

Marilyn Allman Maye Interview Transcript

An interview with Marilyn Allman Maye (MAM) conducted and transcribed by Maria Mejia (MM) and Xavier Lee (XL) on October 31, 2014. Filler words and false starts, both on the part of the interviewer and the interviewee, have been edited out for clarity.

Marilyn Allman Maye, class of 1969, played an integral part in the planning and execution of the January 1969 Black student sit-in. A Math and Sociology/Anthropology major, Allman Maye was one of the first students to graduate with a concentration in Black studies from the College and served actively on both Swarthmore Afro-American Student Society (SASS) and the Black Studies Committee throughout her tenure at Swarthmore College. She is a member of the Seven Sisters of SASS and considers herself one of the group's founding members.

MM: My name is Maria Mejia.

XL: My name is Xavier Lee.

MM: And we're going to be interviewing you today about the 1969 sit-in and other events during your time at Swarthmore. So to start off could you introduce yourself with your name and class year?

MAM: My name is Marilyn Allman Maye, class of 1969.

MM: Okay and our first question is: Could you briefly share your memories of your time at Swarthmore College? How did you decide to come to this school?

MAM: I'm from Harlem, New York City and hardly anyone I knew had ever heard of Swarthmore College. They always thought it was Skidmore [College] or whatever – they had never heard of it. I just found out from a guidance counselor about it. It appealed to me because it was small. I had gone to an independent high school¹ on a scholarship so I had gotten used to small classes and I liked the idea of a small college. So that was a big plus. It was co-ed and I had been in an all-girls high school. It was not too far from New York. I didn't know a lot about the college, it was just the features were right. That's how I came to come here.

I came in 1965. Was very naive about the world and society. I didn't know if I was poor or middle class – someone asked me if I was middle class; I didn't even know what that meant. Just hadn't grown up thinking about class differences. I was very attuned to cultural differences because you know New York is very diverse and in the street where I lived there were several different cultures living in the same proximity so that I was attuned to. I didn't know what to expect. I was used to being around people who were more affluent than I because I had gotten a

¹ Allman Maye attended the Calhoun School, an independent now-coeducational high school in New York City.

scholarship to an independent school so at least I was a little bit clued in to the fact that some people are very wealthy and not like the rest of us. But people at Swarthmore don't show their wealth so much; it's not conspicuous so it wasn't as off-putting to me. But I knew it was a very good college, I knew you had to work hard. I decided I wanted to major in math – I was very good in math and I also liked sociology so I actually went for a double major in sociology and mathematics. Later on I added the black studies concentrated when it was created. So I started out pretty naïve.

Very happy to meet these other black – there were only twenty, I think there were twenty black students in my class and that was an all-time high. There had never been that many students before. And I met black students who were very intellectual and smart and from all over the country and that was very nice. You know, people from Massachusetts and I didn't know anybody from Massachusetts per se. I had a cousin but you know. We had people from all over the country so that fascinated me, different backgrounds. My freshman year I was in Willets, I had a roommate. I didn't know at the time if she had been asked if it was alright for her to have a black roommate. No one asked me if it was alright with me to have a white roommate. We found that out our second year. And you know we kind of went along certainly not thinking of any kind of protests or demonstrations or anything like that.

I think one of the things that struck me almost immediately was that all the black adults on campus were gardeners and cooks and dorm keepers and that struck me right away. And it wasn't unfamiliar – I was used to seeing black in blue collar, subservient service roles growing up but it was striking that there were no black teachers, no black administrators. But the black employees were very supportive. They were like in *loco parentis*. They really took us under their wing and looked out for us and gave us advice and just tried to make us feel like family so that was a pleasant piece. But eventually you know you became aware. Around sophomore year, we just started being aware; some things are not quite right and I think that was sort of an awareness just developing that our position here was marginal. In addition to that, some people had issues with certain faculty and things they thought were unfair. I didn't have as much of an issue with that. Some of the things the faculty said in lecture I found offensive and I'd go and debate with them. You know you start to become aware of being black in a predominantly white environment. So I'll let you ask me the next question and see if there's something you want to follow up or I'll keep prattling on.

MM: So you were here during the founding of SASS –

MAM: Absolutely.

MM: - the Swarthmore Afro-American Student Society so could you talk about that and what that group meant to you during your time at Swarthmore?

MAM: Right, absolutely. As we became aware of some of these issues of feeling a little marginalized, seeing that there weren't any black teachers, that all the staff had menial jobs. One

thing that was very offensive to us – and to me personally – was that these cleaning women who were cleaning our dorms and everything were being called by their first names. And these women were old enough to be my mother or my grandmother and I was accustomed to referring to people of that age by their first name. I called them Mr. and Mrs. And that was annoying you know that these young teenagers are calling these adults by their first names and no other people are called by their first names; everybody else is Mr. and Mrs. and the black people are Bessie and Marion and Harold.

So these are little things that eventually as we became aware of these discrepancies, we decided to kind of band together and see if we could create a society that would advocate for some of the issues we felt were important. There wasn't any other student group that really addressed those kinds of issues so we thought we would try to form. We sat down and spent lots and lots of time developing a constitution and trying to figure out what would be our objectives and what we would try to do. We were very interested in increasing black enrollment. Many of us worked with Upward Bound so we had contact with high school students from Chester whom we tutored and we wanted to see some of those students be able to come here and the college said that certainly wasn't going to happen unless some things changed at the college. So we started to talk about what we could do; this sort of advocacy. As we started to form SASS we had to figure out a name, come out with officers. Then it was this whole big issue of exclusivity; would white students be able to join? And so that was a huge debate and letters in *the Phoenix* and it became more political and controversial over the next three years.

