM: If you could just say your name and class year really quickly.

RF: Hi, I'm Russell Frisby. I was Swarthmore [College] Class of [19]72. I got my degree in Political Science and International Relations with a concentration in Black Studies.

AS: Okay, great. Thank you so much.

MM: To start off, we want to ask an introductory question. If you could please just briefly share your memories of your time at Swarthmore. What was it like to be a Black student at Swarthmore at that time?

RF: It was an interesting time. It was in the late '60s, early '70s. I came to Swarthmore in September '68. If you know anything about 1968, it was a very tumultuous time throughout the country with [the] Vietnam War, Civil Rights, etc. And to some extent, Swarthmore became the focal point of a lot of those activities, [and] that discussion in the Philadelphia area. So it was an interesting time to be at Swarthmore. A lot of good people; a lot of challenging situations.

AS: We were wondering how Black students in general – if you would want to speak to your experience in SASS or as just as a student – coped with the atmosphere particular to Swarthmore during this time?

RF: Okay. I was there during a time of transition. When I first came to Swarthmore, in my class there were eight Black students because the Dean of Admissions[1] didn't think that you should have too many more Black women than Black men because otherwise Black women wouldn't have anyone to date. While I was there, by the time of my second year, you started having a growth in numbers. So the interaction among the Black students changed. During my time, at least the last three years, I think the Black students – really SASS – grew. I think Black students coalesced more around SASS than they had in the past. I think prior to that time period there was SASS and there were a lot of other Black students who didn't necessarily associate with SASS. Then, SASS grew and the Black students coalesced around SASS. Then, toward the end of my time, I think there were a number of Black students who probably were uncomfortable with some of the politics of SASS, and they formed the gospel choir almost as a counter-SASS.

AS: Thank you. We noticed that you were the Minister of Information for SASS, and we were wondering what that entailed?

RF: [*Laughing*] It was more of a title. With school and everything, I did not want to be the chairman of SASS, so I just picked the title. Basically, there was a group effort in the Steering Committee, and I was very much involved, probably as [the] number two person. A lot of times that meant that I became the spokesperson for SASS.

MM: You mentioned that some students were uncomfortable with the politics of SASS. Can you talk more about that, or in general about the cultural and social dynamic within the group?

RF: Well, at one point toward the end I was called a Communist.

AS and MM: [*laughing*]

RF: But aside from that – This was the year of the height of the Black Power era. There were some Black students who were uncomfortable with that notion, and that did create some friction. It wasn't a tense situation, but there was some tension. But I think particularly in [19]69 and [19]70, there was more unity because we had gone through the two takeovers – the first of the Admissions Office, then the President's Office, and then we were getting the Black Studies program off the ground.

[1] Fred Hargadon served as the Swarthmore Dean of Admissions from 1964 to 1969.

AS: We were wondering if you, through your participation in SASS and the takeover, ever met Sam Shepard[2] or got to know Sam Shepard because we are not able to interview him and we wanted to –

RF: Yes, I knew Sam. I knew Sam. We weren't particularly close friends, but I knew Sam.

AS: Okay. What was your understanding of his role on campus during the takeover of the Admissions Office?

RF: I didn't think he had a particularly big role.

AS: All right, thank you. Clinton Etheridge[3] was on campus for the past, I think, two weeks, and he mentioned your relationship and being close with you. We were just wondering if you could maybe speak to that relationship, and also to how Mr. Etheridge handled Swarthmore after the takeover, like in the semester afterwards.

RF: Clint was sort of a father figure. I was a freshman, and I came to Swarthmore at the ripe old age of seventeen. Clint was really the elder of the group, and we were close. He became a father figure, a leader, and sort of the cooler head to think through everything. Also, because of the fact that I was a freshman [and] he was a senior – I guess his last semester was so tumultuous. It was tumultuous for all of us. We didn't really have a lot of talks about what Clint was going through, how he was feeling. By that point, I was probably closer to people my age, such as Don Mizell[4], so I didn't have much as much contact with Clint. I remember reading his article later, and I didn't realize this much was going on in his life or [that] Clint had become the target that he may have become. Which is kind of funny because, even then, it was more of a group process than outsiders really understood.

AS: Okay.

MM: Reflecting on SASS and the 1969 sit-in, can you tell us how SASS came to the decision to employ direct action and to take over the Admissions Office?

