Bridget Van Gronigen Warren (BVGW) class of '70, interviewed on October 19, 2014 by Martin Froger-Silva (MFS) and Patricia Gutiérrez-Fregoso (PGF) via Skype at the Swarthmore College Media Center.

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.

Bridget Van Gronigen Warren: Hi!

Patricia Gutiérrez-Fregoso: Okay, hello.

Martin Froger-Silva: Hello.

BVGW: Are you seeing?

MFS: Yes, we can see you now.

PGF: It is a pleasure to finally meet you.

BVGW: Yes, same here, same here. I'm looking out the window, and it's getting really black, and I'm hoping there's no horrible thunderstorms because that could affect this. (laughs) Yeah.

PGF: Okay.

BVGW: Yeah, anyway. Okay, so, what do you have in mind for this? How about if I introduce myself, I really…

MFS: Yes.

BVGW: You guys probably know nothing of me, I've been lost to the world for a while.

PGF: Yes, we would appreciate that.

BVGW: Yeah, well right now I'm relatively recently retired. But I do take work for the Smithsonian. There's a Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute here in Panama, and I'm on their committee that makes sure that all the research protocols take the animals into consideration in the way that they should. Anyway, as you know I graduated from Swarthmore, I studied Biology. And then I went to Temple and I studied Medical Microbiology and Immunology. My professional life was part, I was at the Med School in Panama as a professor in the department of microbiology, and then I changed and I became an industrial person, and I started working in the Panama Canal in industrial microbiology, water biology. My professional life is basically that, I did, yeah, mostly that, there are a few other things, but those are the most important parts. Yeah.

PGF: Thank you.

MFS: So, I guess we'll start the interview now. And we should all go around and introduce ourselves, so names and class year.

BVGW: Okay.

MFS: Yeah so I'll go first, and then Pati, and then you will go. So, I'm Martin Froger-Silva, class of 2016.

BVGW: Okay, my gosh. I didn't know that type of year existed when I was there. (laughs).

PGF: It does now. Yes. My name is Pati Gutiérrez-Fregoso, and I'm the class of 2015.

BVGW: Okay, okay. And I'm Bridget Warren, class of seventy. Nineteen. (laughs).

MFS: Great, so I guess we'll start.

PGF: Yeah. So basically we're just going to be alternating and asking questions.

BVGW: Okay, fine.

PGF: Okay. So for the first question, could you briefly describe how you decided to come to Swarthmore and maybe, what was the environment like when you got here, and how you think it changed with the creation of SASS?

BVGW: Okay. I, first of all, I was a recent foreigner when I went to Swarthmore. Okay? I was living in the States for about two or three years, and I guess of all the schools that I went to I liked the environment when I went there. I liked the small school, I liked the academic programs that were offered. I was interested in science, and biology in particular, and I liked what they had to offer. I didn't expect… I didn't see any black students when I went for my interview, and they told me that there weren't many. They always treated me as both: as a foreign student, my roommate got me because she wanted a foreign student…

PGF: Interesting…

BVGW: Yes, yes. That sort of thing. I was treated as a foreign student, but I was also treated as one of the black students, because my class I think might have been the biggest class up to that point, all right? So I was counted in with that group. Yeah. What was the other question? I forgot? (laughs)

PGF: Just how, maybe, you saw the environment changing from when you were there, and then with SASS?

BVGW: With SASS? Okay. I think maybe as far as the students who would have made up SASS, people who would become members of SASS, or would have participated in the protest, we expected something a little bit more than Swarthmore gave. Because this was the beginning of the support for black students. Remember, and if you look historically at this time, and Martin Luther King was in the South, you know, and all these sorts of things were going on, there were scholarships that were made available for black students, that were starting to be made available, because things seemed to get very slow. And then maybe on the part of the College, and I don't think this is just Swarthmore, it's probably all traditionally white colleges that were beginning for the first time to see other types of students in more than, you know, one or two students in the campus. I'm not sure what the… I don't think they expected the same thing that black students expected. I think there was a difference there. And I think SASS made a difference in making both sides see that, you know, we really were looking at this college experience as something a little bit different, and we sort of needed to move together a little bit more.

