

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

An Interview with

VIVIAN SANKS-KING

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

November 19, 1991

INTERVIEW: Vivian Sanks-King

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GILBERT COHEN: This is Gil Cohen. This is Tuesday, November 19, 1991. I'm meeting with Vivian Sanks-King at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, where she is senior staff attorney. Ms. King is a graduate of Newark College of Arts and Sciences, Class of 1970, and of Seton Hall Law School, Class of 1985. [Break in recording] Okay, we are back with Ms. King. And we were talking before, and I was asking if you could give us a biographical sketch of your academic career, background, your professional career, that would be most helpful.

VIVIAN SANKS-KING: I'm not sure how far back you want me to go, but I'll start with the fact that I was reared in Newark, attended Newark public schools, graduated from Southside High School in 1966, which is now known as Malcolm X Shabazz High School, and entered Rutgers University in Newark in 1966...one of a handful of black students to come in that year or any other year prior to that, for that fact. Graduated in 1970. I believe there were six or seven—my memory may be foggy on this—but I believe there were six or seven people who graduated out of the 11 that came into my class in 1966. As you said earlier, I graduated from Seton Hall Law School in 1985. So there was a big gap in my education. And I frequently talk to young people—and older people—about the fact that you can achieve any aspiration you have academically no matter how long it takes. My reason for not going on to professional school immediately was I was married at the time, and I was raising a son; those things were more important to me. I always wanted to attend law school, always wanted to be a lawyer. And it was something that my parents encouraged even over that period of time during the gap. And so it took me longer than most, but I did achieve the goal.

I'm practicing here in Newark. All of my work experience has been in the City of Newark for the most part, with the exception of a stint in Savannah, Georgia, for approximately a year and a half where I attended graduate school in Georgia. Not completing a degree because my goal was a law degree. So although I took some different roads to get there, I ultimately got it, and I'm very happy with the practice that I'm currently in. I specialize in health-care law; and working for the university is a dream come true. It allows me to combine my past work experience as a hospital administrator at University Hospital, something I did prior to going to law school with a chance to couple it with the law degree that I now have. It makes me marketable, and it makes me also enjoy the different ethical issues that I get involved with, as well as the more mundane contractual stuff that I do on a day-to-day basis on behalf of the university.

COHEN: What did you major in at the College of Arts and Sciences?

SANKS-KING: I majored in political science. And I'm happy to say that one of my academic advisors, Norm Samuels, is now the provost of the university. And we have kept in touch over the years. During my time in the Political Science Department—it's kind of hard to go back 21

years—but I certainly can remember Yael Ferguson and also Cecile Stolbof, two people who had a lot of influence on me during the time I was there at the university. Very encouraging professors in terms of your ability to take that political science degree and market it into something other than just working in government service; for instance, pursuing the law degree or pursuing any vocation where strong communication skills were necessary. The political science degree, as far as I'm concerned, and I say this from sitting on law school admissions committees over the last six or seven years, the political science degree is not as valued as it was during the period of '66 to '70...and probably up through the mid-seventies. It's considered almost a weak major. When at the time I was in school, it was considered a very strong major.

COHEN: You mentioned, well, the help, I guess the advisement, that you got from Norm Samuels at Cecile Stolbof. Could you go into that a little bit? Just how did they help you? What was the quality, the character of the help that they gave?

SANKS-KING: I would say the quality of the help was that they could tell, as most freshmen or sophomores tend to be, I was very confused about what I wanted to do ultimately once I obtained my degree from Rutgers, knowing that because of my own personal situation—namely being married—that I was probably not going to pursue an advanced professional degree immediately upon graduation. They were able to give me some concrete suggestions as to how to focus my taking of courses so that I wasn't into taking esoteric international political sciences courses when I knew that I really planned to stay in the city and become a contributing citizen and become involved in local politics. They were accessible, which is not something that I can say for most of the faculty members currently at the university. I don't know if that's true with most majors. I never had any trouble reaching my academic advisor and felt free to go to Stolbof, Ferguson or Samuels for personal advice.

COHEN: How would you assess the quality of the education you received at the College of Arts and Sciences? Let's say...let's start with the teaching, the quality of the teaching. Across the board.

SANKS-KING: Well, since I had nothing to compare it to at that time, [laughter] I would have to say that it was wonderful. On a more serious note, now that I've been out in the work world and have also attended a professional school—and other schools in between that time—I would say that the quality of teaching was at the highest par; it was excellent. The student-faculty ratio was also good at the time I attended Rutgers. And I'm not sure what the ratio is now. Looking back, things always tend to look a little brighter. But I certainly don't remember extremely large sections. When I say large, I can't remember being in a political science section that had maybe more than 50 or 60 students. Now that may be the typical-size class now. I don't know. But I certainly have colleagues that attended colleges and universities where the ratio was 100 to 1 to the faculty. And you don't have the same sense of access and feeling that you're more than just a number in the classroom. I think that the education I got—not I think, I know—that the education I got from Rutgers puts me toe to toe with any other degreed individual. I have been able to hold my own. My communication skills, developed while at Rutgers, were strengthened. And I've always felt confident that I can speak well and write well, and that has stood me in good stead in terms of employment opportunities. My first job out of Rutgers was a teaching position. I quickly moved on from that into a planning position with the Newark Housing

Council. And every position after that was a position that required me to do extensive writing and extensive public speaking. And I think that Rutgers prepared me to do that.

COHEN: What did you think about the course content, the actual subject matter, the depth of it?

SANKS-KING: Well, I thought.... [phone rings] This is going to be on your tape.

COHEN: It's okay. It's no problem...Alright. If you wish. It's entirely up to you.

SANKS-KING: I thought that the course content was adequate. I'm becoming very thoughtful as I'm talking to you.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Please do.

SANKS-KING: Certainly I was pleased with the course content as it related to my major. However, I thought that the university could have offered courses that would have been beneficial to me in a cultural sense. At the time I came, there were absolutely no courses that dealt with black or African-American history, culture, or anything of that nature. Before I left, I believe maybe the second year after I came, Bob Curvin was teaching a course called Race, Poverty, and Protest. I will never forget it. It was a pleasure to register for that course because it meant not only would I be take a course that might offer some insight into societal problems that I was facing every day; it was also one to be taught by something that was a novelty to me, and that was a black professor. He's the first black professor that I had at Rutgers. Fortunately, before I graduated, the university brought, oh, Clem....

COHEN: Oh, Clem Price.

SANKS-KING: Clem Price on board. Thank you. And I was able to take his history course. It was a wonderful feeling to be in a classroom and sit there and be able to see someone that you could consider a role model. Not just an individual who's concerned about you and accessible to you, but also someone that you could hope to emulate at some point. And someone that you could be proud of. It's a very rare thing—it was rare then. And I don't think the rarity has changed that much, particularly at Rutgers. I know we've done a lot to increase the numbers of African-American and Latino faculty, but the numbers are still dim.

COHEN: You mentioned the course that Bob Curvin taught.... I think it helped you...

SANKS-KING: Race....

COHEN: That helped you in dealing with societal problems that you mentioned. How did it help you deal with societal problems?

SANKS-KING: Well, first of all it gave me a framework to understand that some of the things that I was feeling had a context and had a name. You have to remember that I was very young at that time. I grew up in Newark. So things that we commonly considered to be common race problems that people are familiar with were not that familiar to me. People now look at Newark

as a very segregated city or entity. But I grew up in a mixed neighborhood in Newark over in the South Ward. And I did not consider that I was a victim of racism. Nor did I consider that I was receiving a somewhat less than equal education to other individuals within the city, even though my high school was predominantly black; certainly my junior high school was completely mixed. That was Clinton Place Junior High School. And so the Race, Poverty, and Protest course really began to give me some insights into the psyche of racist individuals and how to deal with some of the problems that I was beginning to come into contact with on the campus but didn't really know how to handle. And they were not just how do you get along with your fellow students on the campus, but how do you deal with students who don't understand that you have a cultural history and past just as rich as theirs. Those are some of the types of things that he touched upon in the course. He also provided specific readings to us that gave us some insight into the psychological aspects of blacks and whites that made it difficult for them to relate to each other. And so in a very real way, having that knowledge enabled, I believe, students to go back and take a look at...perhaps rethinking their relationships with individuals and not just casting them in a you're black, I'm white type of situation.

COHEN: Readings. What readings can you recall?