RF: Well I think you need to talk to Clint, and folks like Marilyn Holifield.[5] Because, quite frankly, my sense looking back on it is: by the time I got there in September, that decision was kind of already made and it was moving to that. I know by December, [the sit-in] was really under active discussion and it was put forth in January. So I was involved at the end, in terms of

[2] Class of 1968. The first chairman of SASS, 1968.
[3] Class of 1969. Second chairman of SASS, 1968-1969. He held a residency on campus in the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility during the fall of 2014 in conjunction with Professor Allison Dorsey's Black Liberation 1969 history course.
[4] Class of 1972. Vice-chairman of SASS 1968-1969 and third chairman of SASS 1969-1971.
[5] Class of 1969. One of the "Seven Sisters."

the final meetings – "We were going to do this. We didn't have any other options because we were getting nowhere with the administration." But I really can't say that I was involved in the path to that. I can talk about the '70 takeover, the following takeover and how we got there, but not about the [planning of the] '69 [sit-in].

AS: All right, thank you. It seems, from what you've said, that maybe some of the older students really mobilized this first takeover but then afterwards, pretty quickly, a younger group within SASS took over. Would you say that's an accurate statement?

RF: That's very accurate.

AS: Okay.

RF: I think it was mainly the seniors who organized that [1969] takeover, and then, by the next year it would have been the juniors and sophomores — really the folks in the class[es] of '71 and '72 — at that point who took over.

AS: Okay. Thank you. We just wanted to ask you about the atmosphere in Parrish during that time, and then we were going to move to ask you some questions about the 1970 takeover.

RF: Okay. Well, it was tense. It was a tense situation. All of a sudden you see yourself on CBS News, people being pulled through the Admissions Office window. It became a national issue. It got very tense. And then, unfortunately, Courtney Smith[6] died, which nobody expected. So, then we left in honor of that. Inside, we felt there was something we had to do. But it was a very tense situation because, who knew what was going to happen? Who knew what that was going to mean for our futures? I think most of our parents had decided that we had just thrown away our college careers and our future careers, or whatever. That didn't happen, but you just never knew.

MM: Our questions about the 1970 sit-in are specifically: why did you think it was important for Swarthmore [Black] students to have their own space? Because the 1970 sit-in was tied to the creation of the Black Cultural Center [BCC].

RF: It was tied to the creation of the Black Cultural Center and the Black Studies program. We thought that particularly the Black Studies program was important. That it was necessary to bring the focus of Black Studies to Swarthmore in the various departments, obviously particularly history and political science. Also, the Black Cultural Center was related thereto, as a home for the Black students and for the Black Studies program. But again, it was as much [about] the Black Studies program as the [Black] Cultural Center.

[6] The President of Swarthmore College from 1953 until he died of a heart attack on January 16, 1969.

AS: Okay. Could you talk about the decision leading to 1970, the discussions around planning that direct action? It sounds like you were more involved with that decision.

RF: Yes, I was. Again, there was a sense that we really weren't getting anywhere. Now, to some extent, looking back it was probably also because that's what everyone was doing back then. You had Swarthmore, you had Columbia, you had Cornell. I mean there were a lot of takeovers. Between the Civil Rights [Movement] and Vietnam, takeovers were de rigueur. But we thought we had reached an impasse, and that we had to do something dramatic. Taking over the President's Office was dramatic, and then we had a torch light parade to the president's house. That sort of shocked a lot of folks. But we felt in order to achieve our goals we had to do something dramatic, and that "dramatic" was the takeover of the President's Office.

MM: Once you had decided that you were going to take this direct action, what was it like being in the President's Office? I think some of the other people we are interviewing have talked about it, but if you could talk more about what it was like sitting-in at the President's Office.

RF: Well, by that point I was a little handy at sitting-in, so from my point of view it was a lot less tense than the year before. Not only was it less tense, but [also] there was an air of — I'm not sure we took it as seriously as we should A lot of us were serious, but for some folks it was a lark, it was the thing to do. As I recall, it ended pretty quickly. I think David Closson[7] was involved. We were able to negotiate something with the administration, and it ended pretty quickly.

AS: Okay.

RF: But I remember the funniest thing was having Domino's Pizza delivered to the President's Office.

AS: [*laughing]*

RF: It was just absurd, but that's one of the things I remember.

AS and MM: [*laughing*]

AS: Absolutely. Thank you.

AS: [*whispers to MM*] I think you wanted to ask the next question.

MM: [*whispers to AS*] You can ask it.

[7] In the spring of 1970, David Closson was appointed Assistant Dean of Students, with the primary responsibility of counseling Black students and advising SASS.

AS: We were wondering, within this discussion of the Black Cultural Center, what role you think questions about the legality of [the] space and the inclusiveness of [the] space actually played in the administration's hesitancy to move as quickly as you would have liked?

