

PRESERVING MEMORY: NEWARK AND RUTGERS
IN THE 1960'S AND 1970'S

An Interview with

VICKIE DONALDSON

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

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GILBERT COHEN: This is Tuesday, November 12, 1991. This is Gil Cohen. I am meeting with Vickie Donaldson, who is an alumnus, Class of 1972, NCAS, and an alumna of Rutgers Law, Class of 1982. Ms. Donaldson is a practicing attorney in Newark, New Jersey. [Break in recording] Okay. We are back, and I was asking you if you could give a biographical sketch of your academic career and your professional career.

VICKIE DONALDSON: I was a member of the Class of '71. Stayed an extra year because I wanted a dual major, which I did achieve in Black Studies and Soc. And 1974 I returned to graduate school in political science with a Rockefeller Fellowship actually in political theory. And I returned in 1979, graduating in '82 from the Rutgers Law School, Class of '82, where I was a G. Pop. Fellow.

COHEN: What is that?

DONALDSON: There was a joint degree program in planning and law. I was one of those fellows. And since I was admitted to the Bar following graduation, the first Bar that I took, and I was actually sworn in in spring of '83, I've been practicing since that time. I've been fortunate to have—let's see, you wanted professional background biography, too. Well, 1984 I successfully litigated a civil rights case with an unprecedented remedy. It was my first federal case. And that sort of highlights.... It was [Welcome?] *Pioneer vs. New Jersey*. I was general counsel to the Board of Ed in Newark from 1984 to 1988. Maintain a fairly decent small law practice, private practice, now. And I also serve as town prosecutor for the Town of Orange. That's so I can pay my benefits. [Laughs] So I can get benefits actually.

COHEN: The case that you litigated that you referred to earlier, the significant—

DONALDSON: Well actually, it was one of those...it's not like a triple double in basketball. But on I think it was May 8th of that year, '85—'84; I can't remember, it's odd. I had two lead stories on the front page of the *Star Ledger*. Judge Sarakin [sp] of the Federal District Court for the District of New Jersey had granted some relief that was in fact unprecedented at the time. It was later vacated by Memphis B. Stotts [sp]. But at the time it was an unprecedented remedy involving minority firefighters who'd been laid off by the City of Newark. And the remedy was that not only could—and this is in the wake of the affirmative action cases—not only could the City of Newark not lay off minority firefighters, but the remedy included a requirement that white firefighters who had been protected by civil service rules were also precluded from layoffs. So in a sense it was an affirmative action where there's no victim. It was later vacated by Memphis B. Stotts. But that's all right. And the second front-page case was *Brown vs. Newark Board of Education*. My clients had won the local school board elections. And they had been precluded from being seated. And it just happened that both decisions came down the same day.

I don't know how that happened, but it did. But politically one was very, very significant. It was the beginning, I believe, of the end politically for Ken Gibson. I don't know who did the city a great service in retrospect. But that's what happened.

COHEN: When you first came to Newark—well, first came to Rutgers, I want to say—what was your perception of Rutgers University in Newark? What was its reputation as an institution of higher education?

DONALDSON: Coming to Rutgers in Newark from high school in the South, which is where I came from. My parents were citizens of Newark for a long time. But I went to high school living with my maternal grandmother in Florida. Rutgers was perceived by me to be an Ivy League school with— The only thing I knew about it was that it had good credentials in journalism. I wanted to be a journalist. And Rutgers had one of the better schools of journalism. I had originally been slated to go to Douglass. But there was a housing shortage. So I ended up going to Rutgers in Newark so I wouldn't have to commute to Douglass. That's how I ended up here. I had no sense of Rutgers in Newark. I had never seen it in any perceived physical way. There was no campus. There was nothing.

COHEN: What were your impressions when you got here?

DONALDSON: My impressions were...this was the year of the riots. The buildings were brand new. We were the first class to occupy the new buildings. And there were only four actually. There was Ackerson Hall which was the law school. There was Boyden and Conklin, John Cotton Dana Library, and a campus center. That was it.

COHEN: I think that's what it was, yes.

DONALDSON: And the buildings were concrete white. They were all white inside. And all of my classmates my first year were white. I had one person who was of color, and that was a person in gym. But it was very, very intimidating. I came out of the South as a very, very active activist in the civil rights movement since I had been about 14. And during the riots I rode the buses from down the hill to South 18th Street, which was about as far out to the edge of Newark going in that direction that you could be without being out of Newark. My house was on 18th Street. I think there were only a couple of other blocks before you hit Irvington. And I rode through the riots coming from Newark Prep, which was where I was going to school to take a language course because—so I would not have to take freshman language.

COHEN: Oh, you were taking a course at Newark Prep while you were enrolled at Rutgers?

DONALDSON: Just prior to September, during that summer, I actually went to Newark Prep which was taught, I thought, and other people perceived it to be, a fairly exclusive prep-type school. In fact it was Newark preparatory school. To take a Spanish course because I didn't want to take the—to satisfy my language requirements at Rutgers.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: And I actually rode through the riots during that period.

COHEN: What can you describe? Vivid recollections you have of that experience?

DONALDSON: I can recall it being like night and day. I would ride the 25 Springfield bus up Springfield Avenue midday. And it was like a war zone. Going to see people even in the middle of the day concluding activities that probably had begun during the night: Furniture being moved. Stores still having merchandise removed. Tankers, a lot of Army personnel. And at one point I remember thinking that I wanted this new TV, one of these huge color televisions? And I remember my mother saying under no circumstances could any of this stuff come to my house because I was saying, you know, I see all this stuff. Why can't, you know. My mother said, "Well, it's hot, and you can't bring it into my house." And it made me feel apart from the folk that I was riding by only in the sense that, well, particularly in the sense that most of the things that were prized merchandise items during the riots, I took for granted. [Break in recording]

COHEN: We are back. So you're on the bus.

DONALDSON: I was saying that I took this—these material things for granted. I mean we weren't wealthy, but I guess by most standards we were comfortably middle-class blacks. My mother was a nurse. She and my father owned a business. I was not on scholarship or grant going into Rutgers, something that I changed very quickly when I discovered that everybody else was. But I became aware that things people were being shot, risking being shot at least, to take, I took for granted. And it made me also consider that possibly the riots weren't properly focused just on taking things. That there had to be something more that was underlying people's willingness to be on the streets and to confront folk with machine guns and tanks. This was the first time—apart from the Southern civil rights strategy that I had been involved in for a very long time, even at that young age, I perceived a new militancy. When I went to Rutgers in September, it was around the first, second week in September. My first encounter was something called Freshman Camp.

COHEN: Freshman Camp?

DONALDSON: Freshman Camp.

COHEN: It was on campus?

DONALDSON: No, actually the university rented a Y camp, and we went out into the wilderness, and it was an opportunity to meet your classmates, do general university-orientation kinds of things. And I went. It was Freshman Camp. It was for freshmen. And I assumed everybody went. When I got there, there was one other black student, Marcia—she's now Marcia Pickens [sp]. But we were the only two blacks other than the help in the kitchen at the entire camp. And we became—I became aware of what would confront me when I got to the campus the following week. I had not gone to school with whites before. I had been a scholar—I had scored, I guess, well enough to be considered in the top 10 percent that Rutgers accepts anyway coming in. I had been accepted at maybe 20 colleges. Choosing Rutgers was a matter of journalism and economics.

COHEN: Yes. Just as a side, what schools, if you'd had the choice—I mean financially and otherwise—what schools would you have chosen or what schools would you have chosen at that time?

DONALDSON: I was accepted by Michigan State, Howard, University of Missouri, but they didn't know that I was black. I was the recipient of what they called a Florida Presidential Scholarship given by the presidents of the four major colleges. Which meant I could have gone tuition-free to the University of Florida, Florida State, Florida A&M, I can't remember the other one. I think I applied to Fisk. I applied to—I can't remember all these places. Barnard, Mount Holyoke, I don't know. Probably one of the universities out in California because my father lived there. I can't remember all of them.

COHEN: Now when you got to Rutgers, did the coursework of the school—did the school meet your expectations of what a Rutgers school, college, would be like?

DONALDSON: When I got to Rutgers that Monday, I was just completely intimidated. I saw no black students. It was two, three days before I saw another black student. And immediately upon leaving the campus, all I saw was, you know, were black folk. But my first class was with Professor Charles Smith, who taught English composition. He was red-haired, very pale. His name was Charles Smith. I'll never forget it. That was the first class. The buildings were white, the rooms were white. I told the story.

COHEN: Yes, yes. Could you explain?

DONALDSON: And he was white. And coming from the South in a segregated school situation, regardless of your academic achievements, you always wonder will I really be able to make it in this competitive Ivy League situation? And half the people in the room were either valedictorians or salutatorians. And what happened was that in that first-period class, Professor Smith asked who had read *Macbeth*. And of course everybody hadn't. *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and everybody's hand. And after a while, you know, *Merchant of Venice*, you know. My hand was going—King and I—My hand was the only one—

COHEN: Is that right?