SANKS-KING: One of the readings was *Rage*—I think that was the name of the book—by Price Collins [??]. I may have his name incorrect. I think that was the name of the book. It was...I'm trying to think of an appropriate word—moving, I guess, kind of experience to read about experiences that other blacks have had with racial problems. They were quite different from anything that I had even contemplated. I just never felt the kind of experience that was set forth and outlined in that book. My only real exposure to what I would consider hard-core racism would be during those summers when I actually visited grandparents in the South, in Florida. And even then it was a pretty sheltered experience. And with a few exceptions, perhaps, going to the movie and actually sitting in the back of the balcony, which is something that doesn't come to your conscious fore as you're older, I really didn't remember until I started reading the book *Rage*. And those feelings began to come back and the anger about perhaps being considered less than you should be considered. Really getting these consternation. I have to say that I was raised by very loving parents. Came from a solid home and was encouraged to do anything I wanted to do and become anything I wanted to become. And I think that that also had a lot to do with me not being as exposed as some people might have felt, some of my colleagues at that time, to racism. Newark was quite a different place then.

COHEN: Talking about your colleagues, I mean when you came to the college in '66—

SANKS-KING: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: —there must have been at that point, according to what I've been reading, about 60 black students.

SANKS-KING: So they say.

COHEN: So they say.

SANKS-KING: I'd have to say "so they say." I never—if I had to give an estimate, I would say that there were in fact not 25 black students.

COHEN: Not 25.

SANKS-KING: I never saw 60 black students. They in fact may have been counting students in the school of pharmacy. I don't know. I would be very surprised if any of my other colleagues that you talk to could remember 60 black students in 1966 on that campus.

COHEN: Uh-huh. When you came, did you join the NAACP or the ...?

SANKS-KING: Immediately.

COHEN: And was Richard Roper the president of that chapter at that time?

SANKS-KING: Yes, Richard Roper was the president. I joined immediately. I've always been active in community organizations, so it was a natural thing to gravitate toward an organization that at least was concerned about espousing some of the goals that were important to black students on that campus at that time. And it was a socializing mechanism. The campus was not as we know it today, and many of our classes were over on Rector Street, Washington Place.

COHEN: Yes. That's right. You were '66 right before the big move really. Things had just begun to ...

SANKS-KING: Exactly. We were all spread out, so it was not a unified type of campus. And so belonging to the NAACP—or any club but particularly the NAACP—gave you an opportunity at least maybe once a week or once a month, I don't remember how often the meetings were, to really interact with students who had similar interests as you did.

COHEN: What was your perception and the perception of your fellow students in the NAACP of the Rutgers admissions policies, specifically in Newark? People talk about it?

SANKS-KING: In fact, we did talk about it. I think I'm sitting here trying to be delicate about it, but I won't be.

COHEN: Oh, don't be.

SANKS-KING: I thought they sucked. [Laughs] Okay. To be perfectly frank. The university was not at that time geared, motivated, or willing to go out and recruit. They considered themselves to be an Ivy League school. That's the gist of that attitude even today. And even if they were, it's really beside the point. The point I'm trying to make is that they saw no need for outreach, to bring blacks or Hispanics into the mainstream of the university. And we were very concerned about the minuscule numbers of students for two reasons: Number one, we felt that that campus was expanding, and it was expanding at the sacrifice of community people by taking land. And that it had an obligation, an affirmative obligation, to give something back to the community, namely admitting students and preparing them to become strong contributing

members of this community. There's no question that we, with uniformly, as a group, felt that something had to be done and something drastic had to be done. Now, speaking for myself, even at the time that I held those feelings, I really was not sure what efforts had transpired prior to my coming. I do know that in my own admissions process—and I'm sure that many of my colleagues have shared this on tape—that I was discouraged from applying to Rutgers University. I was number eight out of a class of 365 students at Southside High School. Indeed I was a competitive student. But I was encouraged to apply to Howard, to Fiske, and to Spellman.

COHEN: By your counselors at the high school.

SANKS-KING: By my counselors at the high school. Now, Rutgers could certainly take the position, well, we're not responsible for the fact that counselors steer students, black students, to the historically black colleges. Our position was that Rutgers really had an obligation to do some serious outreach, namely recruitment in schools, and to identify those students who had the potential to be successful as a student and who had a good chance of graduating. Our later demands, as it related to open admissions, was an attempt to correct an historical problem and to open the gates of the school, as you will, to all students whose parents were contributing to the tax base of Rutgers University being here in the city. Also, in '66 when I came, Essex County College, I don't believe...it was not even open.

COHEN: I don't think so.

SANKS-KING: So in fact Rutgers was the only educational institution in the City of Newark that students could avail themselves of a college education. Of course they could go to the surrounding colleges, which were then teacher colleges. They were just changing in '66. I was accepted into the four special or trial programs where they were changing to become liberal arts schools: at Montclair, at Kean, and I forget what the other schools were at the time. But the other colleges were basically teacher-training colleges. And if you didn't want to become a teacher, your options were somewhat severely limited if you were not going to be accepted to Rutgers. One of the primary reasons I chose Rutgers—first of all, even though I was discouraged from applying, my father felt that I should apply, that I could get in, and that if I wanted to go to Howard or one of the historical black colleges, my family would be more than happy to support that decision. But he felt that I should apply so that, number one, I would know that I was capable of being accepted; and secondly, he felt that there was absolutely no need for me to leave the state to get a quality education. As it turned out, I was indeed accepted, and...I lost my train of thought.

COHEN: Were you aware at the time of any efforts on the part of the faculty to reach out to students in the schools, any effort at all?

SANKS-KING: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. There was certainly no effort to reach out to students at my alma mater, which was Southside High. And I had friends at Westside, Barringer, even at Central High right across the street; I was not aware of anyone walking over saying, Give us a list of your potentially strong candidates. Not your best and your brightest. But your potentially strong candidates and let us work with them and encourage them to come to Rutgers. There was no effort at all, that I knew about.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

SANKS-KING: And therefore one of the things that ultimately happened was the demand that they place some blacks in the Admissions Department specifically to do recruitment in the area high schools. And from that we got Jay Thomas and Lincoln Lawrence and ultimately the Urban—it was the UUD Department. I forget what it stands for now.

COHEN: Well, now it's Academic Foundations Department.

SANKS-KING: Now it's Academic Foundations and commonly known as EOF.

COHEN: Well, just the funding, the state funding. The Academic Foundations is the academic arm—

SANKS-KING: Exactly, exactly.

COHEN: —of the EOF. And it's really pretty broad-based.

SANKS-KING: And so it was a long time coming to see significant increase in the number of students. I think there has been significant increase. But I still think the university can continue to do more to bring those students who have the potential to make it at Rutgers into that educational system.

COHEN: All right, you were in the NAACP. What was happening at that time on the campus, in the country, to encourage the students to drop their membership, to return the charter of the NAACP and found the Black Organization of Students?

SANKS-KING: BOS. There was a strong feeling on campus among all black students that the NAACP was not providing the leadership that was necessary on a national scene, and certainly as a local organization here in Newark. And that for us to continue as a charter organization of that body was not doing anything to propel us into action. The NAACP had a different had a different stance than the one that we wanted to take, and that was to kind of work through the system, you know, be nice, don't stir up the pot kind of attitude. Clearly there was a movement sweeping nation at all campuses, not just by black students, but students, period. There was student unrest. And we were caught up in that same movement. Goals being different perhaps in terms of trying to have open admissions and things that were of special concern to black students. But we were part of the student unrest movement. And membership in the NAACP was really a contradiction to activism at that time. It was not considered an activist organization at all. It was more let's keep the status quo. We didn't want the status quo. And we did not want to be in a position where we had to become entangled or embroiled in a battle with the NAACP over not following its methods and policies. And so therefore a group decided that it was appropriate and timely to start the Black Organization of Students.

COHEN: But how was this done? If you can remember the beginnings of the....

SANKS-KING: It's difficult to remember the specifics of the beginnings. But certainly I can remember about 12 to 15 of us being at a meeting and just saying that we had had it with the NAACP methods. Not with the leadership because Richard Roper was the president of our chapter. Richard was going to—I believe Richard was graduating the year that we started BOS. I may be off in time. Or he was simply not running for reelection for whatever reason. And it was timely that we make that change then. Of course Joe Browne came on the scene and was a good catalyst to stir us all up in terms of things that we should be doing; and that in order to do these things, it would be difficult to do them as members of the NAACP. So at a small meeting, one of our monthly meetings, we decided that we would create a new entity called BOS. We elected officers, and the organization was formed.

COHEN: How did they arrive at that name?