MM: Can you talk about your position or roles within the group?

MAM: Yeah it's an interesting question. Somebody asked me about that recently. I would definitely consider myself one of the founders and I would consider myself... a leader in the organization. The women deliberately decided to put forth the men to be the leaders. We were in a sort of African Socialist kind of ideal and we wanted to promote the Black men and push them forward to be the leaders so we sort of decided among ourselves that we would elect our chair and co-chair to be men and that we would work behind the scenes. Even though we were really taking the lead, I would say, and most of the initiatives. Somehow my recollection is that the guys were a little less aggressive about it at first and I just think it was the particular guys that were there. Maybe they felt they had more to lose. Most of us were first generation college students and all of us virtually were on scholarship. And maybe the guys were a little more cautious. A number of them were engineers who I think tend to be cautious people to begin with. We were a little more reckless, the girls – not reckless but just a little less worried about taking that position that would endanger us in some way. So—or maybe it was just our personalities. I don't know if it was just a fluke or what. We were very active and we led a lot of the initiatives but whenever we did a public face, we always asked the guys to be in the lead.

MM: So can you talk more about how that conversation happened? Who brought it up, what were people saying during that discussions or more in general about the gender dynamics within SASS?

MAM: Yeah, it's funny. I don't know if we were.... Harold was the one guy, and you probably interviewed him already – Harold Buchanan – who was...he was the...I would say out of the all the guys, he and Sam Shepard who was the first president, were soft-spoken – Sam Shepard was very soft-spoken – but were very clear-eyed about the objectives and seemed to be willing to take a risk that their scholarships might be [*unintelligible*] and that they might get in trouble. They were very clear-eyed. They weren't loud but they were very strong. But both of them were very comfortable with women. They didn't seem to have any hang-ups about women taking the lead and taking over and that kind of thing. They were just that kind of guys – I guess they call them renaissance men today. They were comfortable with that so we all got along very well. Some of the other guys were a little more macho and weren't so sure they felt so comfortable with these women. Little remarks would be made sometimes and it just made me...just didn't feel as comfortable. I don't know; it wasn't one conversation. It would be an ongoing dialogue. We sat together in the dining room in those days. You'd always come into the dining room and see the black people in a group or groups of black people and this was very annoying to the white students. And they weren't excluded. If they were brave, white students would come and join us and it was fine. The ones who were brave enough to join us were welcome and were comfortable with all these black people, being outnumbered. But many whites would comment and say they felt left out because we were meeting. And we'd say "Well, when you're at a table with all whites, we don't feel uncomfortable that we're left out. Why is it just because our color's different and when six of us are at a table, suddenly it's a statement? We're just having lunch." And those kinds of things. And it was tricky with that.

And so we would talk at lunch. We had several culturally sensitive things. So for example, we had some Black History Month events and we called it the sisters and the brothers, you know those days. I don't know if they still use that language today. The sisters got together and bought all this fabric – we were gonna make dashikis for the guys for the Black History Month affair. We all had sewing machines – I know it sounds funny but you came to college with a sewing machine because you know you couldn't just run to the mall, there wasn't any such thing. You had to make your own clothes or sew. It sounds like ancient history but you know we all had sewing machines [MM laughs] So we would buy fabric and make these dashikis by hand. We would cut them out, we'd measure the guys and we'd make dashikis for all the men. We may have a couple of photographs of with them in the dashikis and we'd cook – make African or Black kind of meals and the guys would wear dashikis and the guys really liked that. Guys who would not normally wear Afro-centric attire, but I think they felt kind of proud and pleased and just differentiated. So I think that brought us together. It was gender demarcation because they were dressed in dashikis and we weren't. Maybe we tied our heads in geles. But we wore pretty much whatever clothes we had. That was the kind of thing – it was a time when the Black Power Movement was coming along and there was just a lot of conversation in the Black

community about the roles of men and women. The Black Muslims and Malcolm X they had that you know Muslim influence and that sort of focus on women's role so that also influenced the conversation. We were just trying to tap into that. We were eighteen, nineteen and twenty – what did we know? We were just picking up bits and pieces of what was going on in the culture around us.

MM: So do you think having men as the vice-chairmen, chairmen, spokespersons, whatever – do you think that affected how the student body and administration interacted with SASS?

MAM: Yeah, that's interesting. I never thought about that. It possibly did because the university had always been co-ed and had always paid at least lip service to equality of men and women but the president was a man, had always been a man. There never until recent times was there a woman. The male domination in society was pretty much intact for all people so it wouldn't surprise me if a predominately male faculty and a predominately male administration would feel more comfortable interacting with the male head of an organization. I would imagine that they would feel more comfortable interacting with two guys instead a bunch of women who tended to be very vocal and a little more irreverent. I mean we could behave – when I say irreverent, it's not that we misbehaved but we weren't very solicitous. We expressed ourselves pretty willingly. It's possible that they felt more comfortable with the guys just because men and men. I don't know if we considered that so much, but it's possible that that did make them feel more comfortable.

MM: Okay, so then if... I guess I'm still trying to understand that position to say like, "We are doing this and this is how it's going to be." So I guess what else was motivating that decision to put men at the forefront or in those specific roles?