DONALDSON: —going up.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: And so he says, "Well, how'd you come to read all of those works of Shakespeare?" So I said, "As a requirement of graduation, I had to do a senior thesis. And it just happens that my senior thesis was on how Shakespeare develops character. And for that I read 23 complete works of Shakespeare." So it changed my—I mean I was beginning to feel a little more comfortable. Following that, Professor Smith says, "Well, you know, this is Rutgers University. We don't teach grammar. We have a mortality rate of 65 percent here. Sixty-five percent of everybody, freshmen, who takes English comp, fails it."

COHEN: He's addressing you, saying that, or the whole class?

DONALDSON: He's addressing the whole class.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

DONALDSON: So then he starts talking about—he asked, well, what are the eight parts of speech? Everybody knows them. So he suggested things like what are infinitives? I mean finally there are only three or four hands going up. Mine is steadily one of them. What are infinitives and what are gerund phrases? And these are all things that I mean are just second nature to me. I just knew them.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: And all of the sudden I mean from being I was almost arrogant. And almost as if you can be overcome by something, I became confident. And I realized that I might make it here. And I might not be inferior. In fact I might be superior. I've told that story. But the following day I was walking across campus not having seen any other black students. And I saw this person who turned out to be Richard Roper. But to me he just looked like an African. He was dressed—he always had a suit, he had a tie. And he was approximately halfway between the rear of the library and the campus center. And as we approached—and you never know how these things are going to go—being Southern I was taught that you speak to anybody you pass on the street. It was one of the hardest lessons, in fact, to learn how to undo in Newark. But Richard Roper not only spoke, but he smiled back. And he stopped, and we started to talk. It turns out he was a Southern also. [Laughter] So he invited me to a meeting of the NAACP, and I went although the NAACP was perceived by me to be a rather moderate, dated organization. It was the only thing black that I'd heard of. And I heard that they were having a dance. And I came to the meeting, and I came to the dance. Of course that's the semester that we changed the NAACP to BOS. But we all went to that organization meeting, and that's how it all started.

COHEN: What was the NAACP program at that time?

DONALDSON: Well, it was a program of political moderation. The NAACP was embraced by many of the students at Rutgers who were black. And in the black community was still regarded as the premier civil rights organization. But as I indicated, I had come out of the South in a very, very intense involvement in the civil rights movement in my hometown. And even though I worked directly with Patricia Stevens Due and her husband John Due—Patricia Stevens Due was the area secretary to the NAACP for Florida; she and her husband worked together, her husband was an attorney—I'd also been involved with CORE. And at that time CORE was a little bit more radical.

COHEN: CORE here in Newark?

DONALDSON: CORE in Florida.

COHEN: Oh, CORE was in Florida. Sure. Okay.

DONALDSON: With CORE I had more or less done most of the political activities that led me straight into Newark. [Break in recording]

COHEN: Okay. You were saying....

DONALDSON: Actually there as a slight difference between CORE and the NAACP.

COHEN: Oh.

DONALDSON: CORE was considered a little bit more militant, if you can call it that. It had a slogan, "Freedom Now," as opposed to some long, structured thing, even though that political theory was closely aligned with that of the SCLC, which was Martin Luther King and the NAACP.

COHEN: What program then were you and your fellow students looking for? What didn't CORE and the NAACP and the SCLC—the Southern Leadership....

DONALDSON: Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

COHEN: Southern Christian—SCLC. What weren't these organizations offering?

DONALDSON: Well, they weren't offering any immediacy. If I can probably put it in a nutshell, there was no immediacy to any political action agendas of SCLC, even to a lesser extent CORE, the NAACP. Because this is a time when we were beginning to listen to Malcolm X. The SNCC leadership folk were very visible and theoretically principled in line with what we were thinking. And there were at least half of the students at Rutgers who were very satisfied with the status quo, who didn't raise legitimately the NAACP. And that difference in agenda preferences led us all the way through the student movement. It never left. There were conciliations, there were coalitions, there were alliances, there were compromises. But I would say that there was no one mind, if you will, of the black students at Rutgers in 1967. There were some students from Newark, in particular, who felt just grateful to be at Rutgers. They felt that this was an achievement. And there were those of us who perceived that it was not such an honor to be in the middle of Newark after the riots in a sea of whiteness without any ability of the community that surrounded it, to influence it, to pierce those white walls. In fact, those buildings, as we perceived them physically, were structured to be anti-riot buildings. That perception panned out to some degree because when the Conklin takeover took place approximately two years after I got there, we discovered underground tunnels. There was a connectedness that really went to security within the university's existing facilities and those that it had planned. Some of us were astute enough to consider that. But Rutgers in Newark was in the heart of the black community. And the black community had no presence.

COHEN: What in the architecture of the buildings, aside from image and tunnels, gave the impression of being, as you said, anti-riot?

DONALDSON: They were all concrete. And arguably they were of the New Age architecture. But the windows were made of thick plate, darkened glass. You could see out, but you could not easily see in. Almost all concrete. The glass was almost peek-a-boo, in my perception. Most of what you saw was concrete. There was no grass, there were no lawns. There were just—even the area that normally would be lawn was concrete. There were no scenic facilities except concrete blocks for students to sit on.

COHEN: That's right. That's right. They're all gone now, but that's right. Was that your perception about the buildings at the time or is this in retrospect?

DONALDSON: No, no, at the time, I felt as if it were a part of a concrete oasis. And that may be a very odd usage of that. But concrete employing cold, structure, secure from outside. But oasis indicating that in the middle of all that concrete enclosure, were things that those of us who needed intellectual stimulation thrived on.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

DONALDSON: Political exchange, academic excellence, at least the pursuit of that. The intellectual stimuli that I guess as the brightest.... See, that was the other thing. We were the brightest. We had to be almost the brightest to get into Rutgers at that time.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: We needed that. So when we came from outside the confines of the community. There were those of us who felt that we brought the community with us. And whatever the sense of community in us was, any that existed, was stimulated by this intellectual and academic growth and excellence. And at the same time, the part of the community in us that demanded: Notice us. Accept that we exist. Is what eventually led, I guess, to the confrontation with the university.

COHEN: Now you mentioned earlier the bus ride. You lived—I just didn't follow that well. You lived outside the city?

DONALDSON: I lived in Newark at the very edge.

COHEN: In Newark at the very edge. So in better circumstances.

DONALDSON: Well, in terms of proximity, it's very, very close to the riots, to the riot area. But actuality it was an area in the west boundary of Newark bordering Irvington, where poor whites actually had moved from Newark. And it was like the last place that blacks—one of the last places—that we could move into. But we actually were occupying properties built then by lower-class whites. Now I understand that. But at that time whites were moving from Newark across the line to Irvington. They would move three blocks, and they'd be in Irvington. And they felt somehow better off. When my parents bought this house on 18th Street, there may have been two other black families on that street. They bought it around 1963, '61, something like that. And there were very few black families on that block. It was just beyond what was called Upper

Clinton Hill, which was historically one of the better neighborhoods in Newark, prior to the exodus, the out-migration.

COHEN: Yes, yes. How did being middle class compare to, well, relatively better circumstances than the poor folks in the central city, how did that influence your your perceptions?

DONALDSON: Well, I only know in retrospect.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

DONALDSON: At that time I didn't know that I was middle class. I didn't know whether....I mean it had never occurred to me if I were poor. My parents worked every day. They were working people. My mother was a nurse who went whether it snowed or rained or whatever to Greystone Hospital in Morristown where.... [Break in recording] My mother worked at Greystone Park. My father went.... This is my mother's second marriage. My father, my natural father, lived in California and was remarried. My mother moved to Newark from the South to work; because as a nurse in the South, unless that first nurse died, there was only one black nurse in the town. You could wait literally years before you could get a job. So she came here to work. She started as a technician at Greystone Park and eventually became a nursing supervisor. My father—my stepfather.... We don't have stepparents in my family, I'm sorry. My father in Newark, who was technically my stepfather, worked first as a chef in a deli. And with two Jewish partners eventually owned three delis. One was Deli King in Linden. One was Robert Kosher Caterers in Highland Park. And the other was the Edison Country Club during a time. He was a—he started out as a chef. And they over the years let him buy in, and then they expanded, one of the partners eventually dying. Then the two of them. Then after the two of them, one took the deli in Rahway and one— My father maintained the country club until he retired. But I didn't know that— I'm digressing.

COHEN: No, no. This is very rich.

DONALDSON: I did not know that I was middle class. All I knew was that when it came time for tuition, my mother wrote a check to Rutgers. And somehow the notion that if you didn't write the check, you would be a welfare-type personality. And so my mother wrote the check. Following my political sophisticated at Rutgers, I realized that I could get grants and loans and foot my own bill and not have to have my mother write the check. That's what I did. But I never knew that people could not go to school because they didn't have the money in my family. And from the time.... [Break in recording]

COHEN: We're back!

DONALDSON: But my mom saved a dime or a quarter from most dollars that she earned. And when I got ready to go to college, whenever there was a \$10—and that time it was usually \$10, \$8.50, \$10, \$15 to apply. I wrote the applications and it was paid. My mother never asked if I was going to college. It was always where. So I don't know.

COHEN: When you arrived at Rutgers and you settled down a bit, what was your perception of the admissions policy of the university, particularly in Newark?

