

This is an interview with Dr. Ava Harris Stanley, who was a student at Swarthmore College from 1967- 1972. She was a member of SASS and served as the treasurer for SASS as well as participated in the 1969 sit-in in the admissions office. The interview was conducted by John Gagnon and Ali Roseberry-Polier on Wednesday August 6, 2014 via phone.

ARP: OK we just started. This is Ali; I am Dr. Dorsey's research assistant for the summer. I just graduated.

AHS: Congratulations

ARP: Thank you.

JG: And this is John. I'm a current student that is a research assistant for Dr. Dorsey.

AHS: Alright, how can I help you both?

ARP: Can we get started with the interview?

AHS: Yes.

ARP: Thank you.

JG: OK. Well to start off with if you just want to give us a little bit of your overview of your experiences at Swarthmore. I think that would be a good place for us to start.

AHS: That's a while back. So my experiences at Swarthmore. The experience was completely new to me. I had as a child, as a teenager, grew up on the south side of Chicago, which has a long history, African-American history, no exposure to Quaker traditions or even that demographic. So the experience was new to me. The educational experience was also new to me because I was much more exposed to I suppose you would call it not conceptual, not analytical learning style, so it was drop Ava into the ocean see if she can swim. So the exposure to African-American, interestingly enough was also different because the African-American history of the midwest, the experience that is to say, particularly Chicago is way different from the east coast- New York, New Jersey, and south. And so I was exposed to basic individuals of history but not the text, not the literature of the east coast. There's a lot more, to me anyway, to literature of biography and autobiography was what I was exposed to as opposed to the literature of Sociology or De Bois or Harold Cruse¹. It was an interesting experience. I was used to the ideas of African-American organizations because that was the only way that we functioned was through organizations, so that was ok. That was actually the part that I was most familiar with. The part, the expectations of other non-black students was also new to me. That was the first time people ever wanted to pat my hair, see what it felt like. I had never really been exposed to suburban living or people who lived in the suburbs; I was strictly urban. I would say that and the

¹ Harold Cruse was the author of *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* in 1967. He taught African American Studies at the University of Michigan beginning in 1968. Among his ideologies were his stance against integration, rather he supported and implored African-Americans to reclaim their cultural heritage and to establish centers of cultural influence.

academic atmosphere made it an interesting set of years. I think I was enriched by it, but there was a lot of kicking and screaming in the process. I think there are easier ways to expose young students to each other, but it was a politically charged atmosphere. Now I realize later on that most academic atmospheres are politically charged, so that was nothing that was different. Did I feel like I was mistreated- no. Did I feel like I could have had a better time in the process- yeah. I think orientation could have been a little bit different; mainly orientation that week was getting to know where all the building were not getting exposed to the class style. I suppose if I had gone to- well that was the other thing I did not go to a high velocity prep school where I learned to read the primary literature and analyze it in a way that was useful, so that I had to learn how to do that. And the thing that I most noticed is that even though I wasn't good at Math and Science and Chemistry, there was much less bias there. I was much more drawn to it after a certain point. It was the perspectives, even the liberal perspectives in History and Sociology had no room for the voice of the studied group or individual so I was...For that reason I think Biology and Chemistry were actually easier. In terms of mentorship which I think is really the most important thing in terms of academic development and focusing on what your path should be there was none until I met Kathryn Morgan. And in terms of medicine there was none until I met people, I think they had a proposal for a post-bac program and they brought in people who had graduated but needed another year of exposure to Science so they could move on. And I met these people and then I saw them as successful, and at that point I basically did a u turn or I think maybe it was a right turn. At any rate that mentorship process in the most important part of the process of learning and education. There are certain ways to break paths, that is to develop new ideas, to learn new things, and to communicate them and that part needs a model that part needs a way of thinking about it and going about it and its just not clear to somebody coming from where I came from which is basically south side, went to a private parochial high school, but you learn basic stuff; you didn't learn academic process there. But once you are able to understand academic process then you can break new paths and move forward. That kind of trust relationship, it should happen more often- I don't know how to make it more often- but it should happen more often. Does that explain?

JG/ARP: Yeah, that's good.