MAM: Right. It was definitely a consciousness about Afrocentric, you know our idea of African culture. Most of us had never been to Africa but we kind of had this idea – you know, the man is in charge so we brought that in as a cultural statement. As you hear some of the guys even say, we were behind the scenes pushing them, nudging them to take a stand or to do something because they were, as I said, these particular guys were a little more cautious than we were. I can't think of any guys that you would consider "hotheads." You know sometimes there are guys like that but maybe Swarthmore doesn't give itself to hotheads. It was a cultural thing. That's what I would say more than anything else. It was a cultural commitment, almost like an article of faith. It didn't come out of the fact of their particular strength, that they were more articulate or that they were better leaders. It wasn't based on anything that was inherent in what they had to do that made them better to be in those roles. It was an article of faith that we should do this, we *should* do this. And if they weren't up to it, we were gonna help make them up to it because it had to be that way because we thought it was the correct thing. I would say that's the way we looked at it. Other people might put it differently.

MM: So when you were talking about different men in the group, you mentioned Sam Shepard and I was wondering if you could share more memories of him since [MAM interjects: Yeah, he's deceased] we can't interview him since he's passed away.

MAM: So Sam was from Philadelphia. He had gone to one of the selective high schools there. I think his family was like most of ours. I don't think his parents were college graduates – I can't say that for sure. Most of us our parents hadn't gone to college and I think he was of that same kind of generation. He smoked incessantly. Those days people smoked a lot, students and such. But he was a smoker. Wore glasses. Very quiet, very low-key. He was an engineering student and you wouldn't know what he was thinking. We would all be sitting there talking and Sam's not saying anything and when he talked you would have to listen really close because he barely spoke above a whisper. But he was very sharp and very thoughtful just he didn't assert himself in the discussion. But very thoughtful and I think he became more politically aware as he matured. And when he left here, we went to Princeton for a masters I think in political science and then he went to work for Mayor Sharpe, I think, the first black mayor of Newark.² He worked on his campaign and he got really into political activity after that, made a career. He went to Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton for his masters. And he had a family because I spoke to his daughter [Kira Shepard] maybe some years later. Didn't get to meet her but I talked to her on the phone. Just a very thoughtful person. Secure in himself, not a show-off. Very quiet but not out of fear, just quiet. He had to be pushed to be the chair but that just wasn't his personality but it wasn't for lack of resolve or anything. We respected Sam but we had to be encouraged to take that outer role. That wasn't his personality. He was definitely an introvert. It wasn't his personality to be a leader of anything but he would do a lot of the writing. When we were writing our constitution, he was really good at thinking about what would be good. He was a political science type so you know he was good. I'm trying to remember if he was political science or engineering or both. I might be a little bit confused on that point, which was his actual major.

I thought afterwards that some of the people were struggling academically because Swarthmore's always difficult. But we didn't really talk about that much among ourselves so you didn't really know who was struggling and who wasn't. Or maybe some people knew and some people did not. I think that some of the problems, maybe in hindsight, that held back – the people that went to regular public school, even if it was a test school, Swarthmore was so much more orders of magnitude difficult. It was very intimidating to people, especially if you'd been a good student in high school to come here and be struggling and I think people kind of held it in and didn't really reveal. Trying to manage that and having all this extra-curricular activity because it took a lot of evenings – night-after-night in a week meeting in Sharples in those little rooms, organizing. It took a lot of time. It got to a point where we were spending maybe half the time working on SASS stuff and the other half the time doing your homework. I think that was pretty

² James Sharpe was the second black mayor of Newark, New Jersey. He served from 1986-2006. Kenneth A. Godson was the first black mayor of Newark. He was elected in 1970 and served until 1986.

hard for people but they didn't want to necessarily acknowledge how much of a challenge that was. After we graduated, many years I realized that some people were really sweating their academics. I had had the privilege of going to this independent school where they set us on the path for college prep from the seventh grade, day one and we were reading whole books. You have a homework assignment to read a book by the next class? That was unheard of to the kids who had never gone to those kinds of schools. Read a whole book for a class? But I was used to that because that's the kind of—I had been in that kind of environment. Swarthmore was easy for me. I know to people it sounds funny. It's not because I'm some genius. I just had this incredible prep school preparation so I had time to get into trouble because I was used to that kind of level of work and I know the people who went to public school particularly were much more challenged, I would say. Giving myself exceptions.

MM: Thank you for sharing that. We're aware that you were very involved with the planning of the 1969 sit-in. Can you tell us about how SASS decided to employ direct action?

MAM: So we had gotten up to a fever pitch by what you young people today call "microaggressions." We didn't have that word then but we had enough of the microaggressions. We had our list of demands and things we were advocating for in the newspaper and talking to the faculty and nothing was happening. We got into December of our senior year and we realized "Wow we've only got a few more months and we'll be out of here and nothing has changed." It was just talk and no action or whatever. And then there was this microaggression when they put our information in the library that really triggered everybody. When we went home for Christmas vacation, we had indicated that they had to do something. We were kind of making demands and we were kind of threatening that we would have to take some direct action but I don't know if we ever had in our heads exactly what that would look like. However, some of us and I can't remember who all was involved made the decision that we were going to do a sit in when we got back from Christmas vacation if things hadn't changed. And we were pretty aware of the CIA and the FBI - -we had a lot of concerns and if you know what happened with the FBI break-in and infiltrators and people, we had a lot of concerns about that over the years. We said this is not something we can plan with 32 people in a room. A group of us, a steering committee, would have to plan this thing and everybody else would just have to join in because this is too much leakage or opportunity for people to find out.