PGF: Thank you.

MFS: Could you share your memories of Sam Shepard?

BVGW: Yes, yes, I do. He was a nice guy. He was really nice. I haven't been in contact with a lot of the people, talking about SASS, really. I remember him but not… I know he was the president of the Black students association. I think that was just before I went in, there was something that was trying to start moving and I don't think it got very far until SASS in itself came along because I don't think SASS was created a little bit after or he was the president. He was a very quiet, very quiet person, a very nice person. I don't have a memory of him being as active, maybe, as the people who are traditionally mentioned when you talk about SASS, which would be the president, the vice-president, and so forth.

Could I ask a question? What did you guys hear about him?

PGF: Well, part of the reason that we're asking is because, so, he's passed, and he's one of the people that we can't reach for his interviews…

BVGW: That's right.

PGF: So we're trying to get an idea from everyone that we talk to, like how we can put their memories together to create an image of him that we can't access.

MFS: And he was the president of SASS up until '68 when he graduated.

BVGW: Yes, yes, and there really was not much activity, that I remember, at least, and I should preface that by saying that I know that my name is there with the Seven Sisters, but I wasn't quite as active as my six other friends/sisters and so maybe he was and I didn't know, that could be right, but we were all there to one extent or another, more or

less. There were some people who were really a core in getting everything going and they should be recognized as such. I was friends, we were the so-called Seven Sisters, we were friends, we were never roommates, we were friends and we talked a lot and we had to throw our ideas at each other a lot and people saw us as this unit, but this very powerful entity that I'm beginning to get a feeling about, I didn't really feel it as a general sense of things while I was at Swarthmore. That came after, or I discovered that after, I guess.

PGF: Interesting. So, could you talk about… Were you involved with SASS from the beginning, as soon as you got to Swarthmore, and how did your relationship with SASS change as the events of 1968 to 1969 unfolded?

BVGW: Okay. I was not involved because, as I said, there was a group that existed, that I would go in and out into meetings, but I was not active, let's put it that way.

PGF: Okay.

BVGW: All right? I listened to the issues, issues that I didn't know existed until this group presented it to me and other students, newer students, right? And for me, I think if there was a turning point, it might have been that study that came out of the Admissions Office. I felt horrible (laughs). I guess that's the word. I felt I was being studied like a lab rat, you know? What was this experiment going on that I was less than a human being? I didn't even know that it was going on, nobody asked for my permission.

PGF: Right.

BVGW: You know, to put out private data, and stuff like that. And I guess, from the point of view of the administration, they seemed to think "Well, we didn't put anyone's name there, so, you know, we could say how much your parents made, you know, what your SAT scores are, whatever, whatever," and no one would…? You're at Swarthmore now, it's a very small school. It was even smaller then, imagine. And, you know, I felt naked, I really did. That for me was a turning point where I felt that something like SASS had to exist just to make people understand that those students who were brought in to supposedly help them, because really, I know the university looked at that as "we are helping these students, what's their problem?", you know? That there should be a way of treating them, and it wasn't what, what I was discovering, because I didn't think it was that way. I think if I thought that was what it was when I went for the interview I don't know if it would change my decision, because I'm suspecting it was pretty much the same at that time at just about any campus that was the type that Swarthmore is. But I felt that I was ignorant, and once I got there was something new that I had learned. And the existence of SASS made me understand, see that more, and see that better. Yeah.

PGF: Thank you.

MFS: What was your sense of the leadership structure of SASS and the roles each member played? And, also, maybe we can come back to this later, in your impression, was there a distinction between the roles of men and women?