DONALDSON: When we considered.... Well, first of all, there was this internal debate among black students about whether or not we wanted to be in the NAACP or we needed something else. And part of the analysis of the organization of necessity focused on our numbers.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: And then I was told that our numbers were so small because there were no qualified blacks—Negroes—to come to Rutgers. And that people in Newark... Newark students at Rutgers, Newark graduates who were at Rutgers numbered about half of the black students there, and there were only 14 in each class. No more than 15 in any year I believe between 1955 and 1967. But that's another statistic. They were told that they should not apply to Rutgers because Rutgers was too elitist, that the admissions standards were too high. And they all applied to black schools in the South.

COHEN: They were told....

DONALDSON: By their guidance counselors in high schools in Newark.

COHEN: Who was telling you this at the time?

DONALDSON: All my friends who were members of my class, in particular people like James McGill, George Hampton, Linda Spears, Joanne Hanks, these were all people who had gone to Newark high schools. And many felt that they were not "up to snuff." That they applied was an exception. And again, you had to be—pardon my language—"Super Nigra," "Super Nigga" to get into Rutgers at that time. So we focused on admission by first going to the board of ed to challenge that they were telling their students not to apply.

COHEN: The board of ed in Newark.

DONALDSON: Told their students not to apply.

COHEN: I see. I see.

DONALDSON: Because they couldn't get them into Rutgers. Rutgers in turn told us that they didn't have students applying. They had no qualified pool of applicants for admissions. So we went straight to the board of ed. And some of the confrontations with the board of ed resulted in my being appointed to the board of ed in 1972.

COHEN: After you graduated from—

DONALDSON: Right.

COHEN: Oh, I see. Yes.

DONALDSON: But I had these classic battles with the president of the board of ed and the members of the board of ed, who told us that they could not encourage their students to confront failure. Why should we have them spend their money apply to Rutgers when Rutgers, one, gives them no financial aid; two, does not recruit; three, only accepts the top 10 percent for consideration for admission? And so we challenged that. I was appointed to the admissions committee; I believe for my sophomore year I was a student rep. Maybe, Sophomore, junior year.

COHEN: You challenged it. And how did you challenge?

DONALDSON: Well, we challenged Rutgers by challenging their admissions criteria. We challenged the board of ed in Newark by their policies to not encourage students from Newark to apply.

COHEN: Well, what criteria were you challenging?

DONALDSON: Newark, Rutgers.... Well, in Newark if you weren't a val or sal, counselor said, "Don't apply." So we challenged that mentality, that thinking. We challenged the old-line guidance counselors in high schools in Newark who were encouraging black students that they were not good enough to go to Rutgers. We challenged Rutgers University's policies which said, One, you have to be in the top 10 deciles; I believe that's almost the precise language that Rutgers used. You had to be in the top 10 def files. And you had to have an acceptable essay to be part of the applicant pool that would even be considered. And of course then they looked at your SAT's, and they wanted.... At that time I believe SAT's were like a maximum of 800 or something like that. And you had to have scored 500 or 600 on the SAT's. And if you had grades that came from schools that were not in Newark and represented an A, that would be excellent ... in Newark. [Interference in recording] So there were all these levels of ranking. And I remember specifically decile ranking, the essay; the importance of a school grade depended on the district that issued the grade. And we challenged those things. There were no blacks represented on any of the admissions committees.

COHEN: At the college.

DONALDSON: At the college.

COHEN: How then, in challenging the admissions criteria, did you deal with the question of standards, academic standards, admissions standards, scholastic standards and so on at that time? How did you approach that and answer it?

DONALDSON: Initially, we, in order to confront it at all, we had to have someone from Rutgers who actually went into the high schools to recruit, as they did surrounding communities. That was not existing at the time that we challenged.

COHEN: You say 1967.

DONALDSON: 'Sixty-seven, '68, there was no recruitment effort on the part of the university into those urban communities.

COHEN: Okay.

DONALDSON: So the first thing was to hire somebody. We, I remember, demanded that the director of admissions be replaced. I believe that ended up in '69 as one of the 11 original demands.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: Let someone in the admissions office be hired who reflected black orientations and interests and approaches such that they might interest black applicants in applying to Rutgers. We did not...some people thought we were advocating the lowering of academic standards. And I prefer to think that what we asked for was an expansion of academic standards to apply to excluded communities. Rutgers primarily existed in New Brunswick and Newark. And the people who were first excluded from admissions opportunities were residents of those communities. We felt that the university should, in exchange for its occupation of these communities, say to a person who was in the top 10 deciles, by rank, by class rank, in the Newark schools, that that person had the same right to come to the school that the top 10 decile-ranking....

COHEN: So that was a bone of contention to begin with.

DONALDSON: Sure.

COHEN: Is that the different schools...there wasn't parity among the schools in Newark and the schools in the suburbs.

DONALDSON: Exactly.

COHEN: This was explicit policy on the part of the admissions office?

DONALDSON: It was not written. But I would say it was explicit.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: If you were an applicant from Newark and you had an A average, you were not considered a primary or automatic admittee, as would a student from Columbia High School who graduated from high school with an A average. That person from Columbia would be an automatic admit. And the admissions department did have things like automatic admittees—automatic admits it called them. And the difference was where you went to school as opposed to the grade you received or what your curriculum was.

COHEN: How did you then deal with the realities of different levels of preparation, depending on where the students are coming from? Students from some schools, probably students from

some of the Newark schools, if you were to compare them to, let's say, you mentioned Columbia High School. What did you perceive—did you see differences in levels of preparation.

DONALDSON: I didn't because I didn't go to school here. And because I also had on my resume or whatever, Newark Prep. I guess I was perceived differently. I never had any difficulties. I wrote a letter, and next thing I knew I was admitted. And when I couldn't go to Douglass because of housing, I said, Well, I'll go to Newark because I can live at home, no problem. But for a Newark freshman with me, they had been the brightest in their classes.

COHEN: The ones that you were—the students that you....

DONALDSON: Right.

COHEN: But how did you see students coming from the Newark—

DONALDSON: I perceived them everywhere as being inferior to students at Columbia, South Orange. I guess that's all the same. But Livingston, students from Nutley. These were all people—Bellville, I thought these people were in these great school systems because they are perceived to be better prepared. Again, they announced in the first meeting of the class of freshman English comp, which is a required course, that we do not teach grammar. And normally that announcement would be not to scare off black students because they very seldom had black students in the class. Sixty-five percent of all white students fail English composition. Rutgers had what was perceived to be the more rigid standards of at least certainly all New Jersey universities. And it considered itself to Queens College and even in Newark it was the Queens College.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Did you see, once students started coming in, did you see students coming from the Newark schools working under any handicap as far as preparation was concerned, levels of preparation?

DONALDSON: I didn't see that.

COHEN: You didn't see that at the time.

DONALDSON: The kids that I went to school with hadn't dropped out after the first semester. Almost half of the general population or maybe not half, but significant numbers. There was an attrition if you will. But of the students who remained, I saw genius. I mean this brother named Carl—I can't remember his last name—was an absolute genius in math. Carl Pine, I believe—Carl Pine was his name. I believe it was Professor Pine who was his teacher. But this kid had calculus and physics, entry level, first-year freshman. He aced all of these courses. But he couldn't pass English comp. And whatever the freshman geography or history—history of Western Civ I guess. We had people like Linda Spears, Gregory Richardson, all these students went on to graduate. But Carl Pine fell by the wayside. He came in the class after me. We went out the summer of 1968 in response to the university's admissions policy and Newark policy. Both of us complemented each other. Rutgers says, no, you're not good enough. The school

system says, no, you're not good enough. Don't even apply. Rutgers says, Well, I would admit them, but they don't apply. We went out and confronted the school system over that year, '67-68.

COHEN: The Newark School System?

DONALDSON: Right. And found 100—or maybe it was 96, almost 100; it may have been 84—black students. And we recruited them. We went to the high schools.

COHEN: The BOS group?

DONALDSON: The black students. And we took them and walked them through the admissions process, and they were admitted. About 65 percent of that class that graduated, they had like maybe 20 percent of Phi Beta Kappas, over 70 percent of them graduated. We found them, and we recruited them. And we took the university steps and said, "Admit them!" We were able to do that in '68-69; that is what was the balance of power in our ability to confront a university because it increased our numbers. We were responsible for them. We tutored them, we walked through things like ...[Interference in recording] Sophisticated. And as the founding body of BOS in that spring of that second year, we confronted the university in the form of the takeover.

COHEN: In the demands and in the whole process, what role did the remedial programs play, in your opinion?

DONALDSON: Remedial programs came after the students came. We realized that if we get them in and we can't keep them, we haven't done anybody a great service. The university's response to our demand for open admissions was, I guess, two- or threefold. In terms of financing these students whom we had recruited but who could not afford Rutgers tuition, as small as it was back then, the Urban University Program was a response. And eventually when it was institutionalized, the legislature's response to our demands as a funding formula was the EOF, which is now statewide. That was a legislated response to how we fund these programs of these students that we're now going to bring into our campus. The academic response was an Academic Foundations Program which started out as the Urban University Program. And even before Urban University it was called something else. And now it's called the...eventually it was called the Academic Foundations, all of which is funded through EOF. So the academic response was let us tutor you if we think that you deserve remediation because you can't pass these entrance exams that were set up and departmentalized: English, math, I believe language. We will provide the academic supports. So in theory we've got to get the kids here. To keep them here, we've got to make sure that academically they have the foundations because there was an acknowledgement that the students in Newark were not as well prepared as students from the suburbs. And all that is documented, I guess, in court....