JG: So I guess we want to go from there, you talked about being familiar with black organizations, were you a member of SASS?

AHS: yes

JG: And when did you join SASS?

AHS: '70- no, no, when did I come in? '67

JG: In '67

AHS: Yeah, in September of '67. I think that's when they- we first had, started having meetings then. I think that, I'm not even sure, I think I remember meeting about an argument about what

we were going to call ourselves. I don't think anybody took minutes for those meetings, so I can't tell you which one it was or whether it well and truly happened.

JG: So you were in it from the beginning of the program- of the group?

AHS: I think so.

JG: And do you remember why you decided to join?

AHS: I'm not even sure I understand the question because; I suppose the question to me was why wouldn't I join. Did I see myself as African-American- yes. Did I feel like I had shared values- hope so, wasn't sure but was willing to find out. We actually were very diverse, very heterogenous. It was kinda amazing, I mean suburban, urban, I mean a wide demographic. At the time the admissions office- to me the reason we started meeting was because the admissions office had done an analysis of who the black students were in hopes that they could further develop the black student population. But they did it in a very- they wrote a paper and said 'here what do you think?' As opposed to having small group meetings and saying 'what works for you, what doesn't work for you.' They looked at it as not student development but what works for the college. They wrote a paper- there were only about 50 of us so you could figure out who was who and you could also figure out what the SAT score were and other stuff- it wasn't the kind of paper that you share with subjects but they were doing the best they could. But anyway there were all kind of reactions to that; to me it was knowledge, to everybody else it was- some people were very offended and you could look at the paper and say 'this is a very wide demographic' and I came to realize, and they based in on the basis of schools and SAT scores and then as I got to know them I realized this is a wide demographic in terms of academic background as well as cultural background. Even at that point there were African-Americans who were from the Caribbean, African-Americans from Harlem, New York, New Jersey are totally different from African-Americans from the South Side. African-Americans from Florida and Virginia are totally different from African-Americans from Chicago. Africans from the Caribbean are different from all of that. There were some students who didn't join, and I was never sure about their motivations.

JG: Were there many of those, or were they pretty few in number?

AHS: There were a few; there were a few.

JG: But they never voiced their reason why they didn't join?

AHS: I don't think I ever asked them. I don't think I was at that stage; I was a freshman. But my background had been from organizations with successful social and political lives. My father was in the democratic party in Chicago, particularly the Young Democrats, and this had been an organization present since the 19th Century, I think Chicago had a black congressman either early 1900's or late 19th Century but there was some type of black organized political life in Chicago. So that was how I understood organizations. SASS was a lot less structured, but I

thought it would pursue goals and articulate and speak for and also accomplish things that would improve student life and student interest.

ARP: So what was your involvement with the 1969 takeover of Parrish Hall? What do you remember about that?

AHS: I was there. I didn't really like it.

ARP: What about it did you not like?

AHS: I felt as part of an organization it was something I had to do, but I didn't think that- and it was part of the process of other student activities that were going on in the region at the time. They weren't going on in the South Side of Chicago at the time; we had already had student life at the University of Chicago. My mother actually went to the University of Chicago, MBA 1948. She commuted though. But I felt like it was an important step and we needed to be unified. And the demands seemed reasonable and at that point making them requests didn't seem appropriate because we were outside the tradition of Swarthmore thinking and maybe even Quaker thought- I don't know I haven't studied enough philosophy. I know the Quaker meetings I went to, I was the only black person, so I'm thinking we were probably outside that tradition.

JG: Do you remember how you felt during the days that you were sitting-in in the admissions office?

AHS: Me personally, I was just holding on. It wasn't something that I well and truly wanted to do. I'm not a protest kind of individual; I mean, will be in granted situations. If this was a way of me asserting myself and this was the option I had as opposed to not being a part of that organization- and at that point there only seemed to be two choices, either you're in or you're out- I said well, ok.

ARP: So after President Courtney Smith died, SASS ended the sit-in and many students left campus; did you leave campus at that point?

AHS: yeah where were we; we were at some church in some place. Were we in Chester or Philadelphia? I don't remember.

ARP: What can you remember about the exit from campus?