Over Christmas vacation, some of us who lived in New York and I remember Harold because he lived in Long Island and I lived in Harlem – we would be in the same area so I said over Christmas we will meet in my house in Harlem and everybody – the few of us who had access to New York would be able to get there. We met at my house and we decided to plan this sit-in/takeover type thing. We had gotten some maps of the building, the layout of Parrish and we'd made list of kinds of things that we'd need and if we were going to be there for some period of time, what kind of supplies we would need. In terms in provisions and tools we would need. You know we were going to take over this building, how were we going to hold it. How many people are going to be needed? We planned the logistics over the vacation. Some people

knew that some group was planning this but they didn't know the details because it was a need-to-know basis and other people were working the political side with the administration trying to get them to make some action on our demands not necessarily knowing what the other group was doing. I think that worked out pretty well because only a very small group knew the details and we planned the logistics very, very carefully. We decided what day we were going to do it, we decided what time of day, how we're gonna get people out of the building, how we're gonna get the custodial help and dadada. And we told everybody to just be ready so that when the time came they would just show up over there. They didn't know the details – the day, the times. We would give you a signal and everybody would come. And so that's pretty much what happened. I think a large number of people came in having not really knowing it was going to be a sit-in, not knowing how long it was gonna be. Kinda getting the message – bring a backpack, bring your homework, bring your books, and bring a toothbrush and some things to stay a while. Be prepared but not really knowing. You know it's so fuzzy, so long ago. I don't even know if people remember – the people who were there, if they can even remember – if we can reconstruct...if it's precisely how everything went down. We know bits and pieces.

I was very involved in the inner planning so I remember certain things very vividly – how we got the people out of the building who worked there. This, that was planned. We wrote a script, what we were going to walk up to them and say and some of us had the script. We did it at lunch time so we knew there was going to be a minimum crew because a lot of the people would leave the building for lunch. Some secretaries were there and because we didn't have any weapons or dangerous things but we went up very serious in our black clothes or whatever and [said] “This is a takeover and we're not going to hurt anybody. Gather your things because you may not be able to get back at your desk for a while. Would you kindly leave the building?” and they were like “woah oh my god” because you know people were really shocked. I mean we're nineteen, twenty year-olds and it was a group of us and it was pretty intimidating. And people just gathered their things and just left. I think they were all women at the time in the building, the secretaries were typically all women. I don't think there were any men in the building at the time. They just scurried out and took their bags and their things and they just got out of there. It was January. We didn't have any resistance or physical confrontations with anybody. And as everybody left we chained the doors. We had chains and were prepared for that and we told the custodial staff that we were going to do something and we didn't tell them what but to “Please stand by, keep an eye out for us.” So when they realized something was going down they were very supportive in their own quiet way and they made sure we had toilet paper and paper towels and soap and eventually they helped get us food as it when on and on in a very *[the] Spook Who Sat by the Door*.³ I don't know if you know that movie

MM: Yeah, I do *[laughing]*.

³ A novel by Sam Greenlee published in 1969 that was adapted into a 1973 movie directed by Ivan Dixon.

MAM: In a very *Spook Who Sat By the Door* fashion. They were sweeping the floor and whispering “Do y’all need something? We got some of this for you” and then “woo!” So it was all of that, yeah. So that was what happened.

MM: So besides Harold Buchanan do you remember any other names of the people who were at that December 1968 meeting at your house?

MAM: You know I’m very fuzzy on that. I haven’t tried to reconstruct it. I don’t know if Jannette [Domingo] was there because she lived in New York. I don’t think Marilyn [Holifield] was there, she says she didn’t remember. It wasn’t a large group of us. Maybe four, at most. There were a couple of other people. Delmar lived in New York. I don’t know if he – Delmar Thompson – he lived in Harlem but I don’t know if he was there at the time. I’d have to look at a list of names and try to figure it out. That’s interesting. It wasn’t many of us. We were the logistics group. Harold was very good at logistics – he always had a camera and he was just a very rational person who knew how to organize things. He played a huge role in the logistics. He wasn’t interested in being upfront, talking to the press and the media - -that wasn’t his personality but very much a nuts-and-bolts person. That worked well. And then when we came back, there was sort of a trusted inner circle who knew the plan. And I think when I say trusted, by this time we were very – I don’t wanna say radical. Nobody was thinking about violence or anything like that but it was somewhat radical to take a direct action like that and we didn’t want anybody who we thought was going to chicken out and the last minute or, worse, go and tell. That was really important. We had to know that the people who knew the details were rock solid as far as the commitment to this and to the group and to not ratting out on us. That was just very important. We had to be very careful who [we] shared the information with. You had to know people who weren’t afraid and you learn that about people I guess over time and we had been working together for three years. We kind of knew who those people were. I think we were right. As far as I know we didn’t have any defections.

MM: So what can you tell us about what was happening inside Parrish during the occupation? I know you told people to bring their books and I’m guessing there was some homework involved.

MAM: Oh we were doing homework all the time. Because it was finals and we had to come back for finals. That’s the college used to be; you didn’t have finals before Christmas. After Christmas you’d come back and have to study for finals. Everybody had their books, they were studying for finals. Inside people were... I mean it was such a beehive of activity. I mean you’re talking about twenty or thirty people – maybe twenty people – sleeping in this one huge room, the main admissions office -

[Due to technical difficulties, there is a gap in the audio recording of this interview. When the audio resumes, Marilyn Allman Maye is responding to the question: Were you involved in the

negotiations that took place between SASS and the administration from January 9th to 16th, 1969?]