COHEN: There was an acknowledgement on the part of whom?

DONALDSON: Black students. Any university. That black students from urban areas where educationally and culturally deprived or disadvantaged—I believe those were the catch words back then—required some extra effort. And that's how we got the tutors in, we got to require

them to go through a remediation process if they could not pass the entrance exams. And I believe that the normal entrance examinations given by a university are called placement tests. I believe they were called placement tests. There was a language placement test, a math—

COHEN: I think so, yes.

DONALDSON: All those things were not discarded immediately. But they were used as a tool to determine who would need remediation and who wouldn't.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: And another factor was that the commensurability issue that—

COHEN: Oh, yes, yes.

DONALDSON: The population of Rutgers University, whatever it is, ought to be commensurate with the contiguous—some word—the communities that surrounded it. And it also meant that Rutgers also had to begin to admit low-income white students.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: Because they had been excluded just as blacks had. There was a difference between Columbia High School and Belleville. Or East Newark, East Side, even though it was predominantly black, not white. Irvington High School. There was a perceived educational disadvantage if you were economically deprived and white. So a factor that we anticipated because politically it was part of what we hoped would sell the package—but it was an unexpected outcome in terms of reality—was that poor white students previously excluded from Rutgers and its Ivy League image and institutional persona were now getting access to Rutgers University as well.

COHEN: Yes. You mentioned before the demand for open admissions. Was there really a demand?

DONALDSON: Sure.

COHEN: Okay. Open admissions for—

DONALDSON: We wanted open admissions for everyone who graduated from high school in New Jersey.

COHEN: But was that.... I'm trying to remember the original 12 demands.

DONALDSON: It was one of the original demands. In fact we had based a lot of the rationale because we were required to not just present demands. But we had to give a rationale that was economic, that was social, political, and everything. We had based the demand for open admissions on the model of Ohio State, as I recall. We were also required to research everything

we asked about because Bessie Hills, who was on the board of governors, would not even consider a demand by black students unless it was well written, well researched, and properly and politely presented. Which I'm grateful for. But Ohio State had a policy of open admissions. So did California essentially. And that policy said if you graduated from one of our high schools, you ought to be good enough to go into the state university. And Rutgers was the state university, even though it was Rutgers, The State University, which is the only animal of that kind of species. It was still the Queens College in mentality and institutional character and persona. But that model said that if you can graduate from our schools, our high schools, you can come to our state university. Now we couldn't get into Seton Hall like that. But Rutgers was a state university owned by the people, financed by the people. It ought not to be financed by the state for just some of the people.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

DONALDSON: That was our motto.

COHEN: Talking about the board of governors, the Black Organization of Students were invited to make a presentation to the board of governors I'm told. What were—

DONALDSON: After they knew we were coming anyway.

COHEN: Were you in the group that the presentation was made? I believe—I think Richard Roper was one of those...

DONALDSON: I don't know, but I attended—the second meeting I attended.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: See, there was a series of meetings.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: And there was not just a takeover. There had been several months—in fact a whole semester and a half of such meetings. We were at every board of governors meeting, and we would politely state our demands and state our grievances. And they would set up committees, and they would tell us who to talk to. And we would do all those things. We met with faculty members on numerous occasions. We went to faculty meetings. But the specific meeting where our demands were set forth, Richard Roper was not even on campus. Richard Roper was not involved at that time...

COHEN: So that was an early meeting that they talked about...where there was some discussion about whether students in New Brunswick were requesting that the student center be named after Paul Robeson and then there was the...

DONALDSON: Oh, that was much later.

COHEN: That was established probably...okay, yes.

DONALDSON: Nineteen sixty-nine in the Conklin takeover came after a very harried and eventful semester and a half.

COHEN: And those semesters if you can recall were—

DONALDSON: Fall semester of '68 and the spring semester of '69.

COHEN: Okay.

DONALDSON: What happened in 1970 and 1971 was almost anticlimactic. Nineteen seventy, '69-70, was filled with attempts to make the university abide by and own up to the demands that it had agreed to, the concessions that it made. It involved trying to get the legislature to fund the state university's open admission policy.

COHEN: UUV, Urban University—

DONALDSON: Urban University Academic Foundations, EOF. The first thing the university did was try to dispute that it had signed what it had signed.

COHEN: Yes. I wanted to ask... It's come up time and time again, either in the Archives and people have tried to— Was there a signed agreement?

DONALDSON: Sure. We had—the original letter of demands were signed after a night messenger delivered them to Mason Gross's residence. We wouldn't leave the building until they were signed.

COHEN: This was after the takeover.

DONALDSON: And so we had the confirmation that they were in fact signed. And I believe there were some handwritten agreements as they related to one or two. And the part that wasn't set forth in the original agreements was how are we going to fund this?

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: I'll promise you anything to get you out of the building, but how are we going to do it?

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: And those became very real problems subsequently.

COHEN: But what was your understanding—what was the agreement?

DONALDSON: Well, it would—I'd have to go to each of the original demands and say what I remember and what I can report as having been—was agreed to. So absolutes became pledges. You know we were committed to the extent practicable. I mean stuff like that. Some were actually outright agreed to. I probably would have to look at them.

COHEN: Sure. I understand. Do you have any recollection of, when the issue was presented to the—after the students had left the building, the issue was presented to the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences. Do you recall the discussion about whether the—I think it was the top 50 percent of the students would either be considered for admission or accepted.

DONALDSON: We recall and we believe we can find support for acceptance. Will be, shall be. And the faculty, of course, had not been—the faculty was put out because the university had not consulted in areas where they thought they had absolute rights to be consulted. The dichotomy was as much because people perceived these outrageous black students to be demanding these things, and the university capitulating and all this other stuff. Some people were concerned about those things. But other people were obviously genuinely concerned about academic freedoms and the role of the faculty in certain decision-making and policy issues. I remember the bitter fights with the faculty and how the faculty and the vice president or the provost....

COHEN: Malcolm Talbott?

DONALDSON: Malcolm. How Malcolm was able to cajole the vote. I say cajole because probably his own personal credibility.... I remember Henry Blumenthal's role. I remember Norman Samuels's role. I remember characters. I remember Norman Samuels's position that—we had discussions about standing.

COHEN: Standing?

DONALDSON: Standing is a legal precept, concept that in addition to saying in order to get equity, you have to do equity. It means that in order to be able to raise what is a perceived right, you have to be the person entitled to the right. I'm trying not to talk in legal terms. But standing is a prerequisite to any constitutional claims that anybody can raise. In other words, if I say I have the right to vote and the Constitution says no person shall be denied the right to vote, I have standing because I am covered by the very language of the Constitution.

COHEN: Okay.

DONALDSON: I have standing. I have a right to raise this because I am affected by it. I'm affected by its outcome of this question that's being presented. If I don't have any right and if I cannot be personally affected by the outcome of any decision, then I don't have standing to raise an issue.

COHEN: Okay.

DONALDSON: And I was one of the proponents of very strong academic achievement. I was a member of the Scholastic Standings Committee, I was a member of the Admissions Committee.

And I believe I made dean's list a sufficient number of times to raise issues of standing. I'd demonstrated. I'd marched. But I also wrote my papers for English comp and English lit. And I would make dean's list whenever I felt like it actually. And that was a deal that not only did I have with my parents: You know we won't stop you from raising the rights of people as long as you don't waste money. If you're going to college, that's your primary obligation, to do your college work. If in the process of doing that, you have these other issues that you want to address, fine. But my understanding was that people who do not maintain at least a 3.2, which kept you off probation, did not have the right to raise political issues or anything else in the context of a university setting. And that was considered conservative and crazy.

COHEN: How did it affect then how you functioned as an activist and with the other students?

DONALDSON: Well, it didn't because I had credibility at that level. I was the most radical in terms of the extremes that we would go to. If it was like go stand on the desk, go lay down, if it's take over the building, if it was like this university will not move, I was usually in that group.

COHEN: Okay.

DONALDSON: And I always resisted the people who said, Well, why don't we negotiate? Why don't we talk to them. He's our friend. And so and so and so on. I rejected those kinds of small steps. I guess because I'd come out of that in the South in the civil rights movement.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: And in order for me to do that, I had to have standing.

COHEN: Sort of like paid your dues and have credibility.

DONALDSON: Yes. No, my first semester, I.... [End of Tape #1] We were talking about standing.

COHEN: Yes. I think I understand what you're saying. You mentioned before that that semester before was a very—I think that the word you may have used was harried and—

DONALDSON: Eventful.

COHEN: Yes, eventful. And what were some of the highlights, I guess...