RF: I don't know. Perhaps, but I don't recall a lot of discussion about that. [...] It was just that, no they didn't want to do it. Just a lot of opposition. We didn't hear from them a lot of arguments with regard to legality or inclusiveness.

AS: Okay.

RF: That was not something that was raised. Well, I think [it was not] raised in a serious fashion.

MM: You mentioned that the 1970 sit-in was not just about the Black Cultural Center, but also about Black Studies. And we were hoping you could talk more about how Black Studies looked in the beginning. The Black Philosophies of Liberation course that took place during the [spring] 1969 semester was a student-run course, and that's one example of what Black Studies looked like at the beginning. So, if you could talk more about that —

RF: I'm not sure I took that course. I'm not sure I took that course. Later on, obviously Kathryn Morgan[8] — she was the person who really got the Black Studies program off the ground. We had other people involved before then, but it was really Kathryn Morgan who got the program off the ground, who gave it integrity.

Recognize, at that time there was a tremendous debate between the — shall we say — the cultural nationalists or the Black nationalists and the revolutionary nationalists who were — the [Black] Panthers[9] would fall on the revolutionary nationalist side, along with SDS[10] [Students for a Democratic Society] and groups like that. A lot of the political discussion was geared around the whole question of cultural nationalism, which meant that the problem was a problem of race, versus revolutionary nationalism, which meant that the problem was a problem of caste. To some extent, I think a lot of the discussion — both in the classes, and in the dorms, etc. — revolved around how to deal with those issues. And clearly there was a split in the community along those lines. For instance — I think you've heard of the "Seven Sisters"[11] — they would probably be cultural nationalists. Their focus was on race. Other folks, particularly those of us who got more

[8] The first female tenured Black faculty member at the College, Kathryn Morgan taught courses in the history department and Black Studies program from 1970 until her retirement in 1995. She served as chair of the Black Studies program following Clement Cottingham, Jr.'s departure. (Cottingham first oversaw the Black Studies program).

[9] The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was an organization of Black revolutionaries active from 1966 until 1982.

[10] Students for a Democratic Society was an organization of student activists that operated from 1960 to 1969.

[11] The Seven Sisters were a group of Black women who were founding members and leaders of SASS.

involved in the anti-Vietnam [War] protests, began to focus more on revolutionary nationalism and focusing on some of the economic slash war issues, as opposed to simply focusing on the racial issues.

Again, you saw those tensions throughout. That also led to the tension of, "well, how closely do I identify with SASS, the group?" You had all of those multitudes of discussions going on all the time.

AS: Between the cultural nationalists and the revolutionary nationalists, which way do you think SASS ended up being steered near the end? Or what direction were the leadership —

RF: I would say more toward the revolutionary nationalism because, again, you had the Vietnam War going on. A lot of what we did merged into some of the anti-Vietnam War [protests]. But, it was really down the middle because at the same point, obviously, we were pushing strongly for the Black Studies program and trying to get that off the ground. By that point Kathryn Morgan had her classes going on, she did a great job in terms of the history — the cultural history. We were all over the lot.

AS: Okay. Thank you.

MM: Just as another follow-up to that, do you think any of these divisions were along gender lines or were there other disagreements that you think emerged in SASS along gender?

RF: Well, that's interesting because that was probably a generational divide in that the older students — quite frankly, I think the seniors were much more divided along gender lines than the younger students. For instance, I do believe that the Seven Sisters were the driving force behind the '69 takeover, but they put some of the men upfront. I think later on — with the later groups you didn't really have those gender divisions. Women were much more involved across the board, in all the decision-making. If you look at [the] class of '69 and groups before, I think there were gender divisions. Starting with my class and then moving forward, I think the gender disputes just evaporated. We had disputes, but it was not about gender. It was about politics, etc. Everybody had an equal voice.

AS: Would you say that in the class of '69 there were disputes about gender, there were discussions, or was it just that the positions were divided based on gender?

RF: I don't know — because, again, I came in as a freshman, [and] got into the takeover. The whole fall semester was sort of the buildup toward the takeover, the disputes, the takeover, and then recovery after the takeover. So I did not get a chance to really know some of the [class of] '69 people as well as I knew the other people.

But it's interesting; one of the things you haven't mentioned is the book *The Burglary*.[12] Which is very interesting because, unlike some of the '69 folks, we were there, and actually, our names got published in some of the files that were released to the FBI. It was interesting — talking about the anti-war things — You would read the FBI files, and then you realized when you'd go to meetings, all of a sudden you would have these outsiders who would show up. No one knew where they would come from, etc. And they were the ones who were always advocating violence, and you had to step back and control these people. And then when you read the FBI files, you read that most of those [people] were FBI agents, who were actually the ones advocating violence. They would just show up, and try to get people to do crazy things or be disruptive. Then, we would sort of pull back and say, "no, we can't get involved in these sort of things." That was another thing that we saw post-[19]69 — that you did have much more infiltration from outside.