MAM: There's a press - Did you see it yet in the paper? "This was said, blah, blah, blah." Clinton [Etheridge]⁴ and Don [Mizell]⁵ were the negotiators, and Michael Graves.⁶ The three negotiators. So they were pretty much always interacting with the media and the college. We would write up our statement. Almost every day we would write a statement and they would deliver the statement. Then, they would tell us what the administration said, and come back to us and ask us what would be our response. And we would collectively, everybody, discuss it. "Don't tell them that." "Say this." "Don't do that." So, that would interrupt the studying.

And then, of course, the only way you could get washed up was to use the face bowls and stuff in the men's and women's bathrooms downstairs. So that was a whole drama everyday for everybody to get washed up. Because security had to stand at the door - our security. People were on guard. You had people who had to guard the doors. So if somebody had to go downstairs to wash up, you kind of had to organize that. That whole thing.

And then, the food... the food distribution. People would bring us food and deliver it through the window. Some people had to be in charge of meals and making sure everybody had what they needed. And combing your hair, people would be braiding hair. It's like we're living in this place. That's kind of how the days went. And then you're studying, and then there's some crisis that we all had to react and discuss and debate. And then you go back, and you sleep at night. And you get up in the morning, and do the whole thing again. [*laughing*]. It was kind of weird. It's like living in a refugee camp.

MM: Do you remember who was bringing in the food?

MAM: Well, so how the food thing went - it came in through the window. Because we were not expecting people to bring in food. Whatever food we took in there, which was mostly things like tuna fish, sardines, canned goods, and nonperishables - First of all, we didn't know we were going to be in there so long, but we knew it was probably going to be multiple days. So when we had our list, when we were preparing, we had provisions. We had cans, crackers, and that kind of thing, which we thought would be our food for the duration [of the sit-in]. However, we immediately started getting a lot of attention and support from the community. Some wonderful Black people from Media and Chester, church people and stuff, started bringing us cooked food. Hot food. Macaroni and cheese, chicken, rice, greens. They were treating us like celebrities! So they would come with these trays of hot food, and pass it up through the window, and that's how the food got in. Then we had real food, so that was kind of amazing. It wasn't like we ordered food. Nobody ordered food. We didn't have, like, Domino's Pizza. That was unheard of. There

⁴ Class of 1969. Second chairman of SASS, 1968-1969.

⁵ Class of 1971. Vice-chairman of SASS, 1968-1969. Also, third chairman of SASS, 1969-1971.

⁶ Class of 1969.

was no such thing as ordering food. No. And certainly, the college wasn't going to give us any food. It was just the kindness of strangers. Yes, amazing.

MM: So you mentioned the cleaning staff kind of passing along secrets of what was going on. Were any other members of the staff or faculty offering support while you were in Parrish?

MAM: By the time we actually did the takeover, we had our first Black faculty, who was Dr. Asmarom Legesse, the Ethiopian professor. He wrote an open letter to the community supporting us,⁷ and it appeared in the *Phoenix* and that's available. He was the only Black professor at the time. We had gotten that concession from the college over the years.⁸ Certainly, all of the custodial staff was backing us one way or the other. I'm sure a lot of them helped to organize that food stuff. Later on, we realized they actually felt empowered enough to write a letter of support.⁹ We felt very supported by the Black community and the Black staff, even though people were not out front waving placards and so on. And there were some people from the community who came, and spoke to the press, and said what we were doing was right. We don't even know all of the people who came because we were inside for the most part. So the bits and pieces we got. Then, when we came out, the people took us to Chester or Media - we're still not sure - and kept us for a couple of days,¹⁰ till things quieted down after the president [Courtney Smith] died¹¹ and they thought we were in danger. They said, "we'll take the college students with us." So we all were taken out to safety, sort of away from all the anger. Did that answer the question you're asking?

MM: Yes, yes. You said they took you away from all the anger, so what was going on campus after the sit-in? What was the climate like here [at Swarthmore College]?

MAM: Well, we missed a lot of it because we just physically were not here. We were in the building and then we were away from the campus. By the time we came back, everyone was on good behavior. It was kind of like a moratorium. This college was in such shock over the president dying and all the uproar, and they just could not believe this had happened. All this attention in the media, it was unheard of. So I think everybody just thought, "let's just try to take

⁷ Asmarom Legesse is from Eritrea, not Ethiopia. The letter referenced is "[Open Letter from Asmarom Legesse, 01/1969]," which can be found in the Black Liberation 1969 digital archive.

⁸ On May 5, 1967, the *Phoenix* reported that the Sociology Department had appointed Asmarom Legesse as a Lecturer in Anthropology. Initially, this was a year-long appointment to replace Steve Piker during his leave of absence, but Asmarom Legesse's appointment was extended.

⁹ A reference to "Open Letter to the Parents of Black Students at Swarthmore College," which was signed by William and Eileen Cline, Edwin and DeLois Collins, Harold Hoffman, Robert and Lee Williams, Rachel Williams and can be found in the Black Liberation 1969 digital archive.

¹⁰ The students were at the Media Fellowship House in Media, Pennsylvania from January 16 to January 19, 1969. For more information about their time there, please see the interview with Robert Woodson.

¹¹ The president of Swarthmore College from 1953 until he died of a heart attack on January 16, 1969. Smith had a pre-existing heart condition, but since this was undisclosed at the time, many attributed his death to the stress of dealing with the SASS protest.

a deep breath and try to just cool our heads and let's see if we can get through this." So by the time we came back to campus, they had declared amnesty. We were able to get back in our classes and finish up the finals and stuff.