DONALDSON: Well, I guess the whole year leading up to the takeover was the debate that typified our decision to change from the NAACP to the Black Organization of Students. I remember the organizational meeting. We were trying to choose a name. And we had all these names, you know, AASA—African-American Students Association. I really want us to be SCABs, which was Student Coalition of Afro-American Blacks, right? And I came to find out that SCABs was a very dirty word in a lot of circles. And in union circles it was somebody who went across the picket line. And in the streets of Newark it was a lady of very poor reputation—scab. So everybody laughed, and of course we didn't become SCABs. [Laughter] We became the

Black Organization of Students. I remember Joyce Hampton just standing up and saying, “SCABs! Why those initials!? SCABs! Do you know what a scab is, sista?” [Laughter] I said, “No, I don’t.” I mean, you know.... And George Hampton went into this whole song and dance about what a scab was. “Sister, I know you’re naïve, you know.” And they were very protective of me because I was naïve in those kinds of ways. And also politically sophisticated in others. It’s responsible for me not having very many dates. [Laughter] Because people would say, “Ah, you’re a virgin.” Like a you know, But they revered it. And at the same time it was, you’re a virgin, you know. We can’t talk to her. We’ll let her do politics. [Laughter] It’s just funny what we go through. We had such camaraderie in the middle of all those intellectual discussions of fights. Folk would come to a meeting, but you couldn’t just come and say I want, I prefer. You had to rationalize it, whether it was about the teachings of Baraka; we had one or two people in there. The Cultural Nationalists were not looked on with great favor by us.

COHEN: The Cultural Nationalists?

DONALDSON: They were the followers of Ron Karenga and LeRoy Jones and Mama Baraka—Amiri Baraka—because we didn’t think they were freethinkers. There were some of us who thought of ourselves as Nkrumahists. And when I mention the Black Book and the Red Book, Red Book of course being the teachings of Mao....

COHEN: Oh, is that right?

DONALDSON: And the Black Book being the teachings of Kwame Nkrumah and were called Nkrumahists. I said, “Well, I’m not anything.” But I really thought that if I had to join a movement and be associated by some kind of ist, I would have been a Nkrumahist.

COHEN: Well, what were the ideas in Nkrumah’s writings which appealed to you?

DONALDSON: Well, there was an underlying socialism. But more than that, there was a sense of communalism. It was after reading Marx and Engels and Mao and Nkrumah and Baraka and Karinga and Charles Hamilton and Malcolm X and James Baldwin, I was very entrenched in literature, period. But I was particularly fascinated and enamored of the Negro Renaissance movement and Marcus Garvey and the teachings of Father Devine. And I studied the teachings of Lawrence Mahan [Rawlings Muhammad]. I mean I was a student of these things. But the thing that appealed to me personally that was distinguishing in terms of a political socioeconomic system was that communalism went a little further than socialism. Communalism to me and the teachings of Nkrumah advocated that there is a world view of all people as a community. Marx, for example, described tribalism in Europe. And at least a perception was that he had to have observed or have studied tribalism in Europe to underlie his notions economically and socially, communism or socialism. We felt that Nkrumah, having observed communes and a communal society in Africa, reached some of the very same conclusions. That’s why the communism of the 20th century and the socialism of Marx and Mao are not that far from the communalism of Nkrumah. The difference is that there was an African perception. And in addition to shared economics and shared social and cultural values, communalism was not rigid and harsh.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: It accepted as an underlying premise that nothing in nature exists independently of something else in nature. And to that extent, we're all dependent on everybody else. And to the extent that people can contribute, they ought to be allowed to. And that they ought to be responsible for doing so. But I was not a joiner of anything other than BOS. I was a BOSist. [Laughter] You know. And the experiences of the rural South during the civil rights movement and the urban North and the aftermath of the riots had made me pretty much a freethinker. And because I had not just heard about the South and the civil rights movement but had participated, lived in it, breathed it, and that I had gone through "the cultural revolution of the North," I didn't feel like I needed to be apologetic if I were independent.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. You've mentioned your work in the South before coming to Newark. If you could go into that in some....

DONALDSON: I edited as a teenager the first underground newsletter that I can recall historically in my hometown. And we would target businesses that treated blacks poorly or charged them separate prices. And we would target them for boycotts.

COHEN: What town was that?

DONALDSON: Quincy, Florida. I would participate with CORE workers who were left in my hometown and who came during the summer usually to engage in voter registration and that sort of thing. We would do Saturday workshops in terms of how to protect yourself, how you be nonviolent. We did voter registrations. We integrated, if you will, physically, the local theater, at least three of the very prominent restaurants. I drank from the fountains early in the movement, symbolically. I would march. If we scheduled a march and nobody else would march, nobody else showed up, I'd just march by myself. In 1987 I went back to my hometown. I was given a testimonial as an outstanding graduate of this town. And some of the very people who were on the receiving end of my demonstrations were present at that testimonial. My governor was there and my congressman was there. The business community who not only thrived, but changed.

COHEN: The governor of Florida you're saying was.

DONALDSON: The governor of Florida was at this dinner. My keynote speaker was Alcee Hastings, federal judge, who before his impeachment, was a federal district judge for Florida, who came from an area close to my hometown. He was the keynote speaker at my dinner. But anyway, we did all of that. We registered people. Personally I can remember being shot at. They shot at my house on a couple of occasions. I can remember having a double-barrel shotgun placed in my throat for registering an 87-year-old woman when I was 15 years old—14 years old. I can remember members of my family who stopped speaking to me because I would walk into businesses with FREEDOM NOW, CORE buttons. "I am registered. Are you?" buttons. And they stopped speaking to me because—under the perception that if they did that, they'd condone my activities. That's some of the stuff that we did.

COHEN: Where—this is a trite question—but where did you get the resources to face that sort of threat at 15, 16?

DONALDSON: I don't know. My grandfather was a bootlegger. [Laughter] And in the South I guess if you're a bootlegger, that means you have some social standing because you have some money. But he was by most definitions a classic Tom, Uncle Tom. I mean he didn't want to rock the boat. I mean he may have been a bootlegger and he may have money, but he didn't rock the racial boat. My grandmother, who was widowed, whose three children all went to college because she worked in the tobacco field until she was over 55 years old. My mother, who worked three jobs and went to college. When my grandmother called my mother who was by then in Newark working, to say, you know, "Make this kid stop." My mother's response, "If we had done it, she wouldn't have to do it." And my mother died with my bail money in her pocket.

COHEN: Bail money.

DONALDSON: Literally. She always kept bail money.

COHEN: Oh. Were you ever in prison?

DONALDSON: Twice.

COHEN: Twice?

DONALDSON: Carswell, who's was nominated as...

COHEN: Oh, yes, the darker... Who didn't make it.

DONALDSON: Yes. He was a surrogate judge in Tallahassee, Florida. He put us into jail even though we were kids. But he didn't make it. I don't know where it came from. My grandmother was not a militant. She worked hard. But she'd tell stories of—she was crazy. She slapped this white person who slapped my uncle who eventually became a chemist for American Cyanamid. He just retired and moved back to Florida, as a matter of fact. He worked in a white funeral parlor. And in my hometown there were like three Jewish families and blacks. They bore the brunt of our discrimination.

COHEN: The blacks and the three Jewish families.

DONALDSON: Blacks and the three Jews. And there was a kinship and a bond. But my grandmother's supervisor in this tobacco field was a Jewish person. And she pulled a knife on him because he hit somebody on the butt, one of us. And she slapped this white person who had beaten my uncle because my uncle didn't get to work on time—something. And she had a reputation. And you know, local folklore has it: If you're Jewish, she will pull her knife on you, but she will stand and negotiate. If you're white and you hit one of her kids, she will kill you. And it was about.... It does say something about the kinship between blacks and Jews in the South if not anyplace else. But it's said that even in the South, there are people they didn't mess with. My grandmother was one of those. I can't ever remember my grandmother not having money, borrowing anything from any neighbors. I remember she was a loan shark. She'd loan you a quarter, and you'd paid her 50 cents back.

COHEN: People didn't mess with her.

DONALDSON: No. But I mean the people in the community who never had anything, they knew that if you needed or your children had to have something for school and you didn't have the money, my grandmother would loan you the money. But my grandmother also got interest on her money. That's when I say loan shark I mean it as...

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes. Sure.

DONALDSON: But I remember that she sold cosmetics on the side. And she worked for as long as I can remember. When she finally stopped working, it was because my mother and my uncle, the year I graduated from high school—well, actually she had to quit work a couple of years before that—but they sent her money every month because she wasn't old enough for Social Security. And they just said, "You can't work anymore." And my mother and my uncle sent a check every two weeks. They took care of me and my grandmother. That's where it comes from. I don't know.

COHEN: So when you brought these experiences, really gut-wrenching experiences to say the least, to your work on campus—I mean where did you see yourself vis-à-vis the other students in the organization? In terms of position, in terms of action.

DONALDSON: In retrospect?

COHEN: No—either way. I mean, you know....