MM: Did that FBI infiltration affect how you interacted with the nearby community, like with other Black communities around the College?

RF: It did. It did because you never knew. I mean, at some of the meetings you had people saying crazy things. *I'm not going to do that.* Looking back, you realize those were the FBI people who were trying to get you to commit violent acts. So yes, it did have the effect of dampening the desire or ability to work with outside groups outside of Swarthmore.

AS: We had some more questions about what courses within the Black Studies [program] you took —

RF: Sure.

AS: Or more specifically, what professors you worked with as well?

RF: [*laughing*] It's going to be interesting. The ones I remember were Clem[ent] Cottingham [Jr.][13], I remember I took an urban studies course with him. I took several courses with Kathryn Morgan, and did a senior thesis on Black troops in World War II. There were a couple other professors, but at this point I have no idea what their names are.

AS: Okay.

MM: How would you describe your relationships with these faculty members, or Black staff members on campus?

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[12] *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover's Secret FBI* (2014) was written by Betty Medsger and discusses the 1971 break-in of an FBI office in Media, Penn., in which files were discovered that showed government agents had been spying on Black college students at Swarthmore.

[13] Clement Cottingham, Jr. was appointed as the first director of the Black Studies program in the spring of 1970.

RF: Well, with the Black professors, they were good, solid relationships. Obviously, closest with Kathryn Morgan. My one regret is Clem Cottingham wanted me to help him in some research, in writing a book, and he was going to give me credit. And I was too busy, didn't feel like it. Looking back, boy do I feel stupid not having done that. He was a good guy too — went through some rough times at Swarthmore, but he was a good guy.

I had good relations with the Black professional staff at Swarthmore because I lived in the "preps."[14] I guess they've been torn down now. But, across the tracks in the preps I did not have much of a relationship with the non-professional staff that some of the other folks who lived up on campus had. Most of my relationships were with the teachers, or the assistant deans, etc.

AS: I was also wondering what your relationships with faculty members outside the Black Studies [program] may have been. If you remember just the general atmosphere in classrooms during the time, in terms of how faculty related to students?

RF: Well, we had a lot of support from the faculty, and even if they didn't support they didn't make an issue of it. But had strong support from some of the — it was a very radical White faculty, so we had strong support there. Again, particularly those who saw the struggle in economic terms, and linked this struggle with the struggle against the war [in Vietnam]. The other professors, for instance David Smith[15] and Ray[mond] Hopkins[16], two of my political science professors. I had great relationships with them. I pretty much left the politics outside of the classroom, and inside the classroom we didn't really delve as much into the politics.

MM: So do you think that these professors or other White professors taught Black students differently or if there was just a sense that you were all Swarthmore students?

RF: My sense is that we were all Swarthmore students. I had been in predominantly White schools since seventh grade, so coming to Swarthmore was no big deal, it was just another situation where I was [only] one of two, or the only one in the class. By that point, after maybe six years already, it was no big deal.

AS: We've also from other interviews talked to some people who have said that, especially around the time of the takeover, there was a lot of stress that some of the members of SASS and Black students may have felt, and that it may have manifested itself in academics and kind of

[14] The "preps" were buildings of the Swarthmore Preparatory School, before being converted into college housing. They are currently known as the Palmer, Pittenger and Roberts Dorms (PPR).
[15] David G. Smith, Richter Professor Emeritus of Political Science.
[16] Raymond F. Hopkins, Richter Professor Emeritus of Political Science, began teaching at Swarthmore in 1967.

difficulty, and I was wondering if you wanted to or could speak to just how people seemed to be doing with classes during your time at the school and during the takeover?

RF: Remember I guess that a part of freshman year at that point was pass-fail, maybe all of freshman year at that point was pass-fail, so obviously when you're getting a pass or a fail it didn't effect me that much. During the other times, it really just didn't affect me. You had to buckle down, you had to study, you just kept going. Now there were some classes where I got extensions, but actually the time I got the most extensions was not during the takeover [of 1970] but the next year, with the Cambodian Incursion.[17] And we were all so busy demonstrating that they let basically everybody get extensions, so I took extensions and finally got everything in in August, and it was the best year and the highest GPA I ever had at Swarthmore. I guess, maybe it was me, I never let it get in the way. At some point I was a student and you just have to crank out the work so I never felt pressured by the takeovers, but recognize I wasn't in the sciences. The sciences were very tough anyway, and so if you were in biology, chemistry, maybe math, then I don't know, but I was not in the sciences.