SANKS-KING: Well, there was a movement during the early sixties, as you know, to move away from the term "Negro," which was another bit of consternation for us, that we belonged to the NAACP, which had not moved to the realization that most of the country was moving toward referring to our race as "black." Okay? And I think that the name was a natural evolution over the desire to be referred to as black students. It was an organization forming. Therefore, Organization of Black Students would not sound... OBS sounded a little strained, and BOS sounded easier to deal with as an acronym. Thus the birth of BOS.

COHEN: Yes. What were the students and yourself reading at that time? Who were the—Well, let's ask the question: What were you reading that you can recall? Who were the authors who were influencing the thoughts of students at the time—and you?

SANKS-KING: John Hope Franklin, Franz Fanon, W.E.B. DuBois. Some of us were reading LeRoi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka, in terms of poetry. And in fact before I graduated, we did have a black poetry class at the university. I'm trying to think who else. I think we were all reading *Crisis Magazine* even after we dropped our affiliation because the articles were usually very timely and gave you a good synopsis of what was going on in other areas of the country. It's a difficult question.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes. At the time...you mentioned before the student activism in the country. Was there any—at the time that BOS was formed—was there any kind of contact with the....

SANKS-KING: SNCC?

COHEN: Well, I'm not thinking of the leftwing student organizations such as SDS. Was there any contact between the Black Organization of Students....

SANKS-KING: There was some contact, but there was a lot of dissension and debate within BOS as to the nature of our association with SDS and other organizations such as that. Many of us felt that they were absolutely too militant, and we weren't sure just how far they were going to go. So it really became a bone of contention amongst our own membership as to the nature of that. I'd have to say some of us were very close to members in SDS, and some of us stayed as far

away from them as possible. There was never any formal affiliation between the two organizations. Now, I do believe that we worked cooperatively on several projects. And those projects had more to do with tutorial.... [Break in recording]

COHEN: We are back. Alright. Okay. Good.

SANKS-KING: You were asking about SDS.

COHEN: Yes, the SDS, if there was any contact with them. You said you were involved in tutorial programs with them. That was the extent of it, or....

SANKS-KING: I would not say that was the extent of it. But that's what I remember. And I certainly also remember some working relationship as it related to dissatisfaction with the editorial board of the *Observer*, which was the student newspaper. And an effort, a joint effort, on our part to convey that dissatisfaction first in writing, then through disruption at the editorial board meetings. And I think there was even an instance where there was a trashing of the office. Who was involved in that? I'll never say.

COHEN: Do you have any recollection of what the objections to the editorial policy were? What was the content of it?

SANKS-KING: Well, the editorial board first of all was not really conveying what was really going on at the time in terms of student unrest. They were covering what I would call namby-pamby type stories, you know: The French Club met here, this organization's doing that. [Laughter] But it wasn't really giving a picture to the student body of what the primary concerns were of a number of organizations, not just BOS or SDS. I think that students at the time were so caught up in the movement to do something—most organizations were focused on change within the university and without also in the community. And the *Observer* just wasn't a part of that without being dragged into it.

COHEN: Talking about the community, how did the riots in Newark in July of 1967 influence the students' thinking and approach to organization and action? What was the effect of that on specifically on your campus?

SANKS-KING: Well, I think that the riots were a rude awakening to our students, particularly the black students who lived in the community where the riots were taking place. I can remember vividly—my parents did not live far from what is now Irvine Turner Boulevard but then was Belmont Avenue, which was the site of a lot of the activity that was going on. I used to take the bus to school. So I came out one morning not even knowing that a riot had started because it had started the night before. And when I came out, there were National Guards people on the corners with guns. I mean it's a frightening experience. It's like what I imagine being in a hostile territory must be like. It had a strange effect on me in that I tried to go on about my business as usual, as though nothing were taking place. Because even when I saw the Guards people there, I still was not aware that someone had been killed the night before that had precipitated this. I did take the bus down to school against the advice—because there were on bullhorns, you know: Go

back into your house. Stay in your house. Only to find that most of my colleagues had not come to school that day.

COHEN: You were taking summer courses.

SANKS-KING: Yes.

COHEN: Oh, yes. July of '67.

SANKS-KING: Yes. Went back home to find my father, who was a staunch NAACP member, out passing out flyers, you know: Be calm. Stay in your house. Don't become involved in looting. And some members of my family actively participating in the riot. So it was a strange experience to say the least. In terms of how it affected the students, I think it increased our desire to make Rutgers more responsive to the needs of the community, by again raising that same discussion of the closed nature of the institution, and forcing a more openness of the institution in terms of admissions and also simple utilization of the facilities at the school. We felt that community organizations should be able to come in and hold community meetings on the premises of the university. And I think all that ultimately acted as a prod for us to move toward more—what is the word?—a more spirited kind of action, rather than just saying, well, this is what we should do about this. And maybe we should talk to this person about this. You know, let's take matters into our own hands.

Shortly thereafter we started talking amongst ourselves about the non-receptiveness of the university administration to proposals that we had submitted to increase the admissions presence in the public high schools, and the parochial schools for that matter, in the area. And that if they were not going to be receptive to nice proposals and nice letters, then perhaps some other drastic alternative might be the appropriate method to follow. At that point a committee was named, and we drafted a first set of demands. Now, I don't remember the exact month that this took place. It had to be maybe October, shortly after the riots.

COHEN: Oh, okay.

SANKS-KING: No, I'm sorry. It had to be the following year because the takeover was in '69.

COHEN: Yes, the first demands I saw had a date of February. Whatever.

SANKS-KING: Okay. And I think that those demands kicked around for two or three months as we debated again amongst ourselves as to whether that was really the appropriate route to take; whether we wanted to do something which at that time was considered very drastic: To say to the university, we demand that you do so-and-so. That's what I mean by....

COHEN: Oh, just by the language itself—

SANKS-KING: By the language itself.

COHEN: —was considered a drastic step, something that NAACP probably would not have done, is that what you're saying?

SANKS-KING: Exactly...exactly. But after discussions with our advisor, Bob Curvin, and also with one of the then members of the board of governors, Mrs. Hill, we felt that we were taking the right step and that perhaps this was the only way to really bring to the attention the seriousness—bring to the university's attention—the seriousness of our mission: that we intended to increase the numbers of students, and we did not intend to have five additional students admitted as a token of their good faith to us. That we wanted to see movement, and we wanted to see real movement, and we wanted to see movement now.

COHEN: Do you have any recollection of how the group came up with some of the numbers that appeared in the demands? Something, let's say, 30 percent of the student body I think was one of the figures that came up. Any recollection at all of numbers?

SANKS-KING: I don't really remember why we chose a specific number. I do remember that one of our demands in terms of percentages had to do with reflecting the community's population at that time.

COHEN: Yes. When they were talking about community, was there any attempt to define what the actual entities, municipal entities, were at that time?

SANKS-KING: Yes. Every place that Rutgers had a campus. So we were talking about obviously Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden. Our demands were not just for Newark.

COHEN: But I mean were they including, for instance, when you say Newark, were they including students, let's say, from East Orange or from South Orange or from Maplewood or Irvington?

SANKS-KING: No. Initially our demands were geared towards students from Newark. We were not thinking about East Orange, Irvington...though later on that was incorporated into the demands.

COHEN: That's what I thought, yes.

SANKS-KING: It indeed was. But the initial drafting was a focus on Newark students. We were specifically looking to bring students who were enrolled in Newark high schools into the university.

COHEN: How did that broadening take effect? I mean why did it broaden that way? Do you have any idea?

SANKS-KING: That's an easy answer.

COHEN: Are the influences there?

SANKS-KING: Yes. The easy answer to that is that we had a number of students who were not from Newark high schools.

COHEN: Okay.

SANKS-KING: Who were also participating. I don't know whether...it wasn't brought to our attention and we didn't move on it initially when we drafted the first set of demands simply because they weren't in the room or whatever. But certainly we had students who resided in East Orange and in Montclair, where we had a number of students who were black. And so it was a natural type of expansion because of self-interest on the part of other students.

COHEN: Yes. What—we were talking before about the literature. You mentioned several authors. But I want to sort of maybe follow up that question. At this time, when demands are being generated, BOS was... If you can recall, what ideological movements were working to give this framework, to give this impetus, if you can recall?

SANKS-KING: I'm not sure what you mean by ideological movements.

COHEN: Well, as an example, I've been speaking to people, for instance, about some of the nationalist movements. I mean one of the names that came up in discussion was Ron Karenga as an example.