AHS: I think we were in private cars. Then when we got there, I don't even remember where we slept, probably on the floor because we were sleeping on the floor in the admissions office. I remember trying to communicate and trying to get people to talk to each other because on hand I thought it was really difficult at that point because Sam Shepard was the president of the group², and I wasn't really part of the Seven Sisters, it was more like I was trying to mediate between the two and I felt like I was getting alright I'm trying to get along here; I'm not even sure what the

² Sam Shepard was the original president of SASS, and graduated in 1968. Clinton Etheridge was the current president of SASS during this time.

issue was. I think I was trying to make sense of, trying to make something coherent. Why are we here and what should we do next. I don't think that was clear to me so I just took the next semester off. I came back and I think that was sophomore or junior year and then I came back. When I came back there were other activities going on.

JG: And then when you came back, we found that there were some documents where your were listed as the treasurer for SASS.

AHS: Treasurer, yes. I was; I just collected membership money and deposited it in an account.

JG: How long were you in that position?

AHS: Maybe a year. I think I was on the steering committee one year; maybe I was, maybe I wasn't. I did have a lot of things to say.

JG: Do you remember other members of SASS that were on other committees with you?

AHS: I remember Harold Trammel but I don't remember whether he was a part of the steering committee. Don Mizell. Holly Robinson. Gillespie, Myra Rose

JG: As members of the steering committee?

AHS: I'm trying to remember. I know Holly was. Mizell was, I'm not sure about the others. There were a lot of disagreements about how to go about things.

ARP: What sort of disagreements?

AHS: I'm trying to remember what they were. They mainly stand out as conflict. I'm not even sure the issues were all that significant. Yeah, I remember. At a certain point a lot of people had graduated on and the steering committee had a lot of freshmen on it, and Holly. And I think Mizell was trying to basically bulldoze people, and I wasn't really sure whether that was for the good of the organization or for the good of Don Mizell.

ARP: Yeah.

AHS: And I basically said to Holly, well, why do you want to be involved in this process? Because my conversations with Mizell would be more like, we need to be an organization of people as well as of issues, and it's not so much who the leader is, but what about leadership development. I'm kind of summarizing here, I probably wasn't as articulate. We had meetings - there was somebody else who was good, she was a history major. I'm having a hard time remembering her name. Very tough-minded. I just felt like I spent a lot of time trying to assert interests of *group* process, rather than, you know, individual leadership process. Interestingly enough, a template for organizations in general. Yeah, I was treasurer, and then I think - I don't think I was ever really a part of the steering committee, although I certainly had things to say.

ARP: Yeah. Did you get the sense that any of those divisions within SASS were along lines of gender, in terms of leadership?

AHS: Initially, yes, very much. Marilyn - we used to call them the Marilyns, Marilyn Holifield and Marilyn Allman. They both had very clear ideas of what should happen. More Marilyn Allman, I listened to Marilyn Allman more than I did Holifield. Holifield wasn't around all that much. People listened to what they had to say. They were fairly coherent. And they were also fairly coherent in meetings, which is probably where I heard most of what they had to say. I remember an interaction between Marilyn Allman and a history professor at a meeting where we were trying to develop Black Studies, trying to define it, determine it in terms of focus, in terms of where courses should be. The history professor was saying that many times, specific culturally focused course work or course concentrations didn't survive or didn't have academic focus or weren't well funded. And Marilyn's specific question was, and how does this relate to Black Studies?

JG: And so was that the Black Studies Curriculum Committee?

AHS: Yeah.

JG: And you were a part of that.

AHS: Yeah. I guess, yeah.

JG: And from your experiences on that, did you feel like the faculty members or administrative members that you dealt with treated you as a respectable person, or equal that had something good to contribute to the conversation?

