

*Interview with James White, Swarthmore College Class of 1973. Mr. White was a member of SASS in his first two years at Swarthmore and was directly involved in the 1970 sit-in as well as the establishment of Robinson House as the Black Cultural Center. James White was interviewed by students Alis Anasal and Haydn Welch on September 27, 2014. The transcription is word for word with two exceptions, unnecessary conversational words such as “um,” “so,” and other expressions used in conversation have been edited for readability and clarity. Additionally, false starts, both on the part of the interviewer and Mr. White were withdrawn to preserve the coherence of the conversation.*

AA: All right, so we're just going to introduce ourselves for the recording. My name is Alis Anasal and I am a senior in Professor Dorsey's 1969 class and we're working to preserve and document the narratives of students who were in your generation at Swarthmore.

HW: My name is Haydn Welch and I am also a senior in the same class, and today we will be interviewing James White. I'm glad that you could interview with us today. Could you talk a little bit about your background and your decision to attend Swarthmore?

JW: Well, in my background, actually I'm wearing a shirt related to a historic black community that I grew up in. The community was primarily white in terms of the township and the high school that I went to. So there was around a two percent black component to that school system. At the time it was one of the best in Pennsylvania, probably in the nation, at that time. So I grew up essentially in a somewhat sheltered black community surrounded by white communities throughout, so we had a kind of sheltered situation there. As I approached decisions related to determining a college to go to, I was fairly naïve at that point, even though I was a National Merit Scholar, or whatever it is. We didn't really have much access to information about schools—at least the black community did not. I remember going to my high school guidance counselor and her thought was that I should apply to a local community college even though I was within the top ten percent of the high school, so I kind of made a decision from that point not to get any guidance from that guidance counselor. Although I had seen situations where other people had become pigeonholed because of that lack of guidance to black students. So my dad who was involved in the Civil Rights Movement had connections through a Swarthmore graduate—they were close—I don't know if they were really close friends but they were friends—and interacted related to the Civil Rights Movement, and as a result of that, I found out about Swarthmore. So I didn't really have a thought to look at some of the Ivies or anything like that. For some reason that wasn't even on my radar screen. And so the two schools essentially that I came down to were Haverford and Swarthmore. And actually I was really going to go to Haverford, but I got a letter from the black students here. And, I don't think I came on campus during those weeks where you come into campus and kind of get oriented, or whatever it is. It was that letter, talking about the black students, the fact that it was a co-ed school, that really changed my mind about, rather than going to Haverford, going to Swarthmore. And I think

Swarthmore also gave me a little bit more money, so that was obviously a component of that, but I think that letter kind of piqued my interest a little bit there.

HW: You entered Swarthmore in the fall of 1969 after the 1969 admissions office takeover. Could you talk a little bit about what the dynamic was like on the campus between black students, faculty, the administration, and white students?

JW: Now remember, from a point of context, I'm coming from a school system that was highly competitive with extremely bright and highly competitive white students. In the black culture where I grew up in, having good grades was not something that you wanted to broadcast everywhere. So I kind of kept that hidden, and so even though there a couple of black students from that high school who were bright and went on to Penn and some other places, when I came to Swarthmore, this was the first time that I had really encountered the caliber of intelligence both in terms of white students and in terms of African-American students, and there were other nationalities here as well.

So the transition to Swarthmore wasn't as tough to me from the perspective of black and white, but certainly the caliber of intelligence was a different dynamic there. So now where I was a really, really smart person in high school, it was like now you're just one of many. And you really saw some kinds of people who were really out there in terms of smarts. So culturally, the transition wasn't that difficult from that perspective. However in my high school years, you know I had just grown an Afro, I was just beginning to get a sense of who I was as a black student, so I'm kind of coming into that situation. At a certain point what happened was I got engaged with the black students, and I think that black students were pretty--I won't use the word aggressive, necessarily--but they kind of made sure that they welcomed the black students, and so for the most part, most of the black students coming in (and I think there was around thirty of us or so) were integrated into SASS or became connected in one way to the black student body.

HW: Did you notice any tensions between the faculty and the student body because of the admissions office takeover, or did that seem to be something that you didn't notice as much when you were first coming to Swarthmore?