SANKS-KING: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Or Malcolm X, of course.

SANKS-KING: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Martin Luther King. I mean these are different approaches to ideals. Amiri Baraka. With certain approaches to nationhood, to militants, to.... On the other hand Martin Luther King would not be an approach that....

SANKS-KING: Whether non-violence...

COHEN: So obviously there were differences. I mean so the question is: How were these ideological movements shaping thoughts and actions at the time, if you can recall that?

SANKS-KING: I would think that the activism or the movement by the Black Panthers had a lot to do with our interest in becoming more outspoken, more pronounced, more demonstrative in terms of our demands. And while there was still some level of respect for Dr. King and his movement, no one was interested in a nonviolent movement. Dr. King represented, at that time, to us a continuation of the NAACP and its goals and its methods and kind of protecting the status quo. When in fact, in retrospect, that may not have been the case. But to young idealistic students who wanted to do something that kind of put them on the map and make the university sit up and take notice, nonviolence was not an avenue that we were looking to embrace. By the same token, we were not advocating violence. But we were advocating that BOS as a group do something to

make our presence felt on that campus, and that was not just going to be by presenting a written document of demands.

There was also just a movement—a protest—across the country, not just the Black Panthers, but SNCC was still involved—highly active. And a number of our students came out of that SNCC involvement and protest in the South; Richard Roper, for one, came from the South. Vickie Donaldson came from the South. So we had all of that mixture and diversity in our group to kind of propel us. Even those of us who may have wanted to sit back and kind of fall back into the NAACP framework, I think, without question, were affected by what was going on. Few of us wanted to be—and this is my opinion—associated as in the vein or the ideological stance of the Black Panthers. They were seen as like the ultimate, far group out there. But certainly we began to embrace some of their stances in terms of you have to be mindful that you need to become involved in the politics of the situation and translating that into politics within an academic institution, which is something difficult to grasp in and of itself. And without the assistance of people like Curvin and Ms. Hill, would have been even more difficult for us to grasp.

COHEN: Alright. We've mentioned, of course, the names of the BOS president and Bessie Hill time and time again. Starting with Bob Curvin, I mean what role did he play?

SANKS-KING: Advisor, mentor, role model, teacher. He played a number of roles, either because he wanted to or because he was the only one there and had to be responsive—or was responsive; I don't say he had to be responsive. But indeed tried his best not only to do an excellent job, but being responsive to our concerns as an organization—I'm speaking of BOS now. He guided us even as we were considering dropping the NAACP charter. Bob Curvin was a CORE activist. So he came out of a different framework from the NAACP himself, and was able to share with us that you really can embrace more than one view at the same time. What you need to focus on is the goal that you have. And you can have several methods of achieving that goal. It was important that he shared that kind of framework and thinking with us because had he not, I think that the group would have been on dangerous ground and footing because we would never get 20, 30 members, whatever we had, to think alike on each issue. But if we all embrace the same goal, we can work out some kind of agreement as to how we're going to achieve that, you know, just how demanding are we going to be?

COHEN: What was the goal?

SANKS-KING: The goal was always to increase the admissions, to make the university more responsive, and to create a true presence of black students at the university.

COHEN: What was he advising then in terms of tactics? Or was he advising in terms of tactics?

SANKS-KING: I'd have to say that he didn't really advise in terms of tactics. He waited for us to come and ask, What do you think about this? What do you think about that? And then he would comment on what we were about to do.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes. And Bessie Hill? What was her role?

SANKS-KING: Her role was to make sure that we didn't embarrass her as a member of the board of governors. [Laughter] I say that in jest, but in all seriousness.... I remember when we visited her at her apartment because she wanted to review our list of demands. And she wanted to review them to make sure that we were presenting something that was cogent and well written and that really conveyed the sense of what we were asking for. And she tore it apart. [Laughter] She literally tore it apart. And said, "This is not grammatically correct. This is not really what you want. This is what you want. And if you ask for it this way, you're liable to get nothing else but this. You're foreclosing other options to yourself. And so she really helped set the framework for redrafting not once, not twice, but probably three or four times those demands. So that it was a polished product—at least in our estimation—that was ultimately presented to the board of governors.

And she was right in doing that. I mean in retrospect I think that we can all see that at the time some of us—speaking for myself—you know like, look, do we need this? We want to tell these people what we want. And if there's a comma out of place, you know, or a misspelling, what is the big deal? I'm not sure how truly aware and cognizant we were of the fact that we needed her to kind of usher these demands through. I think the feeling against—speaking for myself and what I sensed from other students—you know, we're going to go in there and tell them this is what we want, and they're going to give it to us. And we don't really need an advocate on the board of governors to push this through for us. Nothing could have been further from the truth. To have her as an ally, when she was comfortable that she had a document that was presentable, not that she necessarily agreed with all the demands, she didn't try to get us to change the substance or the essence. But just to get us to truly understand what it is we were asking for. Okay? So that she could be comfortable with the presentation.

COHEN: Were you present at the meeting, the first meeting with the board of governors where the demands were presented?

SANKS-KING: I don't believe I was.

COHEN: Were you at any of the meetings, have any recollections of any that you attended?

SANKS-KING: Scarce recollection. I was at one meeting, I know. But I don't know if it was the first meeting; I'm not sure.

COHEN: Do you have any recollection of what happened at that meeting, the tenor of the give and take, what was happening then?

SANKS-KING: No. Not at all.

COHEN: Uh-huh. When the demands were being hammered out, who locally.... Well, alright. Who was the group negotiating with at the time on the campus here?

SANKS-KING: Malcolm Talbott.

COHEN: Could you describe the tenor of those discussions? How did those discussions go?

SANKS-KING: I would describe them as—now, I wouldn't use the word "cordial": I started to say cordial. I would describe them as paternalistic. That's how I would describe them. And by that I mean, well, we don't want them acting up to the point that we have the newspapers in here. Alright? So the best thing we can do is sit down and listen to them, and listen like we're really concerned about what they want. Okay? Then we'll go back and figure out how we might be able to give them some of this, but enough not to change what it is we believe Rutgers really wants to do. That's the sense that I got. And I tell you the number of meetings at the old Washington Street...I guess it was not 15 Washington. The old building that is now the museum headquarters.

COHEN: Fifty-three, I think.

SANKS-KING: Fifty-three, thank you. Which is where Talbott's office was. He was always attentive. I have to really choose my words carefully. I started to say "respectful," but I don't really mean that. But attentive. Always made you feel as though he truly were listening to what you had to say. But at the same time let you know that, well, I have to take this back to a number of people, and I have to take this back to a number of people. And we'll see what we can do. Initially, Talbott really didn't treat—although we denominated that list of demands—he didn't treat them as demands. It was like, well, now, I'm going to sit down and talk to you about your concerns. And we're going to see what the university can do. And always gave me the sense that he was willing to give in some fashion, but you never really knew how much.

COHEN: Okay. Who else were the students talking to in Newark?

SANKS-KING: Other than Talbott?

COHEN: Yes.

SANKS-KING: The admissions director—and I can't remember his name right now.

COHEN: C.T. Miller...Miller and Swab were the two names...

SANKS-KING: Swab is who I'm talking about.

COHEN: Yes. Actually, in other words, the assistant and....

SANKS-KING: Okay. Swab is the person I remember.

COHEN: And Swab was the director.

SANKS-KING: Okay.

COHEN: Did you attend any of those meetings?

SANKS-KING: Yes, I did.

COHEN: How were they in those discussions? Could you describe the tenor of those discussions?

SANKS-KING: As noncommittal, unconcerned, and let's get this over with as quickly as possible. That's how some of those discussions. It was: This is a bother. We know our jobs. We're the admissions professionals here. And we're doing everything that needs to be done at this point. Unless we get direction otherwise, we're not changing what we do.

COHEN: Is that what they said? Unless we get directions otherwise.... Or that was the....

SANKS-KING: That was the sense.

COHEN: That was the sense.

SANKS-KING: That was the sense that was given to us on that. You didn't get a feeling of attentiveness as I described the meetings with Talbott. You certainly didn't get a sense that they were even listening with a serious ear to what we had to say. It was more, I felt, disdain. As though someone said: Meet with them. Not necessarily do anything, but meet with this group. Okay? And you've met your obligation once you've met with them.

COHEN: Do you recall how many students were involved in these discussions? Was it the....