AHS: That's a loaded question. We sat on different sides of the table but we had different sets of armamentarium. It was unloaded for us politically in that we didn't have the budget, we didn't have the perspective on how to integrate African American history into history, integrate DuBois into sociology. And so, yeah, they were respectful in the context of the academic process of funding, hiring, grant proposals, and academic and faculty politics, yeah. [pause] The other interesting thing, I was involved in a meeting with, I think maybe a provost, about the Black Student House, when they basically said - they would call us for meetings, and I'd go, alright, what the fuck's going on now. I didn't quite say that, but their project line of how things should work was not communicated to us at any point in time. And knowing how committees work and how management and management style works, I'm also sure that wasn't intentional, but it certainly was hard to predict. I remember being in a meeting where we were basically offered the building, and I'm thinking, this is what I'm sitting here to say, to say, OK. So I said, OK, that'll be fine. With funding for it. And I said, OK, yes, thank you. At that point, students weren't supposed to say thank you, but I nodded my head and was agreeable. Even now, I realize that friendliness and collegiality can be misconstrued, and I think I was appropriate at the time.

JG: And do you remember other interactions with the faculty regarding getting the Black Cultural Center?

AHS: That was the one I remember the most. There was one protest where we went to the house of a later president and somebody read poetry basically saying, we're not happy with what you're doing. And I'm thinking, I'm always thinking, whenever I go to a protest, and I've been to other protests, this isn't making any sense. But, OK, we want to do this, you want to do this, you think it's important, OK. That president was only there for a year, I think. Was his name Friend?³

ARP: Would that have been Robert Cross?⁴

AHS: Maybe so, Cross, yeah.

ARP: And, do you remember, you said you were in the meeting where you agreed to the building for the Black Cultural Center. Do you remember why students chose that building, or why that building was the one that ended up getting decided on?

AHS: Why that building was offered, I have no idea. That was one of those things, I wanted to stop and say, wait, where is this coming from? Why are you offering us this? Do we have choices here?

ARP: Yeah.

AHS: And I said to myself, somebody somewhere knows this and somebody should have told me, but I realized I was at a meeting, and these meetings are always like, alright, we're going to sit down and talk to you and we're not going to have any preamble to these discussions. Or the preamble that we have is more of a principled, conceptual one. It doesn't talk about facts or who's involved or - so I did not ask those key questions, but I also thought, would I get a clear answer if I asked them?

ARP: Yeah, certainly.

AHS: So, I would have liked to have a contact inside that management process to tell me exactly what was going on, and I did not have one.

ARP: Yeah. And did you feel that the faculty and administration was sort of opaque with all members of SASS?

AHS: Yeah, I think so.

ARP: And did they, did you feel that they at any point deferred to the male members more than the women in SASS?

³ Theodore Friend was the Swarthmore College President from 1973 - 1982.

⁴ Robert Cross was the Swarthmore College President from 1969 - 1971.

AHS: Only when they wrote the history. The history of that period that was written, I'm not sure who commissioned it, but there were no women involved in that history. I mean, there were no women mentioned in that history.

ARP: Yeah. And that wasn't your experience from being involved?

AHS: Not at all.

JG: Going back briefly to you saying you were excluded from a lot of details on the Black Cultural Center. Did you ever hear anything about the Michener Fund?

AHS: That came through, but I didn't know how it was connected to the - James Michener left a lot of money, but they decided how to spend it.

ARP: The administration did?

AHS: Yeah.

ARP: And so did you have any idea how the fund was to be divided, or what role it was to play?

AHS: No. I never saw that paperwork.

ARP: Yeah.

JG: I guess just in general, how do you perceive that your work in SASS shaped your experiences as a student?

AHS: I guess the question for me would be, were my work in SASS and my work as a student connected? I'm not sure if they were connected.

JG: I guess additionally, did you feel that your association with SASS influenced how you were perceived in the greater college community by other students?

AHS: That I don't know.

JG: Yeah.

AHS: The backgrounds of the other students that I met - I met people who came from the suburbs, people who were - it was just a really big demographic in terms of people who were learned, rich, well-connected, long traditions of success, familial success. I accepted them for who they were, but they certainly weren't me. I had long traditions of survival, but my mother was the first person in our family to graduate, my grandparents had completed high school, so at a certain point I didn't pay too much attention to my relationships or how other people perceived me, I was just more interested in maybe helping somebody else and then trying to get out.

ARP: Yeah. And to back up a little bit, you were talking earlier about the role that faculty played, especially when Kathryn Morgan came, and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about your relationships with black faculty or administrators.