AS: Thank you. I was wondering if I could actually ask another question as well about your involvement with the Vietnam protests, and in general about the interests of the student body as a whole and then the interests of SASS or of White students. I noticed in '69 there seemed to be a little bit of a difference in terms of SASS advocating its goals and then the radical caucus[18] that was meeting at the time advocating student power, and maybe those butted heads in terms of what different groups felt like were more important to achieve in a timely fashion. And I was just wondering in your experience, because it seems like you were involved in other radical action at the College, how well those different interests went together or detracted from one another in different moments.

RF: Well I think after that we both went our own ways. We worked together on certain things, but bottom line is that they did their thing, we did ours, and when we [could] work together, fine, but we didn't get in their way and they didn't get in our way. In fact, in regard to the '70 takeover, we had very strong support and we had White students sitting out in front of the President's office in support of us. So I think we all learned to co-exist with each other.

AS: Would you say that —

RF: There wasn't any grand coordination. We didn't sit down and talk and, "we're going to do this, you're going to do that." Everybody kind of knew what folks were doing, it's a small campus, you read the notices and et cetera, and everybody does their thing.

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[17] A military campaign conducted by the United States and its allies in eastern Cambodia from April to July 1970 as part of the Vietnam War.

[18] This was a student group that met throughout the 1969 takeover to discuss its own positions relating to SASS and to larger questions of student power. A moderate caucus also met during this time period.

MM: And was that also the case with the anti-war protests?

RF: Yes, yes, yes.

AS: So I think one other thing we wanted to talk about was your role in helping the college hire Black faculty members after the departure of Mr. Cottingham? I'm not sure if you wanted to speak to what you remember?

RF: Well I was involved in some of the interviews, not all of the interviews. I was involved in some of the interviews. I remember distinctly one person we were interviewing. He was from a historically Black college or university. He came up and we started talking and said one of the things that we want you to do is teach Black history, and he says no, I don't teach Black history, I teach European history. [Well I'm sorry] no, we're looking for somebody in the Black Studies program who [is interested in] teaching Black history and he says no, I don't teach Black history I teach European history, so that was it. Back then, we went through an interesting process interviewing different people but as I said, I was not involved very heavily in the interview process. I did a couple interviews. That was the only one that stood out. I think I did talk to Kathryn [Morgan] before she came, and obviously she's a wonder, she was a wonder, but again I was not the person who was [...] involved in the interviewing.

MM: You mentioned earlier action at other schools and how that may or may not have influenced SASS, and I was wondering if you could talk more about how SASS or Black Swarthmore students saw themselves in relation to these other Black schools or Black students who were doing activism at other schools?

RF: I can't speak to how the Class of '69 was influenced. Recognize that a lot of the takeovers all occurred within a couple weeks of each other so obviously there was some influence and some coordination, but I was not involved in that. With regard to other campuses, mainly the Philadelphia campuses such as Penn and Bryn Mawr and Haverford, we were all close and we knew what each other were doing, but we didn't act in a coordinated fashion. That was just the nature of the isolation of Swarthmore. We'd get to Penn periodically, we'd have parties with them, we'd interact but we didn't act together. With regard to Bryn Mawr and Haverford, we would take courses together, even some Black Studies courses. So I took some Black Studies courses over at Bryn Mawr, and they would take some courses over at Swarthmore, but beyond that we didn't coordinate.

AS: You mentioned the isolation of Swarthmore, and I'm wondering just because it seems like from addresses given by faculty members at the time or administrators at the time that there was this idea of Swarthmore as being a place that's set apart just in terms of this liberal enclave, kind of almost utopian … and I was wondering just how that image matched up with your

expectations coming in and your experience as a whole, and how you saw that playing into campus culture while you were at Swat.

RF: Well I didn't really have an image of Swarthmore coming in.

AS: Okay.

RF: What happened was, I was all set to go to the University of Pennsylvania, and then I got invited up by SASS for a weekend, and I went to the recruitment weekend and I really liked the people and I think all my college interview basically consisted of was ten or fifteen minutes with Dean [Fred] Hargadon on a early Saturday morning while I was up there and we quickly scribbled together an application and that was it. I'm not sure I had a real understanding or image of Swarthmore. When I went through the college with my kids we were obviously much more deliberative than I was. So I had an image of Swarthmore as a small liberal school where everybody kind of got along and operated on consensus. But beyond that I didn't have a deep sense of Swarthmore going in.