The students who were angry and who felt that their time had been disrupted - because classes were cancelled and there were people whose finals were messed up, so some students were very angry and they didn't like what we were doing. They felt that we had messed up their nice college and killed the president, this type of thing. I think cooler heads kind of damped down that - they didn't give vent to that. And if they did, we didn't pay any attention to it or it didn't stop us. But I understood that the usual cast of KKK [Ku Klux Klan] associates and stuff in the neighborhood were threatening to come on campus and blow us away or whatever. The right-wing extremists of various kinds. But, I personally had no contact with any of those kind of people. I know that there were a couple of White students that I knew, that I had been friendly with before, they were a little miffed. They were a little upset. I could tell relationships were strained. But I wouldn't call it any vicious attack or anything. I'm not aware of hate mail, and we didn't have Facebook or any of that stuff, so I'm not aware of that. We just went on our way and graduated. Finished our work and graduated.

If whatever else bad feelings that were on campus, we were not engaged because we had so much to do. Because after we got our demands, we had so much to do, and we only had one semester. We were trying to recruit Black faculty, we were trying to recruit students. We were trying to get these Black courses organized. We were very busy trying to put into place all the things that they [the administration and faculty] had agreed to, and now we had to kind of make it happen. We were very busy that final semester. It's like, "be careful what you ask for." You get it? *[laughing]* A lot of work.

MM: So your last semester was focused on getting Black faculty, Black Studies. Can you talk about your involvement with the Black Studies Curriculum Committee?

MAM: Absolutely. At the time, we had - one of my notebooks is in the [digital archive], so I can't remember if that was fall or spring¹² - but we had, over the course of SASS advocating, we had managed to get a few courses. First, we did our own course that we self-taught, student-taught. We got permission to get credit for that. We got a couple of adjunct professors in. Professor Legesse was here. So there was starting to be a few Black-oriented courses. Very few. I wouldn't say there was a Black Studies curriculum per se because there was no faculty to teach it, so there just courses. The course that we created - For example, we got this course called Black Religions, and an adjunct professor came. He also taught at Temple.¹³ He was great, and he taught us about the various Black religious experiences, the various cults. But he came in, he did classes, and he took us on field trips, and we got credit for that. We started to get enough

¹² Marilyn Allman Maye provided documents from the spring 1969 Black Philosophies of Liberation student-run course for use in the digital archive.

¹³ Leonard E. Barrett, then assistant professor of Religion at Temple University.

courses to get a Black Studies concentration. My class was the first class that graduated with that on our diplomas. Our degrees [had] a Black Studies concentration. I don't know how many credits, maybe twelve credits. We didn't have credits, but four or five courses, or whatever was the number to declare it a concentration. When we left, that was as far as we had gotten: the concentration. But with the idea that as more Black faculty came, there would be a complete Black Studies curriculum and department.

MM: How did you organize this concentration? I'm just trying to picture it because that happened before there was an official Black Studies program -

MAM: Absolutely.

MM: - And like you said, before there was really a substantial number of Black faculty.

MAM: Absolutely.

MM: So, how did you organize that concentration, then?

MAM: Yes. We were just, we were just relentless. Every idea we had, we'd go to the deans. We'd go to anybody - faculty, we'd go to the department chairs. We'd have meetings, we had endless meetings with the faculty. We just would not stop insisting on stuff. Bit by bit they'd say, "okay, you can have this class." "Okay, you can this class." "Okay we can give you credit for that." "Okay, make sure you find a professor that will sign off and say it's legit, [and] reviews what you're doing." And then, they'd get an adjunct in. We just kept - whoever had to be seen, the dean of this or the dean of that, they just didn't know what to make of us. So, we just got it. Because normally, faculty would be advocating for these things, but there was no faculty to do it. So we just took it on ourselves. In the aftermath of the takeover, people just didn't want to fight with us. So it was like, "okay, let's do this." But they did hire Black faculty out of that, so once the faculty were there, they could fight the battles for credit, tenure, and faculty lines. That happened all after we left.

MM: What were your goals for Black Studies? Were you looking at programs at other schools and taking inspiration from that?

MAM: Yes, we did a lot with other schools. For example, we went to Lincoln University up in Oxford, Pennsylvania to take a course in African history, which was very good. Because we didn't have it here, the school paid for our van to take us out there once a week for the classes. We had an excellent course in African history. We were very interested in that, and we got that whole piece from Lincoln University. We went to, as I said, to Temple University [and] we worked with that professor, whose name I don't remember. But, it [the course] was on Black African religions. We worked at Penn [University of Pennsylvania] with people at Penn. We

would work with Haverford [College] and Bryn Mawr [College], I think on some inter - [to] put together a course students at all three schools could take. So we scotched together enough pieces to put together courses. [*laughing*]. African history and African culture. I think we had one about African politics. Professor Legesse was a sociologist, so we did something with sociology, African something, because I had a class with him. I have notes from his class, a paper that I wrote. With adjunct professors, and student-run [courses], and other schools, that's how we kind of put it together. Did I answer your question?

MM: Yes, yes. I guess I want to know why you thought it was important for the school to have Black Studies.

MAM: Oh. Well, we thought it was very important. We just that we were missing out on our history. We were going to college, getting an education that was considered world-class, and yet, there were all these gaps. We didn't know about our history. I mean, there wasn't any Henry Louis Gates¹⁴ doing all that stuff on public T.V. There wasn't anybody doing that. We just thought, what's the sense in going to college and calling yourself well-educated and you don't know basic history about yourself and your people, right?. And then, of course, there was all the negative stereotypes about our - that we didn't have a history, didn't have a culture. So we wanted to refute that. It was very important to us to get the facts, get the information. It was very important to us. We were hungry for knowledge about ourselves. We would go to the ends of the earth to find out. I know for me personally it was a passion.