BVGW: As a member of the Seven Sisters, even though I really don't deserve the honor of belonging to that group because I certainly did not work on this as much as the others did, I think we were all pretty vocal, men and women. The women who were active, were active, I think, to the same degree as the men, maybe more because we sat around and talked about possibilities and what this place should be like and that sort of thing. I don't know if the men, you know, we never really separated ourselves like that, if the men sat around and did the same thing. Now when the time to decide on who will be the president, etc. and all the way down, there might have been an inclination to say, you know what, there should be a male student up there that might be taken a little bit more seriously, but not because the women felt that they would be taken less seriously. They just thought it was an image they wanted to push out there, right, that they thought should be out there, or I'm sure they would have fought tooth and nail to be, you know, at the head. It was not that they weren't doing anything; they were doing quite a lot. And we're talking about the '60s, let's remember, it was a whole other era for you guys. We felt we were totally liberated, you know, that's Women's Liberation and all that stuff was going on at that time, but in general, I think, not just in Swarthmore, maybe we weren't as equal as we would like to be.

MFS: But, would you say that there was a general consensus on the men's side and the women's side to have men be the official leaders of SASS?

BVGW: I don't want to pretend that there were sides, maybe there were sides in the sense that in those days there were boy's dorms and girl's dorms so when we were meeting at night, the girls, that's because we were all in the girl's dorm, there were no boys there. But, the meetings that decided policy and all that, included men and women, there were men and women. Things may have come out of these midnight sessions that, in our case they were all women, and as I said, I don't have a feel for whether the men were doing the same thing, I really don't.

PGF: That's understandable.

BVGW: Yeah.

PGF: So, during the 1969 takeover, you joined the students Mike Fields, Karen Johnson, Nancy Boyd, Fred Warren, and Myra Rose, among others, in Parrish after the initial sit-in started. Why did you choose to do so?

BVGW: You would not believe the thunder that is going on here! (laughs) We did, I guess in my case, for some reason I didn't know, I knew it was going to happen, I didn't know the exact moment it was going to happen, when it was gonna get started, but I will say, I think after it did start, and the first group of students, I can't remember, there were like twenty, I'm not sure, something like that. The first group of students went in, and there were plenary sessions, and this and that, and we're meeting, and we're talking to the students. I personally reached a point where I felt that I needed to join the students in some way. And I guess I must have reached that before because I do remember my

family used to send me boxes with food, packaged stuff, and I remember before it all started, like the week before, putting all these things sort of out, just in case I needed to take some food with me somewhere. So in my mind maybe I had made that decision before. But there was a point where I was even, nothing personally happened to me, I never felt personally threatened… no, I never received a personal threat. I felt uncomfortable, not being with the others. And I think that was the reason that I went in, yeah. And I can't even remember what time of the day all of this occurred… I know I wasn't in my dorm, I wasn't in classes, I don't remember what day of the week it was. But after, hm, I felt I had to support them, in principle I believed in what they were doing. Yeah.

PGF: And do you feel the other students who joined you on this later date where feeling the same thing, or if…

BVGW: Well, I don't wanna… I'll speak first for Ferdinand Warren, because I married him (laughs). In fact he just walked out the door. And he was a foreign student and he also began to feel… I guess he came to the position, maybe later, saying he didn't feel that, you know… I don't want to speak for him, okay? Yeah. But I think it's the same sort of thing, that once it happened, once everything happened, it seemed like, you know, we'll achieve nothing if half of us are outside the… Yeah.

MFS: So, on the day that Courtney Smith died, Robert Woodson organized a caravan to take SASS students to the Media Fellowship House. Did you go with them? And, if so, could you describe what that experience was like and what was going through your mind while it was happening?

BVGW: I don't think I went to that. I don't even remember that, as a matter of fact. I remember us leaving campus, right, I remember us leaving campus and I really don't remember that.

MFS: Where did you go when you left campus? This was after the sit-in ended, correct?

BVGW: Yeah. When Courtney Smith died, we thought that we could not continue with the protest on campus with the president just dying, it just didn't, you know, it was not the correct thing to do. And we got support from some churches that put us up and gave us food and, you know, that's what I remember really well. If you can't hear me, the rain is really coming down.

PGF: Yeah, we can hear the rain.

MFS: So, leaving Swarthmore after this, can you remember what was going through your mind, what was going on? You were at the sit-in, and then the President died, and what was the reaction among the students?