Also, recognize that Swarthmore was changing. Because I think, from talking not necessarily to the folks of '69 but folks who had been there earlier, the pre-Swarthmore was a Swarthmore where quote "giants walked the land," and it was a much more male-oriented and homophobic, probably, environment back then than by the time I came. By the time I came really the winds of change were sweeping Swarthmore, so all of a sudden the football players were looked down upon. "You play football? What's wrong with you?" That type of situation. So the whole image of Swarthmore was changing when I got there.

AS: I was wondering too if you could speak more about that recruitment weekend that you went to, if you remember any particular members of SASS as standing out and also what they conveyed about the college, what they talked about when they talked about Swarthmore.

RF: I think that's when I became really good friends with folks like Don Mizell and Noble Jones[19] and also the late James Batton[20]. JB and I attended the weekend together. We talked a little bit about Swarthmore, but just as a place to get a good education, a very flexible, liberal place, where you could do your own thing and get a great education. The whole emphasis then was the whole Swarthmore was number one small college in the country, etc., that type of thing. But it was a classic recruitment weekend where they spent more time just wining and dining you —

MM and AS: [*laughing*]

RF: [*laughing*] — than selling you on the academic merits of the school.

[19] Class of 1970.
[20] Class of 1972. James H. Batton participated in the gospel choir.

MM: And just another question about that: how did SASS reach out to you for that recruitment weekend? Did you know someone in SASS?

RF: No, I think what happened is by that point they had the SAT scores and so you know the drill, you get X amount on the SATs and all of a sudden you get the letters from every college in the country, and so what they did was they did a cut on the SAT scores and all of a sudden I'm off to Swarthmore for the weekend with three or four of my friends from other Baltimore schools who'd also gotten great SAT scores.

AS: I also had some — I'm interested in the media coverage as well of the college, during the first year but also during the second year, and we've talked a lot in class about the ways that the takeovers were portrayed and especially the use of words like "militancy," or "violence," and I was wondering if maybe you wanted to speak to that or why you think those —

RF: It was the era; it was that it was the era in the United States. If you wore a 'fro, you were a Black militant regardless of whatever, and you can't at that point separate Swarthmore from the rest of the country. The rest of the country was going through the throes; really they called it "the death of the fifties." That's why you keep seeing '68 as a pivotal turning point but it was a pivotal year. You kind of had the death throes of the '50s and "father knows best" and the Donna Reed show and all of a sudden TV moved from the Beverly Hillbillies[21] to the Mod Squad[22]. So you really need to see it in terms of context of what was going on and then you had the perception of Swarthmore I know Spiro Agnew[23] used to call Swarthmore "the Kremlin on the Crum."

MM and AS: [*laughing*]

RF: You just got used to it. You really defined yourself as opposed to letting other people define you.

AS: Did the way that the 1969 protest was cast both within the campus community and also within the national media, did that affect how you thought about the 1970 action? Was that maybe more something that you were conscious of, the narratives that erupted around 1969 or not so much, it was an independent action for you?

RF: It was independent. Maybe I should have, but at 18, 19 you don't necessarily think of everything you should think of. But no, I didn't, I felt we had to do what we had to do and we were right, I just ignored that. Also recognize that, and for better or worse I may have been lucky

[21] A television series that aired from 1962 to 1971.
[22] A television series that aired from 1968 to 1973.
[23] Vice President of the United States under Richard Nixon from 1969 to 1973.

in that as a freshman, I wasn't really subject to the intense media focus that some of the seniors had been, and they weren't around. As I said by that point, that takeover was run by the juniors and sophomores for no other reason than there were only a few seniors and they were focused on getting into medical school and other things, so it was really the juniors and sophomores who ran that.

MM: You mentioned at the beginning of the interview that by the end of your time at Swarthmore you were labeled a communist, so if you could talk a little more about those labels, like "communist," "militant," and how they were used?

RF: I was in the Black community, my ready response was "you're a Jesus freak," because again that was when you started having the tension between SASS and the Gospel Choir, you had some people in the Gospel Choir who thought that the folks in SASS were far too militant or radical for them, and said "communist," and some of us thought that it was a turn back to Jesus freaks, that they were just too focused on God or too focused on religion, and they had to explain their options.

MM: So is there anything that you think we missed, anything you'd like to share that we necessarily didn't think of?

RF: No I think we covered everything. It was pretty extensive.

AS: I actually had one more quick question —sorry about the

RF: Oh no, I've cleared the afternoon.

AS: Okay, thank you. About the BCC and the space — we read that you were using Lodges 4 and 5, or 5 and 6 at the time you were asking for the Robinson House. And I was wondering how you were using those spaces, and the need for the Robinson House over some of the other options that the College offered. I think it was a Wednesday tour that President Cross led [SASS representatives] on, where you guys looked at a fraternity as well and really wanted the Robinson House.