My freshman year, I went to Africa.¹⁵ I got a job working for Upward Bound. I made like \$600, which was big money in those days, and I put the whole money toward a ticket to go to Africa. I couldn't wait to go to Africa. I was like, *first chance I get I'm going to go to Africa because I want to see for myself all this hype*. I never believed all those myths they said. I saved my money, and got on that plane, and I went as an exchange student for three months. I just couldn't get enough. When I went over there, and I saw things that I was more interested to learn the history more. I was in West Africa, and I saw the ancient temples and the civilization - and we weren't learning any of this. What's this? All this European stuff, something is missing here. It was very important to our identity, our validation, legitimizing. It was very Eurocentric here. People didn't realize it, but even the entertainment. We'd always say, like when they had entertainment on Saturday nights or Friday nights, the weekends - Charlie Chaplin was like the biggest thing in the world. Oh! I never even heard of Charlie Chaplin before I came here. Oh my God they just loved Charlie Chaplin! They'd sit there and Charlie Chaplin would be up there doing all this stuff and they're hysterical laughing. [*Unintelligible*]. What's so funny? [*laughing*] What did he just do? What? They're sitting there watching this and the kids are just eating it up. Oh, we're aliens.

¹⁴ Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is a professor at Harvard University and the director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research there. He has also been involved with television and film series about people throughout the Black diaspora.

¹⁵ Marilyn Allman Maye studied abroad at the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire, also known as the Ivory Coast.

We would try to get into Philly, go see - In those days, James Brown was singing. We had Nina Simone, Gladys Knight. I mean, all this really good '60s music was all in Philadelphia. Philadelphia had The Dells. All the music, the great Black music, was everywhere; none of it at Swarthmore. I was like, *what's wrong with this picture?* So we're like, no, we've got to get out of here. We're going to go crazy. All of this is at the peak of Black music culture. We just said, "something's missing here," and we tried to fill those gaps. You couldn't be well rounded just with those stuff. We didn't really have a clear, articulated position. These are just impressions you have. "Something's not right." "I'm missing something." But you just have this sense that you're going to have to fight to get what you need because it's not working. This is not working.

And thank God, we were - I don't know where we got that. Honestly, I reflect back and I think, *how did we do this? How did we do this?* Nobody was telling us what to do. There were no senior adults guiding us per se. There were a couple of Black intellectuals in the area, who we met over time. They were helpful to us. They were thinkers. We were hungry for this, so we'd invite them on campus and we'd have these Black people come in and talk to us about African and Black history. There was a guy in Philadelphia who had a Black bookstore. He'd come in. There was a professor at Penn. We'd bring him in. Any chance we could get our hands on any money in the student government, we'd bring in a speaker. We brought in all these guys from South Africa - by then the apartheid struggle. We brought in these guys from the South Africa struggle. Always trying to get information. What was going on? Sharpeville massacre.¹⁶ What was going on in the South with SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]? We just kept bringing these kind of people in. Because the college didn't do anything. They didn't bring any of this stuff to campus. Well, we just had a constant stream of guest speakers and artists. I got to give the college credit; they let students do stuff. If you, I don't know how it is know, but if you were a student and you had an idea for a program, an event, you could get the place rented. You could get a room in Bond [Hall], and bring in a speaker, and put up your flyers. And they'd give you the money to pay the person. We took total advantage of it. I don't know if students still do that today, but because there were no adults to do it for us, we constantly had speakers. And we learned a lot from these people. We were just like sponges. I don't know. It was a combination of taking initiative, taking advantage of what the college had to offer. And the college never stopped us. So if we needed a van to go somewhere, you signed up and could take the van to go to Philadelphia, go to Oxford, Pennsylvania, go to Delaware or whatever, catch a lecture, go to Haverford. Just sign up, take the van. We just did it. We were moving all the time. Hopefully students still do that.

MM: Yes, kind of.

MAM: Yes.

¹⁶ On March 12, 1960, police opened fire into a crowd of approximately 5,000 to 7,000 people and killed 69 demonstrators at Sharpeville, South Africa. The protests were in response to "Pass laws" that required Black South Africans to carry identification, in order to limit their mobility and uphold the apartheid system.

MM and MAM: [*laughing*].

MM: Going back to Black Studies for a little bit, where there any faculty members who challenged the legitimacy of a Black Studies academic program?

MAM: Oh, yes. Yes. The White ones, you mean? Who didn't -

MM: Or just anyone who said that "this is not real history" -

MAM: Oh, yes -

MM: - "this is not the real Swarthmore."

MAM: Oh, yes, there were people. I don't know their names. It's very interesting you should say - I have always been the person that said, "I don't have time to fight White people." I know that's probably not politically correct, but what I mean by "White people" is opposition people. That's not my interest, because I feel there's so much work you have to do to get these people up to speed that it's not worth my time. So I was always interested in the internal struggles that we had. Trying to convince our own people of the struggle, why we need to do this. I would be willing to spend endless hours debating with another Black person and try to bring them along, but for a White person who was giving me opposition? I had no time for it. I had no patience, and I would say to White people who wanted to be part of it, help us by taking care of those people. You really want to help us? Talk to your own people who don't get it. Convince them because it's too much energy to be constantly explaining yourself to somebody who doesn't want to really understand anyway. And we have too much work to do internally. So I just avoided those - that's me personally. Now there are some Black people, who really thrive on that kind of - In religion, you call it apologetics. I don't know if you know that word? Explaining your religion, why you believe, so it's apologetics. There are some people who that's their gift. They love to explain themselves to other people and they're infinitely patient, and that's their gift, and God bless them. [*laughing*] I didn't get that anointing. Apologetics is not my thing. But God bless those people, because somebody has to do it.