SANKS-KING: Well, I can remember two meetings with Swab. At least six or seven students were involved in those meetings. And with the meetings with Talbott—there were a number of meetings with Talbott—I would say that there were never less than six or seven, but perhaps as many as 15 students involved sometimes. Because we would have a delegation, and someone would be responsible for being the spokesperson. And someone was responsible for taking copious notes of the exchange that took place with the spokesperson. And then there were designated people who could respond to certain issues in terms of being accurate with the information. Again, this was sound advice that we received from Bob Curvin and Bessie Hill, that you not have everybody trying to respond and/or attack the administration.

COHEN: So after these initial discussions with Talbott and the admissions people—Swab and Miller—what was the next step? I mean how did it escalate, if that's the word?

SANKS-KING: I think escalate is probably a good word. I think it escalated because it became clear to us that the university did not intend to make any significant changes in its operations as it related to admissions. Now there may have been one straw, so to speak, that broke the camel's back. I cannot remember what that was. I simply remember that there were two or three meetings where we discussed the need to do something more drastic to continue to enter into discussions with the administration. And a suggestion for a takeover of the building was made. That in itself caused some problems within BOS because....

COHEN: You mean the idea of taking over a building.

SANKS-KING: Of taking over the building. Because students obviously were concerned about being dismissed from the university if they—or suspended or whatever, some disciplinary action. Being subject to some type of disciplinary action if they participated in that. And it led to some very disgruntled work sessions for us. And I don't want to keep calling the same names. But again, Bob Curvin and Bessie Hill were very helpful in pointing out to all of us that you don't need your entire organization to participate and be in a building. Because who is going to then negotiate the demands? That seems like a simple thing. But when you're in the throes and the heat of it—and you're also students who haven't done this before—you don't really give a lot of thought or even know to give thought to a division of labor such as that. It could have been a very negative, divisive problem. Did not turn out to be that way because there was a realization after several meetings that there were a number of reasons, other than being frightened, as to why people would not want to participate by actually being in the building.

COHEN: How did the students decide on who went in and who stayed out? How was that decided? Or roughly 25 students or thereabouts who went in?

SANKS-KING: Who went in the building.

COHEN: Is that an accurate number of— McCormack in his book has...maybe he says about 25. Whatever.

SANKS-KING: I was going to say I think it was less than 25. I would say more like 20, but I don't know, I don't really know.

COHEN: Sure. How was that, as you said, division of labor arrived at?

SANKS-KING: Well, the first thing was a call for volunteers obviously. That's the simplest way to do it. But even within that call was a request that there be a representative sample from each class. So that there'd be freshmen in the building, sophomores in the building, juniors and seniors.

COHEN: Okay.

SANKS-KING: And that people on the negotiating team also be represented in like fashion. So that there would be a sampling from each class.

COHEN: Negotiating team. Outside of the building?

SANKS-KING: Outside the building.

COHEN: And the occupiers were—

SANKS-KING: Inside the building.

COHEN: Inside the building.

SANKS-KING: Exactly. And then we set up a communications network where someone was deemed to be the spokesperson for communicating with those individuals inside the building. In addition to that, the charge to those who remained outside the building was to line up support from the community. So that the university did not feel that it was just dealing with a gang of students who had absolutely no support whatsoever beyond the walls of the university. And that support indeed was forthcoming from the community.

COHEN: So when it came down to it, your role was to be on the negotiating team on the outside?

SANKS-KING: That's correct.

COHEN: You volunteered for that?

SANKS-KING: That's correct. I volunteered. I was also asked. There were probably six of us that worked constantly to hammer out the demands. And those people who participated in the writing of the demands, who were not in the building, were certainly needed on the negotiating team because you understood the history of how the demands came about. And were a valuable resource in that light.

COHEN: What recollection do you have of the meeting—if there was a meeting.

SANKS-KING: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Where the decision was made....

SANKS-KING: To actually take it over?

COHEN: To occupy the building.

SANKS-KING: I remember a lot of argument back and forth as to whether that was the right course of action. And I also remember that it was almost unanimous to take it over, because we saw no other way to bring sufficient pressure to bear to make the.... [End of Tape #1]

COHEN: We're back. And we were talking about the decision-making process which finally led to the occupation of Conklin.

SANKS-KING: And I was saying that it was almost unanimous to do that. Because no other avenue previously explored had yielded what we wanted.

COHEN: Now you say it was unanimous, but there was a lot of discussion.

SANKS-KING: There was a lot of....

COHEN: Now what was the nature.... If there was discussion, I'm assuming there was also disagreement?

SANKS-KING: Definitely.

COHEN: What was the nature of the disagreement if, on the other hand, as you just said, there was unanimous....

SANKS-KING: The disagreement really stemmed from whether a takeover was the most effective way of conveying our dissatisfaction with the movement of the university toward meeting our demands. It didn't take much, I think, to convince most of the members of BOS, after you looked at everything that had been done over a period of at least 18 months, maybe longer, that, you know, we followed the correct procedures. We did what was advised. And it still yielded essentially nothing. And as you looked at other campuses moving toward the takeover mode, we all knew that something different had to be done. The disagreement was did it have to be that drastic?

COHEN: Yes.

SANKS-KING: Okay? And the answer eventually, after much discussion and much disagreement, was, yes, it had to be that drastic. The reason for the long discussion about it is that we didn't want to enter into a takeover where half your membership didn't support the takeover. And so there had to be sufficient discussion to get people to feel comfortable that this was the only thing to do. Not just the right thing to do, but the only thing left to do in order to bring sufficient focus to the problem. And that was achieved.

COHEN: In the negotiations with, well, Talbott and Swab and Miller, did you have any conversations at all with Mason Gross? Or am I missing something?

SANKS-KING: You know I can't remember whether...I don't believe Gross actually came up to the negotiations. I believe he sent a representative. And one of those representatives was—I'm blanking on it; I can't remember her name.

COHEN: Well, what were these people telling you at the time? I mean you made demands. Were they just sitting there and saying, Well, we'll see, we'll see, we'll see? Or were they talking about reasons why things couldn't move as rapidly as the students wanted them to move? Were they talking about standards, admissions standards, or things like that? Were they saying....

SANKS-KING: Indeed they were.

COHEN: Were they just stonewalling? Or were they giving you, you know, reasons why things couldn't move this rapidly?

SANKS-KING: They were stonewalling without question. But once the occupation of Conklin occurred, there had to be a series of calls made from the Department of Higher Education to

Gross and other administrators at the university to get this problem taken care of and to get it taken care of quickly. And because of that, there were at least two nights I know that I spent in Ackerman Hall in negotiations with other members of the team and the university to try to get to the bottom of the situation. One of the things that we were all unanimous about was that we were not leaving, the group that was in the building was not going to leave that building until there was a firm commitment, a real commitment, to significantly increase the open admissions. There were other small demands about our own dissatisfaction as present students on the campus, about not having enough instructors of color and about not having sufficient courses that we would like to be able to avail ourselves of in a cultural sense. But the real crux of the issue, the real focus always remained the admissions issue.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

SANKS-KING: And ultimately realizing that the students were—I started to say that the students were not going to come out of the building. That’s not quite true. Feeling that there were going to be complications with the students occupying the building—and by complications I mean the fact that there were some discussions about calling in police and guard to disperse the students out of the building. And knowing that the community was ready to almost riot again if anything like that took place because they were out there on the line—there was a picket line in front of the building. Some people referred to it as a picket line. I guess it was really a line of protection because the community was out there. Clergy were out there. And they were not going to let the police cross that line to force the removal of those students. That whole atmosphere, that whole environment, I think, prompted the university to act more quickly than they ordinarily would have.

I’m sure that they could have outwaited the students. But there was a fear that there was going to be an eruption beyond what was presently just a simple occupation of a building. No one wanted to see a repeat of something that even closely approximated a riot. But realized that there could be some real danger if they allowed the situation to escalate. And there were a number of forces brought to bear to encourage the university to settle this issue. The only way they could settle the issue. The only way they could settle the issue, the only way they could get the students to even think about coming out of that building was to make a commitment to open admissions. And they in fact made that commitment, a commitment, by the way, that they didn’t keep. But they made it.

COHEN: On the question of open admissions—now I’m confused because just going over the original 12 and then 11 demands, I didn’t see “open admissions” as one of the original demands. And yet in one of the documents which came out I think while the students were in the building, under unmet demands, there is a demand which in effect was what one would think of as open admissions. And that’s what I’m confused about. Do you recall that the bottom line, as you said before, was open admissions.

SANKS-KING: I recall it as open admissions. I haven’t reviewed a copy of the demands in ... when. But just from our conversation, when you mentioned that there was a percentage set forth in the original demands....