RF: Yeah, I think we were using the Lodges as meeting rooms slash classrooms. But if you know the Lodges there was no security there. People would wander in and out, and there was a concern about security and people wandering in and out, and people spying on us. With regard to the frat houses: I don't know if they're even still around, but they were pretty tacky by the late '60s, because quite frankly, except for maybe the [Delta Upsilon's], they were pretty much dying. Earlier on in my freshman year, I had joined the Kappies[24], which was a fraternity and it was a local fraternity because they had gotten kicked out of national for admitting Black folks. And our

[24] The Kappa Sigma Pi fraternity.

frat house was really ratty and most of the others were pretty ratty too, so again the frat houses were in pretty bad shape. Robinson House, on the other hand, was in good shape. We could run a lot of programs there, we could have meetings there, et cetera, so I think that's why we opted for the Robinson House.

AS: How often was that space used once it was given as the BCC? How often did Black students tend to meet there?

RF: On a daily basis. Folks met there on a daily basis. Not only in meetings but just as a place to hang out and gather. You had folks who were living there, and then you had people who'd just come over, gather. I didn't but a lot of folks used eat their meals over there, do their own cooking over there. So one way or another it got used on a daily basis.

MM: [to AS] Do you have any other questions?

AS: I guess I maybe did have just one —

RF: Don't feel bad,

MM and AS: [*laughing*]

AS: — one or two more about Black Studies and about how you articulated what you wanted that to look like at Swarthmore, if you were looking at other programs at other schools or how you built that idea for the program?

RF: We were looking at programs at other schools but as important, we were looking for someone who had a vision who could make it happen. And again I think that's why Kathryn [Morgan] really became the person because she came in with a vision. Recognize that again, we were anywhere between 17 to 20, 21. We're not academic experts. We know we want a viable Black Studies program but we weren't in a position to really get into the weeds or the nuts and bolts of what our program should or shouldn't look like, but what we were looking for was someone with the academic background who could knew what a program should look like and could implement it, could establish and implement it, and that's what Kathryn Morgan did.

AS: And then the makeup of those early classes — was it mainly Black students or Black students and White students, a mix?

RF: It was primarily Black students but it was a mix, it was a mix.

AS: Okay. Do you remember how some White students or White faculty responded to the idea of Black Studies? Do you remember hearing anything?

RF: Not really. I did have one idiot in freshman year, who when we were talking about Black Studies and a Black history program his response was, "Well, maybe there's no such thing as Black history" whereupon I promptly gave him 3 or 4 books to read, which he never read. The irony and what's really scary is I think he's since went on to become a history teacher.

MM and AS: [groans]

RF: Yeah, I know. But aside from a comment or so like that, I didn't interact with the people who had negative comments, I really didn't. I think we had one episode where we had a debate with the Student Council over some of that and they were opposing it and I was told I was really brutal. I was just speaking my mind and afterwards somebody said "How could you say stuff like that?" "What did I say? I just said what I thought." But anyways for the most part, for better or worse, I didn't have a lot of dealings with the people who opposed us.

AS: Okay, thank you.

MM: I actually had another question. I know that you said you were closer to the professional staff, the professional Black staff because you lived across the tracks, but I was wondering if you had any memories of staff, Black staff on campus, whether they were professional or nonprofessional, supporting the SASS actions and the SASS protests in 1969 and 1970?

RF: I don't have any memories of support. I've been told by some of the Seven Sisters and some of the other females that they got support. I never got any. The only thing I remember is we're in the admissions office and the Black woman who always was on the door of Parrish in the evening tried to break in and told us we should go, we were wrong, we should leave, you know, it was destroying ourselves and the school, et cetera, but no, I don't.

MM: Could you elaborate on that story a little more?

RF: Well that's what happened. All of a sudden she's banging on the door telling us to get out, to get out, we shouldn't be taking it over, we didn't know what was good for us, we were wrong, you know. But that was about it. That happened and at the same time the administration found one or two Black folks who weren't involved in the takeover to speak out publicly against us and the administration used them as a spokesperson to show how we were just crazy Negroes, but you know, that was life.

AS: Yeah that was another division I was kind of interested in. You said that, in general, you felt that you had a supportive faculty, like a radical White faculty, or a very liberal White faculty, so in terms of this hesitancy to make change at the college do you think that that was definitely coming from the Dean's Office and an administrative level, like where do you think — ?