I think that's kind of what was going on in the takeover. The people who were the spokespersons were the ones who really enjoyed debating with the press, and arguing with those people and the professors. They really thrived on that. That was their thing. They were extroverts. And then the people inside: "y'all do that all day long, we're in here trying to figure out how to keep the people from killing us." It's like an internal focus. I think you have to respect people's personalities and gifts, if you're going to have a movement. There's going to be those external people, and there's going to be internal. I don't think one is better than the other. They're both needed, and I think people do best when they're doing what they're wired for. So I

couldn't tell you who the haters were, because I avoid them. If I see them coming, I'm going the other way and saying, "bye." I'm going.

MM: *[laughing]*.

MAM: Only in the most extreme situations would I engage in those kind of conversations. In a few, but [that requires] too much energy.

MM: Thank you for sharing that.

MAM: *[laughing]*.

MM: Ok. You mentioned the Black Philosophies of Liberation course earlier. Thank you so much for providing us with those documents. It was a spring 1969 student-led course. Can you talk more about how that was organized and how the college responded to that course?

MAM: Yes. I can't remember if it was before or after the takeover.¹⁷ But, by this time, I think we had some credibility by this time. We just went to whomever, whatever dean was in charge, like the academic dean, and said, "you're not giving us anything. We're here, we want to learn this. You don't have a professor. We're Swarthmore students, well-read, well-versed. We think we can organize our own course." I don't know if the college had ever had any student-run courses, but I think some of the White students were also advocating for some of their own courses, so it was a timely thing. We may have been the first, or we may have been the first along with a White group that was looking for a similar student-run course. But it was a brand new concept, and to give academic credit. I believe there was a White professor, somewhere, whose name I don't remember, who was kind of tacitly put to oversee us. The person didn't teach, they didn't give veto power or anything, but they were kind of giving the nod that it was legit.

So we had to do our research. We had to find the textbooks. We looked at the philosophies. We said we wanted to do a different one every week, and we divided the class up. Everybody had to do one topic, and what you did was you did the philosophy, the readings, and the genre - Not genre, I want to say like, what the social milieu of that philosophy [was]. So if it took place in the 1930s, you'd play some music from the era. You'd have some food from the era. You'd maybe wear period clothing. We really tried to make it a 360, a multisensory experience. We were being creative. We had some slavery type of things, and we'd come and we'd make spoon bread and some of the things that we thought the slaves ate, and dressed like that. Whatever the era was that went along with it. It was really a fun course. It was fabulous, and everybody worked really hard. Every week you prepared your papers, and when I looked back, I was very impressed. We were Swarthmore students, and I have to give this college credit, by the time we were seniors most of us had been in these honors classes. You're used to reading

¹⁷ The first class meeting for Black Philosophies of Liberation took place on February 5, 1969, after the takeover.

a lot of books and writing papers every week. Really, it was like a seminar almost. Yes. We were up to it. *[laughing]* We did it ourselves. We organized it.

MM: Is there anything else that you want to share with us? Something that we didn't ask you about that you think is really important?

MAM: Well, yes. There's something I thought about and I also want to talk about it tomorrow. I think one of the things we don't get to hear much about is the role of faith in this because, as I say, I wonder how we did this. But there were at least some of us, I'm not going to say it was everybody, who had very strong religious backgrounds when we came to campus and we maintained it as best we could. I think it was much more of a motivator than people think because it kind of gave you sense that you're doing something right and God is on your side. And I don't think that gets heard enough. Society is very secular, and people pooh-pooh that kind of thing. But trust me, to have the confidence and the boldness and whatever, to really persevere in the face of knowing that bad things could happen, it takes some kind of faith. There were definitely some of us, I for one and I can name others, who I believe even in our nineteen-, twenty-year old minds were operating out of a strong sense of conviction.

And I remember when I did the takeover [of the Admissions Office] my mother came down from New York. She was just horrified. I think she heard it on the news, because I didn't tell her and we didn't have cell phones. The poor woman came down in the train with my uncle, who was an evangelist. She was downstairs in the yard, and I'm upstairs, and she's says, "Come out. You better come out. I didn't send you here to -." And I said, "Sorry mom, this is bigger than us." So she sent my uncle up, who is an evangelist, and he was going to get me out. He came up by the door, because we couldn't let in somebody with the chains and whatever. I went out to talk to him, and he started questioning me about it. "Are you really doing the right thing? You really think this is something you should be doing? You're a Christian." I explained to him, this is what the people - this is Dr. King [Martin Luther King, Jr.]. And he said, "I agree with you one hundred percent." *[laughing]* And he went and told my mother, "let's go back. They're fine." Yes. He called off her panic because he said it was okay. The ministers who brought us stuff, the men from churches. It was hard what we did, and it took faith, and it took support of people of faith, and I think that part of the story often gets left out. That would be my add on.

MM: Well, thank you for letting us know that, for sharing your insights. It's really wonderful to hear someone who was there, who can share their memories, and just bring a new perspective. It's always important.

MAM: Good.

MM: Thank you so much.

MAM: Thank you for having me, for having us, for this opportunity.