DONALDSON: In retrospect I feel that I had an heir and sense of superiority, politically. Things that students imagined in our movement at Rutgers, I had lived through in the most severe forms. If you're 14 years old and somebody puts a double-barrel shotgun to your neck, you understand very easily that the least of what could happen to you is that you die.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: If they moved, somebody jerks into them and poof! This was a daily confrontation for some of us. And at 14 years old to literally have a double-barrel shotgun...to have seen and know what a double-barrel shotgun would do because of hunting. Everybody had them, blacks and whites, in the cabs of their trucks. And so when I came to Rutgers and for folk to say that you have to be patient, that blacks were willing to be moderate in their struggle, in their demands, was met by an impatience with me and three or four other people in the organization. I had lived through having people lynched. Not literally. I don't recall anybody in my hometown being lynched. I remember people in my hometown being killed by whites without any kind of accountability. I remember that there were incidents that I had that I mean you walked on the sidewalk, and somebody confronted you who was white and they were in your same space, somebody had to move. I remember having a reputation for not being the one that moved. And having been expelled from high school, in fact, for a couple of days because I

didn't move for somebody's kid. So these things were not things that I felt were unreasonable first. Because I had that Southern Victorian ethic.

COHEN: Southern Victorian ethic.

DONALDSON: Yes, yes.

COHEN: What is that?

DONALDSON: Well, it had to do with prudence and fairness and deservedness and paying dues. It said that if you were going to get married, you should wear white, and you should deserve it. So therefore you didn't have a promiscuous life. And a lot of black girls in the South labored long and hard and harshly under those kinds of expectations from your family and your community. Nice girls did these things. So Southern Victorian says that we were somewhat prudish and conservative in our lifestyles at that time. Part of the ethic said that it doesn't really matter who you are, what race you are. You have to be fair. If it's wrong, it's wrong, and that comes out of the civil rights era, moral righteousness perspective that.... You don't ask for it even in our demands. Things that are not right, that are not fair, that create a disparity that is not equitable. And it rejects notions of equality, which is a strange position for somebody who's an advocate of civil rights. It embraces some sense of equity.

COHEN: I don't understand.

DONALDSON: Equity as distinguished from equality. And I don't remember the rhetoric associated with it. But I remember the thinking that all I really wanted is the opportunity to be as best I can be, to do as best I can, with every opportunity available to help me do that. If that means that a university in this setting has to give me more, whether it's tutoring, remediation or whatever, then the university should do that for me. But if I need less, right? I should not have to compensate by either pretending that I'm a lesser person or have a university describe me as lesser. Give me what I need. And if that means I don't need as much financial aid, then I don't deserve it. If I don't need remediation, don't put me into a bind where I have to come through Urban University. If the doors of equality at the university are to be opened at all, they ought to be open to equity. If this person is disadvantaged and black, and that disadvantage is both economic and cultural, the university owes me a greater debt because I have the same right to at least try to walk out of the doors of the university as prepared, as self-assured, as learned as the person who walked in beside me. If I walk in and my disadvantage is lesser, I don't need it. I mean I came in here in the top 10 deciles. I know that linking verbs do not take direct objects and what dangling participles are. And when I walk out, I can walk out with a joint degree, and I could have named sociology or Black Studies or philosophy or calculus, believe it or not, if I had chosen. But don't hinder me and don't label me. That's what equity is about. Equity is to each his just deserts, according to his needs. Equality is something that, in retrospect, is impossible to achieve because people aren't equal. Our needs and our circumstances aren't equal. So I had these philosophical notions back then because I was weird. Because I read and I thought and I wrote. And I was particular about I's being dotted and T's crossed and that infinitive phrases are appropriate. You know, so then I ...I became the program director.

COHEN: Yes, I understand you did quite a bit of writing. Okay. The demands were then formulated.

DONALDSON: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: And negotiations were being conducted. And who were you conducting negotiations with? Was it primarily Malcolm Talbott or—

DONALDSON: I don't believe so. I believe Dean Blumenthal was in on them. I believe before we went to the board, over the course of a semester and a half—

COHEN: Before the takeover then.

DONALDSON: Yes. I believe Norman Samuels was one of the teachers who was involved in interaction and exchanges with students. There was a faculty committee. There was an ad hoc committee. I forget what it's called and what its name was. But there were coalition meetings between the student groups that sometimes involved faculty members as well. And it was to arbitrate and I guess negotiate what we could all come up with that represented changes that were consistent with the rising tide of student assertiveness, if you will. Because just as we were black students going through theirs, white students were going through theirs, too. They were challenging the war. They were dissatisfied. They were almost guilty to be in a college where some of their friends were in Vietnam, in a war that they protested. Blacks were late in arriving into the intellectual posture best set for us by Martin Luther King. That is, that all war is bad, especially a war that has us killing people for no reason. The Vietnam War was perceived that way. I guess blacks felt it was somebody else's business. Yes, we had a civil rights agenda. How can we be concerned about civil rights in Vietn—and not in... We're over here struggling. And only after some reflection and interaction with other student groups did we come to understand that it's not different.

COHEN: There was interaction with SDS? I mean the....

DONALDSON: SDS, sure. The Weathermen.

COHEN: Oh, yes?

DONALDSON: The Panthers.

COHEN: Were there meetings or just—I mean actual meetings called?

DONALDSON: Sure.

COHEN: Or just rapping on campus.

DONALDSON: And exchanges in public forums.

COHEN: Of course again before the takeover.

DONALDSON: Sure. There were meetings almost weekly in the campus center. The rooms were packed. [Break in recording]

COHEN: Do you remember any of the students of the—

DONALDSON: Sure. Eric the Red [sp?], Alan Silverman.

COHEN: Oh, yes.

DONALDSON: Mike Imperiale—I can't....

COHEN: Okay.

DONALDSON: Sure. I remember Eric the Red [sp?] came—and he was at the law school—he came and painted all cinderblocks.

COHEN: Was that the Students for a Democratic Society?

DONALDSON: Yes. There were students who were Young Americans for Freedom.

COHEN: But that was a conservative organization.

DONALDSON: Yes. They were all there. We had exchanges. And believe it or not, there was not so much divergence as people would think.

COHEN: Between?

DONALDSON: Between the conservatives—I mean it was a matter of dialog and talking. When Young Americans for Freedom and the people who were the Imperiale kind with the—

COHEN: Telephone pole.

DONALDSON: Telephone pole. It was all over, and he sent those people down. They understood that we haven't said that white people should be excluded. You should have been backing us because you represent the poor white who but for some miracle couldn't have come into these doors either. This admission policy said any, any. Not black, not just black. Of course the emphasis was ours. Puerto Ricans, for example, came in the aftermath of all that, and said, We're going to have what you've got. [Laughter] But there was not so much divergence when people sat down and talked to each other.

COHEN: What was Malcolm Talbott's role on the individual...I often hear that Malcolm Talbott was the chief negotiator.

DONALDSON: He wasn't chief negotiator.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

DONALDSON: He was the nucleus that represented the best that the university had at the time. He was also deceitful, and he was shrewd, and he'd tell us one thing, and he'd tell the other groups another. Everybody loved what he said, but nobody, you know, thought about it. He was our protector, but he was paternalistic also. I mean he had students whose rent he was paying, you know.

COHEN: Whose rent he was paying?

DONALDSON: So we hear. To keep them, you know, in good standing. And people— He had discretionary funds, you know, and he did a lot of favors for students. I'm not one of them. But he did me other favors. He would listen, you know. Me, my need was like to have this intellectual orgasm. You know all this exchange. [unintelligible name..Gambia?] the student— she was assistant dean of students—was a tremendous ear. She died subsequently. But she was one of the best friends I made during my time period at Rutgers. Bob Curvin was on the scene. Peter Jackson negotiated for the students during his time, probably to a greater extent than anybody else. And Peter's now teaching at the university.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: Pete was an outsider. And we still don't know how he became involved. But he became almost the glue because he was able to articulate for the students in such a way as the divisiveness among the students regarding whether we should take the building or not take the building, whether that was too radical, too extreme. He allowed everybody to have some sense of dignity, whether they were outside standing in defense of us or whether or not they were with us inside.

COHEN: His role then was to moderate these discussions?

DONALDSON: He was the primary negotiator and the person who best articulated. Not Bob Curvin, whom the students had not trusted in the end. Bob Curvin was perceived to be—because he was our advisor, officially, and because we revered him—but he was a moderate. In retrospect those of us who do not see him kindly in our political assessment of him. But he was our advisor. We could not tell him, for example, what and when we were going to do specific acts because there was a tremendous distrust of him in the end. And we had to rely on ourselves. Harrison Snell was actually the chairman of BOS when we took the building.

COHEN: Oh, that's right.

DONALDSON: And he was very weak, and he was not strong politically. He had standing academically, though. He was Phi Beta Kappa. And we thought that he would be safe to lead us during that time because he was not a political animal. But he had standing. That was real important to us.

COHEN: Yes, I see what you mean.

DONALDSON: He had standing, academically.

COHEN: Yes, like you said before. Yes.

DONALDSON: That's the only reason he was chosen.

COHEN: What was your difference with Bob Curvin?

DONALDSON: The difference that we had with Bob then is just that the majority of the students—the majority of the students—felt that if he had known what we were going to do and when we were going to do it, he would have tried to prevent it. His was an intellectual militancy. Ours was reconciled by a certain knowledge that we would do whatever we had to do physically, actually. [Break in recording]

COHEN: ...record again. Now, a time must have been reached when the negotiations weren't leading anyplace to the satisfaction, at least, of the activists in BOS. How was the decision arrived at to take over the building? What was the process of selecting a building and making decisions—if you can recall that?