RF: No it was from the faculty as well. Obviously there were very conservative faculty members as well, but the one thing the Swarthmore faculty was very good about was keeping the arguments inside the faculty. So you'd hear rumors, et cetera, and things would pop out and then all of a sudden, wow, but you wouldn't really know what was going on in the faculty meetings. But there was clearly conservative faculty members and I guess to some extent I and we had this Black militant image so the conservative faculty members for the most part wouldn't dream of going near me.

AS: No, that's really interesting. One thing that — looking back at *The Phoenix* supplement from that week[25], and I know this is probably a hard to remember kind of detail, but there were reports that seemed like that someone was speaking pretty closely to the faculty, like it seemed like the proceedings within faculty meetings were kind of being relayed to the community and I know that the faculty were kind of relaying minutes as well, but there was also a liaison group, where it was Steve Piker, Professor [Linwood] Urban and Professor Jerry Wood who were liaisons to SASS and I was just wondering if in any of your interactions with those faculty or anyone else if you kind of got a sense of what was going on or the faculty minutes were really pretty closed off despite —

RF: I didn't, I didn't. Most of those folks were not in my department so I didn't have relationships with them. Now again, some of the seniors probably did but I didn't. Now recognize, we weren't getting *The Phoenix* inside the admissions office —

AS: Okay.

RF: — so to some extent we were closed off so we didn't know what was going on.

AS: Okay, thank you. And I guess — this is moving towards final questions I promise — you came to Swarthmore and you helped with all these changes at the College, and it seems like some students graduated and kind of didn't look back. And I was wondering what your relationship to the College, and kind of just keeping up with members of your class year, what that's been like for you personally, and if you've been back for any reunions or anything like that or just what your relationship has been with to the school?

RF: Well I have and I haven't looked back. I still keep in touch with some folks in my class or the class of '73 that I've been close with. I still keep in contact. Periodically I've come back to the school, still have fond memories. Unlike a lot of folks I never left Swarthmore embittered. I was fine. I figured I had a good experience. I learned a lot, I think the school was good for me. It was a pretty sheltered environment which allowed me — I went in and I was 17, I thought I

[25] *The Phoenix* published a supplementary daily issue of the paper during the period of the 1969 takeover.

knew everything but I realize looking back I didn't realize how young I was going in, and it was a sheltered environment that allowed me to grow up and to learn and explore. I went on to Yale and I found that was a much larger school, a much colder environment and I thought, "Boy, these folks are full of themselves." I mean they can't for the most part hold a candle to the Swarthmore people but nobody could tell them that. So no, I had a positive view and since I have been back to a few reunions and one of the things I've noticed at some of my reunions is I've gotten to really reach out to some of my White classmates that I had gotten friendly with freshman year, was very close, and then we had the takeover and we all went our own ways, and they're really neat people and I wish I'd gotten to know them better and stayed in touch with them a lot more than I have. But no, clearly there were some folks, particularly the women, who left Swarthmore embittered. I was not one. I had a good experience, I got decent grades obviously, was able to go onto law school with no problem, so it's all positive to me and I think back fondly on the school.

MM: Any final thoughts?

RF: No I think we've covered everything unless you have one more question. Just kidding.

MM and AS: [*laughing*]

MM: Thank you so much for speaking to us, it's just really great to hear from someone who was there at the time who can share insight that we don't have as researchers or historians.

RF: It was my pleasure, and thanks for teaching me how to work Skype.

MM and AS: [*laughing*]

AS: No problem, yeah thank you so much, it was nice to meet you.

RF: Nice meeting you as well, take care now.

AS: Thank you, have a nice day.

MM: Have a good day.

H. Russel Frisby, Jr.
Washington D.C.

November 26, 2014

Upon reflection, I believe that it would be wrong to mythologize the events of January 1969, or for that matter the subsequent related and unrelated events of 1970-1972. Without minimizing what happened in 1969, it would be incorrect to characterize this, as some might, as the most significant event in the history of Blacks at Swarthmore. I am certain that in each decade starting with the early '60s, there have been equally significant events. That is the case whether it was the College's reaction to Maurice Eldridge's experience with racism or the events in the early '70s including the takeover of the President's Office, the acquisition of the House, the establishment of a solid Black Studies Program or the founding of the Gospel Choir. I am sure that equally important events have occurred since then. For me (as a biased native of Baltimore) any attempt to choose among them would be like historians trying to determine whether the American's victory at Fort McHenry (so heralded in the Star Spangled Banner) was more important or heroic than Andrew Jackson's subsequent victory at New Orleans -- there are arguments on each side. Instead, our takeaway should be that determined Black Swarthmore students, along with their counterparts of various races, genders, and orientations, can change history when they have the courage to take action!