JW: When I was first coming to Swarthmore I didn't know that. In fact, when I was making a decision about Swarthmore I was totally unaware of that situation. I didn't know about the takeover from the previous year. I didn't necessarily notice overt racism or challenges with the faculty, per se, other than the stories I began to hear from upperclassmen, I think, and then as the semester began to go on, then you would hear various students, a professor would make some comment. In fact, my wife who came later, said one professor had said "Y'all shouldn't be here," he didn't say "y'all," but there were certainly professors who let some of the black students

know that they didn't think that they should be on campus, but I didn't necessarily get that message per se. And I came in and I had a white roommate, and we were good friends, so that was another thing that came up in terms of culture and climate, I didn't really get that much of a sense of tension per se.

HW: We were talking earlier about how black students on campus really worked hard to bring in and attract other black students. You became a part of SASS, right?

JW: Yes.

HW: Could you talk a little bit about your initial experiences as part of SASS?

JW: We certainly had a number of meetings, and I remember specifically a couple in Sharples, I guess, in one of the meeting rooms there. And again most of the black students, I would say, were pretty connected-- sometimes some of the upperclassmen weren't as active in SASS at that point in time, even though previously perhaps they had been. There were some of the freshmen who weren't really so much engaged with the black community, they were kind of on the fringes. But I think we started to get exposed to some of the things that had been going on at Swarthmore, it was kind of more of a reality check. Because when you're coming into college, a lot of the time, you're pretty much naive. You're trying to find yourself, and then all of a sudden you're finding out that there was this major issue the previous year, and there hasn't been much success in getting Black Studies courses, the challenge to bring in more students, even though we had a big class year, that was something we had to keep some aggression around, or certainly continue to push for, and it was in those meetings that I began to become acclimated. At a certain point in the fall, I was the first freshman who was elected to the steering committee.

HW: Could you talk a little bit more about what it was like serving on the steering committee of SASS?

JW: My recollections are a little bit vague there. But certainly, I was the young kid on the block.

HW: Okay.

JW: Don Mizell, as I recall, was the chairman, Russell Frisby -- I don't remember the other two members right off-hand. I was kind of getting caught up to where everybody was and some of the other events. I'm quite sure I was vocal on some things, but for the most part I was in a learning process about that.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> During the school year of 1969-1970, members of the SASS Steering Committee (in addition to James White) included Don Mizell, Aundrea White (Kelley), Delmar Thompson, and Franciena King. See Robert Cross, "[Letter from Robert Cross to SASS steering committee, 10/23/1969]," *Black Liberation 1969 Archive*, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://blacklib1969.swarthmore.edu/items/show/497>.

HW: What were the social relationships like in SASS? Were there any interesting dynamics that you observed, or that you were a part of?

JW: For the most part, I would say that a good portion of us were connected to the community. I think some of the students kind of broke off into little cliques or groups, or whatever it is, but for the most part there was a fairly active interaction between male and female and other members of the community. I remember I used to study with a number of the black students in one of my economics courses, so there were interactions with black students related to helping each other in terms of classes and that kind of thing. So there were pretty good dynamics. I mean, again there were some students who weren't really connected. In the lunch for the most part we kind of all ate in the same area, it was almost like it was a reserved section of Sharples. That was certainly a gathering place for the black students as well, and that helped to solidify relationships and also kept a common bond for us.

HW: Do you know why certain students decided to break off, or form other groups? Why there wasn't maybe as much unity among SASS as there could have been, potentially?

JW: Well, my recollection is that there was a pretty high participation rate. I do recall, though, maybe some of the juniors and the seniors kind of backed off a little bit, and that it might have been, you know, "Hey, they're getting ready to graduate, it's time to really focus on getting my educational stuff done," and while there was some participation there, it seemed like--I know one particular freshman guy, if I remember correctly, his family knew Martin Luther King.

HW: Oh really, okay.

JW: But he was still kind of apart from the community. And we were friends, but, you know, that was just a choice or the decision that he decided to make. People didn't really put much pressure on you, regardless of that.

HW: So, in your freshman year, you wrote an article for the alumni bulletin. Is it okay if I read a-

JW: Yeah, yeah, you certainly can.