BVGW: I think, well no one, when you protest against somebody, you don't expect them to die. It was total shock. We felt that we just couldn't continue the protest on campus,

we didn't think we were ever stopped, [that] the protest would stop, but we didn't think we could continue on campus.

PGF: Well I guess…

MFS: I guess…

PGF: We kind of already talked about that.
(To BVGW) So I know you said that it wouldn't feel right, right, to continue the occupation of Parrish after he passed away, and that was one of the main reasons that people left campus. But do you also think that maybe it would have been unsafe for SASS students to remain on campus? Was that sort of a sentiment?

BVGW: There were… That was an issue, even I think before that. That was something we took into consideration before that, it was possible. We knew that both on campus and off campus there were groups that might consider it appropriate to break-in and do whatever, right? And we had to take that into consideration before we went on campus. That was always there, I'm sure it was always on our parents' minds while we were there, yeah. And, yes, it was an issue, yes. As I said I heard that there were threats, people who personally received threats. I didn't receive a threat personally. I do remember someone telling me that they never thought I was black, and I thought that was strange. That tells you how much conversation or exchange of information was needed at that time, right? Because they couldn't see: why would you be protesting? Of course, you know, we had all these sessions, we met with other students. There were students who were foreigners, there were students who were against. And so those kinds of comments came. And, I don't know, that was always at the back of everybody's head: there could be serious repercussions.

PGF: Thank you.

MFS: So you were a junior when the occupation took place in 1969, correct? And you graduated a year later.

BVGW: I graduated in '70, yes.

MFS: Right, so, a year later. So you were there for a whole year after the occupation. How was the campus climate after the event?

BVGW: Immediately after the event, I think there was the friction that's to be expected, right, something like this happens to be expected. There was a change. It was the beginning of what would be a Black Studies program [getting] started. There was a beginning of the Black student's center, which I think it was finished when I left, yeah, the Cultural Center. There was the Vice Dean of Admissions, it was a Black person that was named to that position[1]. Not everything happened, of course, in that year that I was

[1] William P. Cline was appointed to the position of Assistant Dean of Admissions in September, 1969.

there. However, there were people in my year and the year before, I think, that graduated with whatever they were doing up to then, with a concentration in Black Studies, or something like that, which is something that was never available before[2]. I didn't have a concentration in Black Studies, but I had courses that I never would have been able to take before because now there were professors that came in to give courses that would become part of the structure of the Black Studies Program.

PGF: So just to continue with that, were you personally involved in the other, any of the other SASS actions, in the 1969-1970 year, be it for securing a site for the Black Cultural Center, or the anti-racism workshops that were happening?

BVGW: Could you repeat the last part, after the Cultural Center?

PGF: If you were involved in the anti-racism workshops that were taking place on campus?

BVGW: I went to some of them.

PGF: Okay.

BVGW: Yeah, I went to some of them. I think those were things that were necessary. It was necessary to talk to students who were interested, and there were some students who were not interested, and okay. But the students who were interested in talking, whether they were in support or against, I think it was necessary for the campus, for the college, to have that happen in order to really proceed. And when we look at it that was the beginning of all the other studies that came along after my time. Luckily not only at Swarthmore, but in other colleges, because for the first time it was seen as something that is important, to not have just one focus in a campus especially in a college with the stature of Swarthmore, if I might say that. We should be looking at different aspects of everything, as much as we can.

PGF: So were you in any way involved in organizing other actions around those things?

BVGW: Could you repeat that?

PGF: Were you in any way involved in organizing the other actions that happened that year around those issues?

BVGW: No. No, I was not. I was not. Part of the reason is that I had every afternoon occupied in lab (laugh).

PGF: That's completely understandable.

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[2] Michael Graves '69, Harold Buchanan '69, Marilyn Holifield '69, and Marilyn Allman (Maye) '69 all graduated with a concentration in Black Studies. Marilyn Holifield '69, Marilyn Allman (Maye) '69, Clinton Etheridge '69, Allen Dietrich '69, and Don Mizell '71 were part of a Black Studies Committee with faculty starting in 1968 which led to the creation of the concentration in 1969.