COHEN: Yes, yes.

SANKS-KING: The discussion, no matter what was in the original demands, the discussion and the intent was to open admission to any Newark high school graduate that wanted to avail themselves of an opportunity to attend Rutgers University.

COHEN: And this was the agreement which brought the students out?

SANKS-KING: The agreement was a little less clear than that. And it went something like this: The university will work diligently with BOS and with members of the community to, in effect, make sure that any student that wishes to gain access to the university will be given an opportunity to do so. That's not quite the same as saying you're going to have open admissions. And it gives you some room to go back later—and when I say “you” it gives the university—some room to go back later and say, Well, we didn't mean this. We meant this. But certainly the feeling of the students in the building was that they were not coming out without that commitment.

COHEN: Without that commitment.

SANKS-KING: It was the understanding of the negotiating team that the university was in fact committed to opening enrollment for students not just in Newark, but at all of the other campuses where Rutgers had a school in place.

COHEN: Now, the agreements—

SANKS-KING: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Can you clarify the whole question of whether the agreement was signed and by whom?

SANKS-KING: If I could....

COHEN: Because this comes up....

SANKS-KING: I can't clarify whether the agreement was signed or not. I've been asked this many times. And the honest answer is I don't know. I've never seen a signed copy. I've seen correspondence from Chancellor Dungan incorporating some of the demands that the university agreed to and saying that, you know, we need to work on this, and we need to propose legislation that will address this. And the board of governors needs to pass a resolution addressing this issue. But to see a signed document? No. And if there were a signed document, I think I would have seen it because I certainly was there when they went in, and I was there when they came out. It wasn't signed at one of those negotiating sessions. That should be my caveat: It was not signed at one of the negotiating sessions at which I was present.

COHEN: Now, after the students came out—

SANKS-KING: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: —what was the perception that they had of the next step vis-à-vis the faculty? Did they know that there was a next step vis-à-vis the faculty?

SANKS-KING: No, they didn't. The students inside the building didn't know there was a next step, and the students negotiating didn't understand that there was a next step in terms of adopting the commitment—is that what you're referring to?

COHEN: Yes, yes.

SANKS-KING: Made by the university?

COHEN: Yes.

SANKS-KING: No.

COHEN: You weren't advised by anyone either....

SANKS-KING: I wouldn't go so far as to say we weren't advised. I would say, if we were advised, we either didn't hear because we were focusing on We're victorious; we've gotten what we want. But certainly there was no real awareness that some of these demands now had to go through yet another process of faculty acceptance, absolutely not. That's my recollection. Absolutely not.

COHEN: When the students found that out, that that was the next step, what was their response?

SANKS-KING: [Laughs] That they should take the building over again and stay in there this time. And so there was some real assurance that additional gains were not going to be played. The feeling was that a game had been played to get them out, because there was no talk about, well, you know, the nature of an academic institution is that the faculty has to approve A, B, C, D. I don't remember any discussions like that during the negotiating period.

COHEN: Okay. So the students then discussed whether to retake the building. Was there actually serious discussion?

SANKS-KING: Yes there was.

COHEN: In a formal group about that?

SANKS-KING: In a BOS meeting.

COHEN: You attended that meeting?

SANKS-KING: Yes.

COHEN: Could you describe the tenor of that meeting, what was going on there?

SANKS-KING: I would say the tenor of the meeting was one of concern. You know like what have we done? Do we really have a commitment or don't we? And if we don't and the purpose of the initial takeover was to force their hand, then the only thing to do is to go back in there and force their hand again by taking over. I would not say in terms of the tenor that there was a lot of—as much dissension as there was before about the initial decision to take over the building. Because the feeling was, at this particular meeting, that there were other avenues to follow. That our position was we had a commitment. And we didn't care what kind of machinations or mechanisms that the university wanted to try to take this commitment through. They had made a commitment, and we would pull out every stop to make sure that they honored that commitment. By pulling out every stop, we were talking about getting the Urban Coalition, the Greater Newark Urban Coalition, involved; namely Gus Henningberg. Getting CORE involved. Getting the welfare mothers involved. In other words, creating such a ruckus through protest or otherwise that the university would be forced to figure out a way to either get the faculty to approve what they had already committed to or not take it to the faculty. We really didn't care about that.

COHEN: Was this meeting held—can you recall—before the faculty vote, which voted to consider, if you recall, the question of accepting or considering....

SANKS-KING: I think it was held before the faculty vote, but I'm not sure.

COHEN: Do you have any recollection of what the students thought was going on in discussions after the faculty took the vote? I believe it was either March 5th or 6th, where there was a debate on whether to consider or accept students in the top 50 percent of their class?

SANKS-KING: No, I don't.

COHEN: Moving down the pike a little bit, that faculty vote was taken on the 5th or the 6th. Then there was the decision on I think it was March 13th to hold a meeting and to shut down the campus the following Friday, March 14th, if I'm not mistaken. Do you recall any of that process, what was happening that was after the faculty vote?

SANKS-KING: No. That's very hazy to me. I really don't.

COHEN: Do you recall the shutting down of the campus?

SANKS-KING: I remember the shutting down of the campus. But I don't remember specifically what led up to it, how much support we had from other student organizations. And of course what I really remember is the grumbling of students that we were interfering with their education by doing something like that.

COHEN: After the action, after the occupation of the building, things began to simmer down. How did it affect relations with white students on campus?

SANKS-KING: Well, my relations remained.... Well, I'll answer it in a general sense. There was a natural tension. It was...I don't know how to answer this really. There was just a tension that you could sense in the air. Why? Because we had forced an issue that was not an issue or a goal of the majority of the students. They didn't care whether there were additional black students on that campus or not. Their primary concern was getting their education. And if more students could be admitted without a disruption and/or jeopardizing in their minds their ability to do that, for the most part that was fine. But they perceived that that was not going to be the case by virtue of the takeover itself. That they were dealing with a militant group of students. And they weren't expecting things to get better. They were expecting them to get worse if there were going to be open admissions. There was also—though not expressed so much in words to me—a feeling that their education might be compromised in some way by an influx of students who were “marginal” or not as qualified as those who came in through a rigorous admissions process.

COHEN: How did the students in the organization respond to those charges; that if there was open admissions, a major effort to quickly bring in a lot of students, how did the students deal with that issue?

SANKS-KING: I think for the most part the response was the students that we're trying to provide access for have no other alternative in terms of college access without leaving the city. Why should they have to do that? This university owes them the opportunity at least to try to be able to make it within the walls of this university. There's room for many more at this table. And in fact you're getting your education here, but you're not going to stay here and provide service to this community—for the most part. Therefore, our interest is increasing access for those people that we believe will make a difference in the community. And if you can't understand that, too bad.

COHEN: How important was the question of remediation in the thinking of the students at the time?

SANKS-KING: It wasn't important at all because we didn't understand that many of these students would need remediation. I mean I really don't believe that we understood. You have to understand that those of us who were pushing for access, for the most part didn't need remediation. Or if we did, there was no avenue to obtain it. So remediation was not really something that was a focus or at the fore of our thinking in terms of additional services and funds that would have to be provided. We all knew that tutorial services would have to be provided. But we didn't think of tutorial in terms of remediation.

COHEN: Oh, okay. Alright. Let's say broaden it, broaden the definition. How important a place did the tutorial service had been in the thinking of the students?

SANKS-KING: Very important.

COHEN: Okay.

SANKS-KING: Very important. Very important.

COHEN: Let's stay with that then.

SANKS-KING: Okay. And certainly all of the black students who were there were committed to assisting in the provision of tutorial services...but knew that we were so small in numbers that we couldn't possibly meet the needs of all those students who would be coming in. And I think that that was one area where it allowed some kind of—or some type of—ability to start bridging the gap or the gulf that had developed between black and white students. Because a program evolved—I believe it was called RSVP. I'm not sure....

COHEN: Oh, yes. Students going into the community?

SANKS-KING: Exactly. But a strong component of that program was the tutorial aspect. So that many students felt that they were...I mean we'd all come out of this period in the sixties where we were committed and you wanted to help leading the blind and the uneducated.

COHEN: what, wh...

SANKS-KING: And my right counterparts at Rutgers for the most part fell into that. And they could see that there was a role, and they wanted to fill that role in terms of being of assistance in a tutorial nature. Though if you turn the question around and said, "Do you think there should be open admissions or a requisite number of students from the Newark community admitted," you'd get a resounding "no" for the most part. No! If they get in and they need help, that's a different story. But just opening access because they believe there's some entitlement to it, no. We don't support that.