HW: Sure. So you wrote, "Swarthmore, like all American institutions, has not cast off its unconscious racism. However, the mechanism exists, and the likelihood of its success is good." So you wrote that your freshman year, and I'm wondering if by your senior year you had begun to see any of this improvement or change that you sort of foresaw when you wrote that article.

JW: To give you a point of context, I actually wrote that two or three times. My first draft, I wasn't, as I recall, I started that maybe at the end of September, maybe early October, so I had only been on campus one or two months. And, the more and more I began to understand about the black community, then I started to rephrase and reframe some aspects of that document. I would say that based on what happened as a result of the sit-in that we had in 1970 that I did in fact see change. I mean, we had more black students come in, we had black college administrators come in, professors come in. So yes, there were certainly improvements--we had a black cultural center that came out of that sit-in. The momentum obviously coming from the previous year when the admissions office was taken over, but the college needed a kind of wake-up call, which happened in my freshman year in the spring, and as a result of that we're sitting here in the black cultural center. So there were some positive things that did happen, but still there were other dynamics going on at Swarthmore at the time too. The Cambodia bombings, so in my freshman year, actually school was halted. I remember courses that I didn't complete my finals [for], because in the midst of the black movement there was also a Marxist movement going and protests related to Cambodian bombings all throughout the country that essentially shut down a portion of my freshman year at the end when we were taking finals.<sup>2</sup>

HW: Student activism certainly didn't end with the sit-in in 1969, so I was wondering if you could maybe talk about your involvement in other projects like the creation of the BCC or the 1970 sit-in. Could you just share a little bit about that?

JW: Okay, so in the fall we were-- particularly the Steering Committee-- meeting, and there were obviously some initiatives we still had not seen much progress on. I don't remember all of the context, but essentially to the best of my knowledge there was maybe one black professor--I'm not sure if there was a black professor--but certainly some of the things that the previous class, many of which had graduated had been striving for--there didn't seem to be any movement there. So there was some negotiations going between ourselves and the administration, and I don't quite recall when the sit-in happened, I'm not sure if it was March, April of 1970, but certainly there was some level of frustration that we were not seeing as much progress. Now of course, the president at that time, I think it was Robert Cross; his first year. And obviously he's listening to input from alumni, and of course you just lost the college president from the previous year. So probably to be generous and kind to him, he was probably still trying to get his feet wet in terms of what's going on and he had to kind of work with the powers that be to in order to address some of the stuff. But certainly black students became more and more concerned that we weren't going to see some of those initiatives really faithfully executed by the administration.

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<sup>2</sup> The Cambodian bombing campaign introduced a new front in the United States' war on Vietnam. This military operation was kept secret from the American public until the story broke in the *New York Times* in May of 1969. See William Beecher, "Raids in Cambodia By U.S. Unprotested; CAMBODIA RAIDS GO UNPROTESTED," *New York Times*, May 9, 1969.

So we progressively, I guess, began to plan--and I don't recall if negotiations were stalled or we were just frustrated--but we began to actually prepare some steps to bring to light to the entire community that we were very serious about wanting to see these initiatives addressed by the administration. So for example, the black students, even though we typically ate together in a certain section in the lunchroom, we pulled tables together in one line kind of in the center of the lunch room-- this is leading up to the sit-in. And that obviously got a lot of, particularly some of the white students, very like, "Okay, what the heck's going on here." So the black students kind of came together, those of us who were actively involved in the struggle at that point, we ate together at the same time. So you saw a mass really the entire SASS body eating together at the same time at one long table, so that obviously had an impact on the community.

We also began to ramp up the pressure, so ultimately--and I'm not exactly when this happened, it might have been a week or two weeks before the actual sit-in--we actually went to the president's office, we had some torches lit, and as I recall some of the brothers were playing Conga drums, and I don't remember a whole lot, but what I can remember very clearly is that the president and his family were looking out the window and certainly they were kind of freaked out about what was going on. And that again was part of our marshaling resources to increase the pressure. And again, I don't remember what the catalyst was for that, but certainly part of it was just our frustration that we didn't see things happening. And then the night before the sit in as I recall we went, around 12 o'clock or something, the black students all gathered in Bond, took our pillows, some clothes or whatever it is, and we slept over in Bond, kind of disappeared for that evening. And then, myself and around four or five other students, then the next morning as I recall we walked into the president's office and we read a statement. We basically said, we're going to stay her for a while. So that's how the sit in started and in the meantime I believe there were black students in the outside of the office and some outside of the whole area, because I'm not sure everyone could fit in their. Ultimately I think we were joined by some of the white students as well so there was some community support for what we were attempting to do at that time.