DONALDSON: We were in an ongoing debate maybe a month about what we would do if the university and the board of governors rejected our demands. And the feeling was that we had to save face, and we had to exercise whatever power we had, power that we had attained. We had to do something. What to do? We brought up the issue of debates, and we had meetings with the BOS executive board and following those meetings, meetings with the general membership. I remember a great deal of conscious scrutiny given to who was a member of BOS and who wasn't.

COHEN: What was the membership then?

DONALDSON: Well, I think you had to be dues-paying, and it was a nominal fee.

COHEN: I mean how many students that were actually members?

DONALDSON: Probably about 30.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: As I recall. Probably in good standing about 30.

COHEN: Okay.

DONALDSON: I remember people suggesting that we boycott classes. I remember people discussing whether or not we would have marches and rallies. And I remember the more extreme of us saying if our demands are not met, the university ought to be unable to function, period. And I remember that it was not my singular authorship of that notion. But that there were a

group of us who, for whom, any means necessary to shut down the university was a very real, very real option. And a preferred option. But we were an organization of members in reason. And what we tried to do was.... After the debates were all over—and they were very, very heated, rigorous, I mean all-night sessions. I can remember leaving meetings at three or four o'clock in the morning, only to return at eight o'clock in the morning to more meetings. We met with community groups after presenting our demands—prior to presenting our demands. While the demands were being presented, the whole time we maintained contact with the community. A large measure of that contact was facilitated by Joe Browne's relationship with very strong community-based organizations like NAPA. And we went to CFUN, I recall, which was Committee for Unified Newark. They had a group associated called United Brothers, which was like the mental and leadership cell of the Committee to Unify Newark. And we told the United Brothers what we were planning to do without giving them the specific activity. But it was that we were going to shut the university down. We wanted them to know about it before it happened. We wanted their support. And we thought that if we were bold enough to do something that required their support, we ought to have enough respect for them to go to them prior to this activity, giving them the option to support us and not based on what we presented to them as opposed to what might come out as we were doing it.

And it worked in the sense that both groups supported us and were very active and vocal in their support. We had to arrange certain supports. We knew because we were afraid that a violent confrontation would take place, we had to establish rules. Once we had made the decision that we were going to do something, we couldn't tell the rest of the membership what we were going to do. All we told them was that they had to be prepared. And folk who said we we're down no matter what, were the folk who ended up on the inside. And the folk who equivocated and we thought weren't sure, were the people we didn't tell until we were inside.

COHEN: Oh, I see. Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: And we had to do that. We had to secure plans from the physical plant. One of our students was a work-study student at this physical plant. And she stole the plans that told us where tunnels were, told us when the guards patrolled, when they came underneath the library, and how they made their rounds and how much time we would have between security checks and the guards making their rounds. And we had to get food. I think we tried to take enough food for three days. So when people came, we told them to bring these care packages, you know, to last them a couple of days. And to make whatever arrangements with their families. And we usually did—only three or four of us knew. And then at the end we called those four or five others that we each were responsible for calling and say, you know, this is on. And we had to make sure that the Panthers.... We didn't really arrange with the Panthers. The Panthers came because it was big news, and everybody came out to support us. A welfare rights organization brought us food which they couldn't get to us because we couldn't unchain the doors. When the Young Americans for Freedom broke the window, that allowed the welfare mothers to pass us food in. So that was an unexpected bonus their doing it.

COHEN: That's right. Uh-huh.

DONALDSON: We had rules that we had to come up with about behaviors, and we had to have a rule prohibiting any firearms because Utica had gone down with guns. And we were not going to do that.

COHEN: Utica? Refresh my memory.

DONALDSON: Cornell.

COHEN: Oh, oh, oh. Yes.

DONALDSON: At Cornell. Columbia had gone down previous to us, but we held the building longer than any school had held it at that time. Somebody later held their spot—Davis or someone within months. But at that time we were in the building longer than anybody had been in a building occupying it. We were afraid of violence. We knew that Spina (Director of Police Dominick Spina) and the local police would come in.

COHEN: Oh, you really were....

DONALDSON: We knew that. Yes. Because part of the riots and what had happened in Newark were challenges to Spina's authority and the police. I mean so very few board demands and stuff like that were based upon responses to real violence against the community inflicted by the police. It took some planning. I mean we secured the building in less than four minutes. We had purchased and knew exactly how many chains for how many doors. They were precisely cut so that there was no play in the doors. And they had to be installed. We had to get there, lock the doors, barricade ourselves in, where there is time certain, and get to the course so that the guards could not enter from any of the underground. So we had to secure those places also. We had set up camps for females and males. And we had to watch so nobody took all the food. You know just little things.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: And we were prepared to stay. But we really thought that they would blow up the building. We were very afraid at some points.

COHEN: That? The authorities?

DONALDSON: The authorities would blow the building up, bomb it. That they would break through the doors and charge us and shoot. Because the riots, in the sense, the visions of battleships. I mean other people, National Guard people. [Break in recording] Put the police on us. For real. And that between Imperiale and the Newark police and the state police, we were certain that we were going to die. [Laughs]

COHEN: Now when you made the decision to go into the building, was that your expectation?

DONALDSON: We thought that some of us physically be hurt. But we had tried to—[brief side conversation] We thought that we might have some physical confrontations. But to minimize

that, part of the militant, let's-confront-them, be-wild-and-crazy contingent, they really did want to bring in guns. Again, we were an organization of members of moderation, even among the group inside.

COHEN: So there was then sentiment for bringing in weapons on the part of some of the students.

DONALDSON: Sure, sure. And they were outvoted. I did not advocate weapons. See there was still enough of me that was the voice of moderation and pragmatism that did not support armed struggle at that point. There were others who did. And moderation won out as a practical matter. To this day I'm convinced that somebody had a gun probably. They just didn't...let us know.

COHEN: They just...

DONALDSON: But I knew it to be true.

COHEN: Now, it was a peaceful outcome. What do you attribute the peaceful outcome to?

DONALDSON: One being right. Knowing which demands were capable of being agreed to, of understanding the nature of institutional boundaries, institutional racism, power, authority, any of that doesn't float around in thin air. It walks around in real people. We had done a very detailed study of where the power in the university for decision-making was concentrated. We knew the institutional character and history of Rutgers as if it had been a course. We had actually, consciously, studied these things. We knew who the brokers were. We knew how much Bessie Hill could do for us, and how much she couldn't.

COHEN: Who were the brokers?

DONALDSON: In the sense of outward presentation, Hill presented our demands and advocated for us. Mason Gross and the chairman of the board of governors at that time, can't remember his name. Mason Gross was very weak, but he was the president of the university. And that had a power prerogative. Our only hope was that we would find him sober. He was perceived to be an alcoholic. We knew that he drank.

COHEN: Mason Gross you're saying?

DONALDSON: Mason Gross.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: I mean ultimately he had some problems associated with having drunk a long time. But notwithstanding, his contributions and how history at the university will regard him, you know, in fine arts. He was not a bad guy. But he was the president of a university at a very, very difficult time when it wasn't just what black students were demanding. It was partially what Newark and Camden were demanding from this center of partriarchal whatever—power—in the name of the university that said we are Rutgers, the State University. Diploma says Rutgers, the

State University. It doesn't say at Newark, at Camden. But we treat New Brunswick differently. We have houses for fraternities that are finer than whole departments, the housing of departments, in Newark. They have a country club literally, I was amazed. We went to New Brunswick and saw the greens, the lawns, so well-manicured. The mansions that were frat houses. Cafeterias that were—and dorms! So the university was feeling all these tensions, not just the tensions from us. We were the most vocal, and we gave a lot of folk the impetus to breast other concerns. But the whole notion of Newark as a stepchild is very real and the politics of the university at that time. And resources, though much more abundant than they are now, had been earmarked for other kinds of priorities. I mean part of the response that got the Englehardts and these folks to contribute and endow the university to some extent to support the business school and the law school and all that stuff in Newark was a response to some of the tensions in New Brunswick at that time to treat Newark a little differently. The building program right now, I think, is a direct result of the tensions, to treat Newark differently, that began at that time.

COHEN: You're saying that the impetus to push to treat Newark differently came out of the student movement? Is that part of...?

DONALDSON: Behind the student movement, but not necessarily. Certainly I would not claim only the black student movement. See, the university was experiencing a student movement generally. I mean there were committees at Newark who did nothing but go to the board of governors meetings talking about the discrepancies of funding and resources in Newark between Newark and New Brunswick. Then Camden got involved. And it just happened at the same time that black students organized in Newark, we established relationships with the black students in New Brunswick and Camden. They had never done that before. We went down one week in Newark. Three days later there was New Brunswick, and three days after that there was Camden. That was not happenstance. That was based on real coalitions and alliances. We had a lot of meetings all over regarding how those things would happen. The students in New Brunswick were in their own right independent of what we were doing, pressing their concerns also. But when Newark—and we were thought of as the bad guys, big rallies, you name it. These after all were students at Douglass and Rutgers College. They still were a little better than Newark, you know. Those kinds of distinctions sort of went out the window when we got to confront common ideological, intellectual enemies. And the institutional concentration of power in New Brunswick made our eyes turn to New Brunswick at some point.