COHEN: In retrospect, do you see how the faculty were concerned at the time about maintaining scholastic standards in the university? Do you see any legitimacy in their concern at the time about....

SANKS-KING: Since this tape can't pick it up, I'm grimacing. I don't know that they were concerned about maintaining scholastic standards. That may not be a fair comment. It's an emotional subject with me. I think they just didn't want to open the enrollment of the school. It's a part of that belief that they were an Ivy League institution and only the best and the brightest. I guess that could be akin to maintaining scholastic standards. But I think it was more than that. I think that they felt that there was a mechanism for admission into that school, and they saw no need to change it.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

SANKS-KING: And you have to remember that there were no advocates in that faculty group that were speaking on our behalf because there were no black faculty members, for the most part. Certainly there were no tenured faculty members.

COHEN: Yes. At the time, when first the Academic Foundations Center was established, what did the students see as the role of the Academic Foundations Center? And why was the Academic Foundations Center, in the perception of the students, established?

SANKS-KING: In the perception of the students, it was established as a vehicle to assist students with assimilating into the school environment, and helping them, at least with their first year, make that transition from high school, particularly an urban high school, into the university environment. I don't believe that at the inception of the Academic Foundations Department that the students who were there believed that it was a vehicle for remediation...not at all.

COHEN: Oh, is that right?

SANKS-KING: That's right.

COHEN: I don't understand that. What—

SANKS-KING: We simply saw it as a vehicle to provide additional assistance, not to remediate. You have to understand that there was no history. We didn't know that some of these students were coming in with seventh-, eighth-, or ninth-grade reading level. So there would be no reason for us to think of Academic Foundations as a tool for remediation. Certainly the individuals who put it together may have understood that. But it wasn't put together by students.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

SANKS-KING: And so the perception among students is that they're going to get some extra assistance. Extra assistance did not equate with remediation. To me remediation means that you have students who are significantly below par or the norm, who need a lot of assistance. We didn't think that the students we were trying to get in needed a lot of assistance.

COHEN: In retrospect, did you think, looking back now, that some of the students or a significant number of the students who were admitted during the period under the pressures of the early seventies were in fact seriously deficient and needed a lot of help.

SANKS-KING: There's no question about that.

COHEN: That people were under the pressures.

SANKS-KING: Absolutely no question about that.

COHEN: So what role then, again in retrospect, did Academic Foundations play with these students who came in?

SANKS-KING: Well, it served as a lifesaver, an anchor—or it tried to serve in that role. Some students were so far below the norm that it was almost impossible to bring them up to a point where they could truly be competitive with mainstream students who were admitted through regular admissions. But I think that that, that fact, took a while to sink in among the student population. You have to remember that Academic Foundations really began, I guess, in September of '69—I suspect that's when it was.

COHEN: I think you're right. As a center before it became a department, yes.

SANKS-KING: That's right. But many of us who participated in the takeover and/or the negotiations, either left in '69, left in '70, or left in '71. So we didn't really have that kind of picture of the level of remediation.

COHEN: Needed, yes.

SANKS-KING: I have a pretty good picture because I stayed involved with the institution, and was a participant and privy to many of the discussions, now serving in a community role rather than that of a student; where my argument on behalf of the community was I don't care how much you have to remediate them, you know. The intent was to get them in, and Rutgers should do everything necessary to bring them up to par. Of course those discussions centered around, well, you know, where's your cutoff? I mean should we remediate people that only have a fifth-grade reading level? Do you expect us in four semesters to bring them up to a ninth-grade reading level so that they even have a hope or a glimmer of a chance of competing with people who came in with a 12th-grade reading level. You know where's your cutoff? Do you have a cutoff? Are you telling us that our obligation has no limit? At some point, speaking as a community person, my position was you're obligation is without limit. As all things, even my position changed, as I began to see a revolving door. It was not helpful to have an influx of students and only have a few of them survive. That was never our intent. But it really took a while for us to begin to see that that is what was happening. Our intent was to bring students in and to graduate them from Rutgers University.

COHEN: Give me just one second.

SANKS-KING: Sure. [Break in recording]

COHEN: We're back. We were talking before, and you had some pretty pointed comments about Malcolm Talbott's role. But if you could give a sort of an overview of his role in the negotiations and as a liaison with the university administration and the students.

SANKS-KING: I would have to assess his role as—from my perspective at least—as being the person who ultimately was going to make the decisions on our demands. Although we understood that Mason Gross was the president, Talbott was the figure that we interacted with. He was the person that we perceived to have the authority to make decisions. Even if he had to get some kind of approval or share information with Mason Gross, we firmly believed that he had the power to make the decisions that we were looking for. @ And that his recommendation would probably be followed. I found him personally—and I have to use this word again—to be attentive. So that even if he were not really receptive to our ideas, you believed that he was listening to you, and that counted for something. And it was more than we had experienced certainly with the people from admissions who, you know, were physically sitting there listening to you, but didn't give a damn about what you were saying. It was written all over their faces. You did not get that impression from Talbott. Now that may be his skill as a diplomat, you know, and his experience working with students and not letting your real hand show. But even in retrospect, I believe that Talbott turned out to be a fair person to deal with.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes. Do you think there was any... [Break in recording] Okay. We're back. Do you think that there was any opportunity at the time, before the building was taken over, to have come to some kind of settlement, a settlement which would have been satisfactory to the students without that action?

SANKS-KING: Certainly I always believed that there was an opportunity to do that. But the university was not committed, nor were they interested enough in the essence of the demands or the substance of the demands. Our goals were not their goals. I think that's the best way to put it. Our goal of increasing significantly, really increasing the access for black students to the various campuses of Rutgers was never the goal nor the motivation of university administration. I don't care how much lip service they paid to it. And the evidence of that fact is that they continued to admit small numbers, the "talented individuals" that they felt met their "standards." It was, I believe, going to continue to be impossible to move them off the dime in terms of allowing significant access without taking some type of drastic action. Now some other type of drastic action might be continuously picketing the university or something in that vein might have prompted and sparked some additional movement on their part.

But it would have been very difficult to sustain that kind of action on the part of students. It's very difficult to keep that interest level up in terms of picketing. And clearly one of the things that will motivate anybody is to know that you have a group that is willing to do almost anything to bring attention to the problem. Okay? The takeover accomplished that. It brought attention to the problem. It brought the press out, it brought the community out. The press was aware that Rutgers had an abysmal record as it related to access for black students. But it was not an issue that was something that the press was willing to focus on until the takeover of the building. And the same is true for the community. While they were concerned, they had a lot of other significant issues to deal with other than whether black students gained admission to an Ivy League institution. I mean that was the perception. I mean you know we need to talk about putting food on the table for people, we need to talk about housing. We need to make sure our students are graduating from high school, you know. Access to Rutgers, to that type of institution, was not a priority with the community at that time. Having their students—and they were their students; I mean the community's students—in a situation such as occupation of a building, where there could be some physical harm or some untoward results to them if there wasn't a galvanization of the community behind them, changed that focus. It moved up access to Rutgers. It moved it up as a priority on the community's agenda. I don't think that would've happened without that occupation of the building.

COHEN: Yes. You mentioned several times Rutgers, the Ivy League perception. Technically Rutgers is not an Ivy League school, as we know. This may be a naïve question, but what does this perception mean when we talk about the Rutgers's standards for an Ivy League school, okay? What did...

SANKS-KING: The perception to me, and to my colleagues at the time, meant that only the cream of the crop could come to Rutgers. And, you know, we looked around at ourselves and said, Well, we're not the cream of the crop. We did very well, you know.

COHEN: ...[laughter]

SANKS-KING: And we were all admitted to some of the best schools. And we had our different reasons for choosing to come to Rutgers. But we certainly did not feel.... And I think the reason I keep using the Ivy League—

COHEN: Yes, yes, yes.

SANKS-KING: —perception is because it is a state university.

COHEN: Yes.

SANKS-KING: It says that in its name. And therefore it has a different mission than an Ivy League school. And we wanted to force upon them the recognition that you're not Ivy League in the narrow sense, but Ivory Tower kind of concept.

COHEN: Yes.

SANKS-KING: You're not separated from the town-and-gown kind of concept. You have an obligation not only to educate students within the state, but you have an obligation to provide services to the community in which you find yourself. You don't have the luxury of saying, I will only take the cream of the crop.

COHEN: Yes. So when they talked admissions and standards and so on, you saw that as Ivy League admissions and standards.