HW: What happened as the sit in progressed? How long did it take? Do you remember any of the other details about it?

JW: Not a whole lot. I think it was around two or three days that we were there. Certainly I remember being there at least one night. And some of the things we learned later: I mean, I think there was some pressure, or at least we had heard some rumors, that they were thinking very seriously about, you know, kicking us out of school, or perhaps some police coming-- physically removing us. Whether they were rumors or whether people were actually considering those actions, it wasn't completely clear, but there were certainly negotiations going on during the time but my recollections were kind of vague at that point. My recollection is somewhere like a two or

three day period and then I believe the administrations basically said they would begin to aggressively address some of our issues.

HW: Can you talk a little bit more about the creation of the BCC and your role in that? It is our understanding that you were one of the first two students to live in the BCC?

JW: After the sit in, I remember walking around with some students and an African American,<sup>3</sup> I can't remember his name off the top of my head, and we started to look at various properties that Swarthmore owned that could potentially be a place, and we came here, and I'm not sure if it was the only place identified but it certainly fit the bill as far as that was concerned. So we then started to consider what it would take to convert this into a Black Cultural Center, as I recall James Michener at that time contributed around \$100,000. I'm not sure if it was exclusively for the Black Cultural Center but it certainly was around that whole issue of the Black Cultural Center and also I think may have had something to do with securing professors coming in, I don't quite remember what the grant was totally for but it was certainly it was for the Black Cultural Center.<sup>4</sup> So, one of the things we had to do -- it was more of a dormitory at that point than a cultural center-- a group of us had to kind of spec out how we were going to use each room. My recollection is that we had to go to Harrisburg or something and file some papers saying 'Hey, we are converting this dormitory to another use,' and I was part of that process. And of course planning, we needed to have shelves purchased and a sound system and other things. We started that piece toward the end of the year. When I came back our sophomore year the community started putting together the shelves and installing stuff and the Black Cultural Center really became a real thing in my sophomore year. And then they needed a resident and so my roommate and myself we decided to become the first residents here for the first semester.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The designation of the Robinson House as the Black Cultural Center was a prolonged process that was launched after the 1969 admissions office takeover. From the extensive correspondence between President Robert Cross and SASS, it is clear that while President Cross was initially resistant to the use of the Robinson House as the location for the new BCC, SASS eventually succeeded in achieving this location. Different locations such as the Cunningham house, Lodges 5-6, and one of the fraternity houses were suggested as possibilities (See Robert Cross, "[Letter from Robert Cross to SASS, 03/09/1970]," *Black Liberation 1969 Archive*, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://blacklib1969.swarthmore.edu/items/show/488>), but which were rejected by SASS. SASS proposed the creation of a steering committee (with input from the administration) that would spearhead the establishment of the BCC (See Swarthmore Afro-American Students' Society, "[Letter from SASS to Robert Cross re Black Cultural Center, 03/15/1970]," *Black Liberation 1969 Archive*, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://blacklib1969.swarthmore.edu/items/show/515>.) For more information on the selection process see Robert Cross, "[Letter from Cross to the College Community regarding BCC, 03/12/1970]," *Black Liberation 1969 Archive*, accessed November 12, 2014, <http://blacklib1969.swarthmore.edu/items/show/748>.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. James Michener was a Swarthmore graduate who donated money to the college in the 1970s. In his interview, Mr. Steven Piker describes Mr. Michener's involvement. See Piker, Steven. *Interview with John Gagnon*. *Black Liberation 1969 Archive*, 24 June 2014. accessed November 12, 2014, and Chuck Gilbert and Edward Crastley, "[Correspondence between Chuck Gilbert, Ed Cratsley, and Robert Cross re Michener funds, SASS budget]," *Black Liberation 1969 Archive*, accessed November 12, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> James White's roommate was Mr. Harold Trammel.