BVGW: Yes, yes. Yes, I don't know if it's the same thing now but science students tended to not have too much free time. My every afternoon was always taken out, so, yes.

PGF: Okay.

MFS: So you graduated with a Bio Major in 1970 and you mentioned you took classes with some of the professors who came in the newly created Black Studies program, do you remember taking any classes with Asmarom Legesse?

BVGW: I didn't take a course with him, but knew him very well. He opened his house to us. So, we could go talk if we had problems, whatever, but I didn't take courses with him.

MFS: Well, could you talk about our relationship with him and what you remember of him?

BVGW: Well, before SASS as such and the Black student [occupation of the] admissions office, whatever, he was the liaison with the college while during the protest with the sit-in, he was our liaison with the college. And so, I think he did a very good job of that. After that, I don't think he had as active a role because then we had official positions that were filled with other people[3]. But, at that point, he was the only faculty person, because SASS was almost, I guess, treated as a rogue organization because we didn't have a faculty representative. He became the faculty representative. And many people took courses with him, I didn't.

MFS: Did you go to Lincoln College with other students to take Black Studies classes?

BVGW: Lincoln University? No, but some of the students in my time, in order to graduate with a concentration in Black Studies, probably couldn't get all the courses they needed on campus and that's why they were doing that. I didn't do a concentration in Black Studies.

PGF: How do you think the takeover, and the subsequent SASS actions on campus influenced your experience at Swarthmore, and possibly your life after Swarthmore?

BVGW: I think it influenced my life, not just at Swarthmore. Of course, it influenced me because I was about to leave, so I didn't see the evolution of something that began while I was there. But I think it influenced me because there was a different, I think, there was a different atmosphere on campus for black students, okay? You didn't feel as much like, you know, the black lives that are being studied, as if you are there just so people can study you. You felt as though you were students, and you were there, and you had a culture that contributed to something in the world and the world. It influenced my life because I do the same thing wherever I am. (laughs) If I live in a situation where I feel

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[3] Asmarom Legesse wrote an open letter in support of SASS's actions and was engaged in the development of Black Studies.

something similar to that, I try to take part in those activities that would attempt to change that. And I've done it for the scope of my life. My husband's Panamanian, and I have been on the board of directors of the West Indian Museum because there's a West Indian component in Panama that is very strong. Strong in numbers, but not in power. And so I take part in the activities that are run by the friends of the Museum, because in a way, what we want to do is similar to what SASS was trying to do way back when. And I brought my daughter up to do the same.

PGF: That's very good.

MFS: Do you believe the occupation of Parrish Hall was effective in pushing Swarthmore towards progress in becoming a more socially just institution and do you think that the struggles of SASS eventually paid off?

BVGW: I don't think it was an immediate thing and you can probably tell me, or the other students there can tell me, how far it's gone, but I look at, what's the alternative? The alternative that, the way things were going then, if there was not something that, unfortunately, forced something to happen, where would be today? And I don't think we can look at Swarthmore as an island. Remember, this was going on all over the United States in similar types of schools and in other schools. I think it's something that was for the good. It worked, slowly, slowly, it worked. But, I've not been in enough contact to know if everything we would have wanted at that time has been achieved. But, I think it's good that it's opened the doors for other groups to be able to have similar types of organization without them being seen as a threat, or without them being seen as these militant whatevers, you know, trying to take over our school. And, I think it's something to be admired.

PGF: Thanks. That's all the questions that we had prepared, but if there's anything that you'd like to add at this point we would love to hear it.

BVGW: Well, I want to thank you for thinking me important enough to actually talk to me. Unfortunately I can't be there this weekend for the other folks, and I really would have liked to see everybody, including my sisters. But thank you for considering what I have to say important enough, and as I said if there's sometime in the future that I could be there in person I will make an attempt to speak to you, and your classmates, or whoever would be interested in hearing.

PGF: Yeah, we certainly would be.

MFS: That would be wonderful. … Okay.

PGF: All right.

MFS: Well, thank you very much Bridget.

BVGW: Thank you too! And it's very nice getting to know you.

MFS: Very nice to meet you too.