AHS: I think there were people in the admissions office, I think the admissions office tried to hire people specifically to recruit black students. During my sojourn there was the first time they tried to hire black faculty and administrators so I tried to have relationships with them.

JG: But Kathryn Morgan was the one you had the most interaction with, or that meant the most to you?

AHS: Yes. It was more of, it gave me to understand how research was supposed to work. That you started with primary research and worked your way forward into analysis. And that, without the true primary research - I mean, you can do history from documents and that's certainly valid and gives you a good perspective and perception, but talking to people and listening to their stories for me has always been the central way of getting perspective and perception, not just on events but also on how people perceive events. And from that you can develop models of thinking about it. There were, I think there was one political science professor there, and I dropped out of his course on day one because he talked in four line sentences. And I thought um, no, analysis is important, but analysis without background - OK, it's wonderful, it's impressive, but this is not how I learn.

ARP: And that's something you were able to get more in Kathryn Morgan's classes?

AHS: It was more, yeah. I was successful there because it gave me to understand how models are built. It gave me a feeling of, OK, I understand how this works. And that was really, I think, my first exposure to a real way of looking at methodology more than just having to memorize models, that was building methods. So yeah, I would say yeah. In terms of other people - basically, I think I graduated in sociology but I don't think I was ever really a sociologist. Even when I graduated I honestly have to say I was not well-read in sociology. I got a degree.

ARP: Did you work at all with Asmarom Legesse in that department?

AHS: Say again?

ARP: Did you work or take any classes with Asmarom Legesse when you were studying sociology?

AHS: I don't think, were they there when I was there? I don't think so.

JG: I'm not sure how long he stayed. He was there for a period. He was also in anthropology, rather than sociology.

AHS: Yeah, anthropology, yeah. I think I did take a course with him.

JG: But that was the extent of your relationship with him?

AHS: Yeah, right.

ARP: You mentioned a couple minutes ago students getting more involved in recruiting more black students. Is that something that you were involved with at all?

AHS: Recruiting, yeah, I did go on a recruitment trip with one of the administrators there. He told me I wasn't good at it because I didn't smile enough.

ARP: Do you remember which administrator that was? Would it have been William Cline by any chance?

AHS: I think it was a guy that was only there for a year. But I don't think it was William Cline. Was that C-L-I-N-E?

ARP: Yeah.

AHS: I'm blanking at names.

ARP: That's alright.

JG: That's fine.

AHS: I'd do better if I had a picture of him. I don't think he was in the admissions office. Wasn't he an assistant dean? Or was he in admissions?

ARP: He was in admissions, not for very long though.

AHS: OK, then it must have been him, alright.

JG: Another thing that comes to mind with the recruitment is the Black at Swarthmore booklet. Do you have any memories or experiences with that?

AHS: Blacks at Swarthmore?

JG: The booklet, the recruitment booklet.

AHS: No. I don't think so. I think I may have seen it, but I don't think I was a part of writing it.

JG: And you don't remember other people working on it?

AHS: No, I don't remember that.

ARP: Thank you. Were you involved in other black organizations, such as the Gospel Choir or the Black Dance Troupe? Do you remember what sort of impact they had on college life when they started?

AHS: I think the gospel choir was just starting as I left, and I wasn't involved in that. I graduated in '72. The last year I was there I don't think I was that involved in student life.

ARP: Yeah.

JG: And the same goes for the dance troupe, do you remember that at all?

AHS: I'm pretty sure that happened after I left. I think it did. Maybe it didn't, but I wasn't involved in it.

ARP: OK, yeah, thank you.

JG: And were there any other groups similar to those that you remember that we're forgetting?

AHS: SASS was enough, I guarantee. In terms of student groups, right?

JG: Yes.

AHS: SASS was enough.

ARP: Is there anything else that you'd want to add about your time at Swarthmore, and particularly your involvement with SASS? Anything we're leaving out?

AHS: I think you brought out a lot more than I thought I remembered. So I think I'm done.

ARP: Thank you.

JG: It's been really nice, thank you.

AHS: Best of good luck to both of you.

ARP and JG: Thank you so much.