HW: What did you have dreams of the Black Cultural Center becoming as a resource for the black students on campus?

JW: I think we saw it as a, certainly as a gathering place, while we had our meetings for the most part in Sharples, and I think from time to time we might have had some in Bond, I think we felt much more comfortable that we were in a facility where there was some safety and some privacy and it was a place where black students could come together, they could study together, and certainly get away from some of the pressures of Swarthmore and even some of the social pressures that they might have been experiencing. I thought of it more in those terms but certainly we had parties from time to time and there was a group of us that would gather together and watch Star Trek at 6 o'clock, we had interactions about Captain Kirk and that sort of thing, it was kind of fun.

HW: So what was it like living in the BCC? If you and your roommate were the only two living here what was that like?

JW: Well, it was -- there were times it was quiet -- but, particularly given the time we were in, you had a fair number of students coming over, so it became somewhat difficult to study. On the other hand, though, it was a place of interaction and unity. But I would say one of the reasons we opted not to stay here the second semester is we realized it was a little bit challenging to get studying done, even though we were only two residents, it was a little bit difficult to get studying done here, so we opted to go back to Hallowell, I think it was.

HW: Could you talk a little bit about your later years as part of SASS and at Swarthmore College?

JW: Well, sophomore year I was on the steering committee for the second year, so I fulfilled that my sophomore year, and then I made a personal change and shift that essentially pulled me away from the black student body for the most part. I was converted to Christ and I saw some of the ideals of the black student movement somewhat in contradiction to my interpretation of Christianity. I would say that there was some persecution, because, you know, here's a guy who was very much involved in the steering committee his first two years and then all of a sudden he's made this shift and is basically cut off now from the black community. So my emphasis became, much more about evangelism and religious education, which was somewhat at odds with where the movement was, so I kind of disappeared.

HW: What were some of the contradictions you saw with your new outlook and what you saw the values that SASS had?



JW: It wasn't just necessarily SASS, but more behaviors. Certainly, there were some drugs involved in terms of my freshman and sophomore years. I took some drugs, I also did some marijuana, that kind of thing. I made a conscious decision that I wanted to get away from that aspect of the community. There were some other aspects related to that, more on a social level that I felt personally in contradiction to so it was better for me to minimize my involvement in SASS and the movement at that point.

HW: After you withdrew from SASS what was your relationship like with other SASS members and other members of the black community? Did it disappear gradually?

JW: There were still people that I was connected to but it was really more those who had a stronger Christian faith, I would say, were kind of on the same page as I was. At some point, I, with Cheryl Sanders, we had a Christian radio broadcast, I think it was my senior year. So there were people I was connected to but in terms of the overall community I stepped back very very significantly in terms of interactions. I also was going into Philadelphia a lot to do some interaction with a church there and evangelism so a lot of times on the weekends I wasn't even on campus.

HW: Did you still maintain your interest in black student activism or at least some of the projects they had? Or, were you paying attention to it? Did you notice any significant changes your last two years?

I really did not stay much connected. The Gospel Choir did come to fruition some time, and I'm not sure --it might have been my junior or senior year, and at one point I was a part of that but I wasn't part of the creation of that, I was just, when I heard about it someone invited me to sing because I used to sing in the Swarthmore choir so I became a part of that but for the most part I was pretty much isolated and doing my own thing at that point.

HW: Did the gospel choir meet in the BCC too or somewhere else? Do you remember?

JW: Originally the Gospel Choir started with around five members. And I think what they used to do is they used to gather around a piano in Willets. Because, now that I think about it, I don't think we had a piano here. So there was a piano in Willets and they started to meet to sing there. I think primarily because, I don't know if there was a piano there. Sometimes I think we would sing in Bond because they had a lot of pianos in that room there, so that's probably why the black cultural center wasn't used too much.

HW: Do you have anything else you feel you'd like to add? Any questions I should've asked but didn't?