COHEN: Again, we're back in Conklin Hall and still the question of what the outcome is going to be, this other danger of police coming in and, you know, doing something. I guess my question would be who were the people who were instrumental in preventing such an event? You said Mason Gross was one of the— How did they defuse this whole thing?

DONALDSON: Well, it really became states' rights almost in the positive for us because Malcolm Talbott and Mason Gross said: This is state property. This is our university. You will not have a Newark riot on our land. You cannot enter except by our permission. The state police is the official arm of the state university in terms of enforcement issues on state property. And the university declared that Spina could not—

COHEN: Oh, okay. This is legally...

DONALDSON: Malcolm Talbott told them, “Spina, you can’t come.” They came in fact. He made them get off.

COHEN: Oh, okay. Could you go into any further detail on that? Any knowledge of the nature of a negotiation between the university as the state agency vis-à-vis the city?

DONALDSON: Well, there had been some other dialogs between the university and the Newark police because of incidents that had occurred, though not widespread I don’t believe, and I don’t believe highly physical. But the university’s regard for the Newark police was no different than the black community’s regard. It had to do with abuses. And in a real political sense, I blame the university officials—Malcolm, Dean Heckel—because they, remember, had set up a whole vigilance at the law school. Dean Heckel was the dean at that time. It was sort of like a headquarters. I mean there was Malcolm, there was Bob Curvin and community groups and the black law students whose role was very, very critical and very, very key during those three days of negotiations in terms of rights and perceptions and strategies. And I don’t know how, but people tend to minimize that. But the law school became command center.

COHEN: Oh, for negotiations.

DONALDSON: For negotiations.

COHEN: Well, of course Talbott came out of the law school and Dean Heeckel.

DONALDSON: Dean Heeckel. It was convenient because we were right across the street.

COHEN: So once the university made it plain to the Newark police department that it did not want their good offices [laughs] involved in the affair, that they had to withdraw? Was that the case?

DONALDSON: Well, they didn’t withdraw. They just couldn’t enter the building. And they may have given ultimatums like if they’re not out by such-and-such time, we’re going to storm it.

COHEN: The police were saying that?

DONALDSON: Yes. This is Newark, I mean. And Imperiale, if you recall, was a leader of the group with the poll.

COHEN: Yes. Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: So that vision of another riot.... I mean if we, who were the best of this community in the eyes of many— [brief side conversation] I’m trying to think. The university— what were we talking about, the police?

COHEN: Yes. If you can recall just where—just how—the police were prevented from coming into the building.

DONALDSON: But there was a decision by the university structure that they could not come on our property.

COHEN: Yes. Mm-hmm. Yes, yes.

DONALDSON: And the vision of the university being a scene of another riot was operating to our benefit. Bloodshed in Newark was not going to be tolerated again. And the community on the other hand was not going to stand by. I mean they stood vigil the whole time, community groups, students from other colleges, all these other colleges, the high schools around here. Everybody came down, and they stood vigil. And they were watching, and there was all this media. The media—it was a true media event. If they were to hurt us, everybody believed that there would have been new riots in Newark.

COHEN: What brought the students out?

DONALDSON: A real belief that we had won. That's the only thing that could have.

COHEN: What led you to believe that?

DONALDSON: The 11 demands had been signed, and it was okay. That Pete Jackson read them to us over the phone, and Bob Curvin made his appeal to us. And we thought that we had won. So we came out.

COHEN: Is that the agreement we were talking about before?

DONALDSON: Yes.

COHEN: Now, after the—

DONALDSON: In fact, we wouldn't leave even though they represented to us that they were signed until we had a copy of the signed documents.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: Somebody had to have a copy. And that meant that somebody had to go, and they took a state trooper. I believe Malcolm used a state trooper and went to Mason's house and got him to sign them.

COHEN: And the document was signed by whom? Can you recall?

DONALDSON: Mason, Malcolm, and I think Pete Jackson.

COHEN: Did the students sign the document?

DONALDSON: I believe Pete Jackson or Joe Browne signed it.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. After the students left the building, then there was some concern that the demands weren't being met. There was a subsequent—

DONALDSON: The faculty really. The faculty meetings that followed sort of crystallized the issues for everybody. So what did they sign? What did you get? What did they give you that they have authority to give you? They don't have authority to say what I will teach and what I won't and dah dah dah dah dah. No. Because we have a faculty union here and agreement. They didn't consult us. And how are you going to fund them? And those practical issues had not been resolved.

COHEN: Was that the reason for the demonstration on the 13th? I think it was the 13th of March. And then there was a campus reception on the 14th.

DONALDSON: I remember five straight semesters following—I don't know why five; maybe it's less than five. Nineteen sixty-nine, '70, '71 just happened to have been an era of student activism and heightened political awareness on the part of students, all over.

COHEN: Yes.

DONALDSON: And one semester we struck because of the war. Another one because of Dow Chemicals and the presence of Englehardt Industries as an endowment source for the university and their presence in South Africa. So every semester.... And because we had been supported, I think we had a real sense of political obligation to support other people. We had a very strong relationship with SDS and some other organizations.

COHEN: Was there any time in the negotiations before the takeover of the building when you felt that it would not be necessary to take over the building?

DONALDSON: No. Me personally? No.

COHEN: Okay. So at what point in the negotiations....

DONALDSON: Well, I won't say to take over the building. There was never a point where I thought without some kind of direct confrontation would there be any possibility of achieving the demands, see, what hurt was that our demands initially were so simple: the right of a citizen of New Jersey, of Newark, where this university's located, to come to school. It was that simple to us. The right to not be excluded because of where we go to high school when we had no control over what the high school offers. They were very righteous issues to us. And when you tell somebody...to say no, the faculty and the board of governors to simply say no to something so basic was just—if it had been puffed up, you know, where we had excesses. But it was a very raw demand that really boiled down to what was right. In fact what was right ended up being the common denominator for other faculty members who supported us in the end, as opposed to any political or ideological characterizations of the era, the proceedings, the demands. Did we win or

did we not? Were they signed, were they unsigned? Who had them, how are we going to fund it? Who you going to get to teach it? How are you going to hire these extra people without them being tenured faculty members? How can you hire people to teach them who aren't—who don't come through the faculty and faculty committees? Who are going to be the departments? Who are going to chair the departments? We need Black Studies. What is Black Studies? Whoever heard of such? Is it a discipline? Is it something that, you know, we establish it and let people audit? Do we give credit for it? How much academic credit do you give to the history of Africa, black literature? How valid is Kanti Cullen [sp?] when we could be studying Yeats?

COHEN: You're saying these are all questions that people—

DONALDSON: These were all questions that—

COHEN: That they were throwing at you?

DONALDSON: That people considered and contemplated as part of how we negotiated and resolve the crisis.

COHEN: I see. So this was....

DONALDSON: They were very substantive questions that had not been anticipated by anybody.

COHEN: And these came up in the course of negotiations.

DONALDSON: Sure.

COHEN: All these specific things.

DONALDSON: Sure. And I could name 50 others. But those are some.

COHEN: When the decision was made, was it a question of the university not satisfying the demand for numbers of students being admitted? Was there a critical point before the decision was made to occupy the building when the students said no? Was there an outright rejection over the numbers?

DONALDSON: There was an outright rejection.

COHEN: I mean did it come up—

DONALDSON: In our assessment—

COHEN: In what form— Yes.

DONALDSON: In the board of governors and the language that they adopted.

COHEN: What was that vote, if you can recall?

DONALDSON: I can't recall.

COHEN: The board of governors—

DONALDSON: Said “may,” and we wanted them to say “shall.” And it had to do with who the audience focused on the resolution would be; as opposed to being broad, as we wanted it, it was very narrow.

COHEN: Oh, so the board of governors in response to the demands that the students....

DONALDSON: Part of it was the response they made in the actual votes that were taken.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

DONALDSON: And the more important part was their failure to act on the language and demands.

COHEN: Of?

DONALDSON: That we had presented. We had given them deadlines.

COHEN: I see, Okay.

DONALDSON: Remember there were so many deadlines during this time.

COHEN: So it was by, in other words, you got—

DONALDSON: It was as much their failure to act as it was the inadequacy of the actions they took.

COHEN: That they took. And when you say “they,” you’re talking about the board of governors.

DONALDSON: Board of governors and the faculty at Rutgers in Newark, which is the local hierarchy or the local power structure. We had.... If students today knew as much about the chain of power, the limits of power, the form that power takes at the university as we did then, most of the problems that these students are encountering now, they would not have. Part of it is their problems are, of course, that those of us who took those bold actions did not complete our task, and that was to make sure that the history, lessons of history rather, were taught, preserved, for the students who would follow us, for whose benefit we had taken those actions. Because we were, remember, already students. We didn't have to fight for admission for ourselves. We were fighting for the admission of posterity. But part of what.... [Break in recording] [End of Tape #2]

[End of Interview]

Edited by Gideon Thompson