SANKS-KING: Absolutely.

COHEN: Which is the ultimate, ultimate whatever it is.

SANKS-KING: Absolutely.

COHEN: That was the perception at the time.

SANKS-KING: It wasn't just the perception, it was the fact. I mean, you know, we throw you a demand about open admissions—or if we move away from a discussion about open admissions—to a percentage of admissions. And you tell us somebody has to have an SAT of 1500 or more...whatever the scale that was being used at that time.

COHEN: Is that what they were talking in the admissions process?

SANKS-KING: Exactly. Right. And that they have to have had, you know, been in the top tenth of their class. Well, everybody that is bright and intelligent doesn't have a 1500 and is not in the top tenth of their class. And we know that you have students who are not black students who don't fit that description.

COHEN: Of course. Most of them. [Laughs]

SANKS-KING: Well, we didn't know whether it was most or not. But we certainly knew that some of our own classmates did not fit that description. And we also knew that some of those students got into the school because their parents were alumni of the school or they knew someone, you know. We're talking for the most part here about first-generation students who can avail themselves of a college education. So they cannot fall back on my parent can give me some assistance in getting me into this institution. And I'm almost sad to say that most of us who graduated, we got an excellent education. Our kids did not opt to go to Rutgers because the experience that we shared with them about Rutgers was not a pleasant one for the most part. Even though we all still recruit for Rutgers. I mean when you turn to your parents and say, What kind of experience did you have when you were there? if you honestly share the kind of experience, that's not an experience that would motivate your own offspring to go to the institution...even though you then say to them, But it has changed significantly.

COHEN: Yes, yes.

SANKS-KING: It's not the same Rutgers that we went to in the sixties and the early seventies.

COHEN: In retrospect then, what was accomplished by the action?

SANKS-KING: Oh, a lot was accomplished. First of all, we did significantly increase access. We have a cadre of students who have become Rutgers graduates that have attained that quality education, that have become contributing members of the community, that have gone on to do some really significant things not only in the Newark community, but statewide and nationally. Much of that would not have been possible without the push for allowing people to have a chance. That's all it was ever about, was to give them the opportunity to avail themselves of a sound, quality education. We also made it possible for faculty members, who were probably trying to gain access to those ranks for some time, to become faculty members at the university. Because coupled with the demands for increased enrollment for students, was also an increased presence of black faculty members. And Hispanics have benefitted greatly from those demands; because as our ranks were increased, so were theirs. And, of course, you now probably have a number—I would hope there are a number—of tenured faculty members, which is really important in an academic institution, so that they can have a say in the academic deliberations that go on not just in setting up the policy for admissions, but what the community of Rutgers is really going to look like, what service to local and other state communities is going to be about. The whole quality of teaching issue, they can become involved in. And having relevant courses that allow students to have a good perspective of themselves. All of that was accomplished by the initial step of forcing the issue of open enrollment. And finally you've really created a cadre of people who've moved up the ranks to become administrators. I mean we're all very pleased that Jim Ramsey has become the assistant provost and look forward to him becoming the provost of that campus at some point. I mean it's time for—it's past time, not time—it's time that people of color have a significant presence that equates with their presence in the community on that campus.

COHEN: Okay. Is there anything that we've talked about you'd like to go back to and elaborate on?

SANKS-KING: No, I'd just like to say that this has been a lesson in terms of how fuzzy your memory can be after 21 years.

COHEN: Yes. It's very rich, though. Anything that we haven't touched on that we should have? Any questions I didn't ask, perhaps, that I should have? Any major issues, I guess.

SANKS-KING: No. I think that you've covered most of the important things. If there's anything that I'd like to say in closing, it is that Rutgers is doing a good job now. But they can do a lot more. And there are a number of us, principally those of us who were always involved, who keep our fingers on the pulse and keep reminding our most recently deceased President Bloustein and now President Lawrence that we are just as concerned as we were 20 years ago. We are just as mindful, and we are just as watchful, that the university maintain a serious commitment to diversity within its student population, that it continue to make strides in its outreach efforts to get students out of the communities within which Rutgers is operating...as well as other urban communities that surround it. And of course now all communities because blacks are not just congregated as they were 21 years ago in the urban communities.

COHEN: I just wanted to go back, if I may.

SANKS-KING: Sure.

COHEN: We talked before about personalities like Bob Curvin and Bessie Hill and Malcolm Talbott. But just a few of the students who were some of the top leaders, like Joe Browne as an example. Any comments you have about his leadership and his role?

SANKS-KING: Joe Browne was a charismatic, dynamic leader. Always willing to listen to a different viewpoint. But with a firm mind as to where he wanted to take the organization. And he was very diplomatic about how he did it, but he was determined to take.... And I think that that was good. He encouraged dialog, but he kept his goal in mind, which was not a personal goal, but a goal for moving the organization forward. I think Joe has never gotten enough credit for what he did. It was a difficult task.

COHEN: Vickie Donaldson?

SANKS-KING: Vickie Donaldson is an old friend, also a dynamic leader in that movement. Someone that students were willing to listen to and willing to follow. I don't think she made anybody regret that they did that. She's remained active and serves as a very good role model for students, as to the fact that you can do it. And, more importantly, that you should be concerned about bringing other students along. I think one of Vickie's messages, Harrison Snell's message, and Joe Browne's message were that it is not sufficient that we are here, you know. We can't be comfortable that we are the talented tenth or the cream of the crop. Because we will be isolated, and there will be no real benefit to anybody by our presence here if it's only us.

COHEN: Marvin McGraw?

SANKS-KING: Marvin McGraw's quite a character. Hmm. Marvin. What can I say about him? Marvin was a [laughs] firebrand. What do I want to say about that? I'm kind of at a loss to describe Marvin McGraw. He was, I mean, a good dedicated soldier in the cause. Strong leadership ability. Marvin and I had our moments sometimes. I think sometimes Marvin didn't want to deal with women. That's what I'm trying not to say. [Laughter] He saw the leadership role as one for men.

COHEN: That's interesting since women play such an important role in the movement.

SANKS-KING: Exactly. And he has definitely changed over time, and my perception may be wrong. But that was definitely the perception I had at the time.

COHEN: Harrison Snell?

SANKS-KING: Harrison Snell was a little quiet, thoughtful, intelligent. What can I say about Harrison? That's a difficult question. Those are my comments on Harrison.

COHEN: Richard Roper?

SANKS-KING: Dynamic, motivating, challenging, always trying to create a role for someone to play so that they feel as though they are part of the game plan. I would have to describe Richard as like the dean of the delegation sometimes.

COHEN: Two names, people I haven't interviewed yet—I hope to—are George Hampton, who is at the ...

SANKS-KING: I think so.

COHEN: Yes. Anything about his role?

SANKS-KING: George Hampton. A barrel of laughs—we all need someone who helps us keep our sanity in a time of very serious deliberations. Strong leadership ability. Always willing to make a situation work. I think the nicest thing I can say about him—there are many nice things I can say about him—the fact that he can always bring laughter to a very serious kind of situation. You know, Look, it's just one more thing to do. That's kind of George's attitude.

COHEN: Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful property. Douglas Morgan?

SANKS-KING: Douglas Morgan. Always very serious-minded. Good negotiating skills. A good friend. That's not really the question that you're asking, but.... What else can I say about Doug? Just a strong individual, you know. As with all groups and all organization, you have some people who are "the charismatic people" and you have others that while not charismatic are really the people, who along with the charismatic people, are doing the real work. Doug is definitely one of those people.

COHEN: Peter Jackson?

SANKS-KING: Peter Jackson. Another dynamic individual. Strong presence. When he speaks people stop and listen.

COHEN: And his role was what? A negotiator...?

SANKS-KING: He was one of the negotiators. And I think part of that reason was Peter was probably getting ready to leave, probably just about ready to graduate.

COHEN: Anything else that you recollect? Comments about the whole movement?

SANKS-KING: Sue Perry and Ivy Davis. Both students who were involved in the negotiations and in the drafting of the demands from its inception, from their inception. Again, hard workers. Put in a lot of long, long hours.

COHEN: Are they in the region?

SANKS-KING: Sue Perry is in North Carolina and she is head of a legal services division and Ivy Davis is an attorney in Washington DC working for one of the congressional committees. If you would like to talk to them I can...

COHEN: Well thank you very, very much.

SANKS-KING: You are more than welcome, it's my pleasure.

[End of Tape #2]

[End of Interview]

Edited by Gideon Thompson