JW: *Chuckles*. Well I think it's important to remember during the time all this was going around that there was stuff going on in the white community as well. So there was some interaction, some collaboration I would say. Once the Cambodian bombing happened, that kind of changed a lot of things in terms of the climate in the college. I also got the sense, and I don't have any documentation on this, that because of the consecutive years where there were protests, I kind of got a sense that the college became more careful in scrutinizing black students coming in.

HW: Really? How so?

JW: My recollection, in my class we had a number of people coming from urban environments, it didn't necessarily mean that they were more radical than other people, I got the sense that there were less people coming from urban environments as opposed to more traditional middle class families. That's just a vague recollection but I wouldn't be surprised if the college became more strategic about who they were letting in at the time because of what was going on.

HW: I also remember reading in your article in the Swarthmore Bulletin about the conversation about 'risk' students that Swarthmore would let in...

JW: Yes, that's exactly what that was about. Some of what that was about, yes.

HW: I think the definition was also about students who they were worried wouldn't be able to succeed at Swarthmore. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

JW: Right. Well, as I recall, there were a lot of students from Chester. And I suspect maybe some of us might not have been quote-unquote Swarthmore caliber students. I'd kind of forgotten about that piece there and that phrase but I think that was about folks coming from urban schools and urban environments and would they be able to survive.

HW: I remember in your article though that you were skeptical of that concept in general.

JW: Right.

HW: I'm wondering if that had something to do with your background because you did also come from a very academically rigorous environment and did you feel that the conversation about risk students ignored people like you, perhaps?

JW: I didn't necessarily, well, you know what, I don't remember. I might have felt that I might have been part of that. But again, my training in school -- one of the things I did realize about Swarthmore is that you had to learn how to write. And my school was very, very, vigilant in making sure that people knew how to write term papers and all that other kind of stuff. That

scrutiny wasn't always in high schools people were coming from, but it didn't necessarily mean that they were just minority students; it could've been any high school. My wife who later came to Swarthmore reflects that her high school did not necessarily prepare her as much in terms of writing skills, etc. So when she came to Swarthmore, even though she was very intelligent, the lack of those writing skills really worked against her. So I think I was kind alluding to those things, some of the traditional training. You would come to Swarthmore and a lot of these kids were in AP courses, they were doing calculus, they were doing physics, a lot of stuff that was available to me in my high school but I'm not sure what the availability was in a lot of the other schools that the black students were coming from. Certainly there was some thought, from a Swarthmore perspective, that you know, we're taking some risks bringing in some of these black students. I don't know that I would call it a Grand Experiment, but I suspect that there was some nervousness about bringing in such a large class because, as I recall, we were the largest class that had come into Swarthmore at that point. So they aggressively brought in a lot of folks and maybe some of those would not have been seen as the typical Swarthmore student to bring in. That's my recollection of what I was talking about there.

HW: Anything else you would like to add? Any other thoughts or important memories?

AA: I'm curious about how your relationship with Swarthmore has changed? What place it occupies in your mind now, particularly given the events of your time here, and the failed promises, to a certain extent.

JW: That's an excellent question. And again, I was in transition a bit. I kind of vaguely remember graduation: even though it's a happy time, it was kind of an angry time. A lot of students, I believe, had some really hard feelings about Swarthmore when they left.

HW: How come?

JW: Whether it was because of interactions with professors, or the dynamics of the school were such that I think, thank God we had a cultural center, thank God we had some level of unity and various social interaction through the gospel choir and center, because it wasn't easy for a lot of black students here. Some of the black students in my freshman year left. Not many, but a couple of folks said, I can't handle this. And probably as you look through the classes, there are probably two or three that the shock of Swarthmore was just too much for them and that they felt they could thrive better, and in many cases they did thrive better, by leaving. So, a lot of us left -- I don't want to say a lot --- I left Swarthmore not knowing if I really wanted to return. It wasn't just about the school, it was about my total experience here. Even though I am very, very, thankful for that experience, but it was kind of painful to come back to Swarthmore. And the only thing that really brought me back was my participation in the gospel choir (the alumni gospel choir, around 1995). There was a 20-year period --- I think I might have attended one

reunion one five-year anniversary or whatever --- but it was very painful to come back, and a number of us felt that way.

AA: Thank you.

HW: Thank you for sharing with us.

JW: Good, well I hope it was helpful.