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

An Interview with

JOSEPH BROWNE

Conducted by

Gilbert Cohen

OCTOBER 18, 1991

INTERVIEW: Joseph Browne

INTERVIEWER: Gilbert Cohen

DATE: October 18, 1991

GILBERT COHEN: This is Friday, October 18, 1991. This is Gil Cohen. I'm meeting with Joseph Browne, who is an alumnus, Class of—

JOSEPH BROWNE: Eighty.

COHEN: Nineteen eighty. And we have things to talk about.

[Break in recording]

Okay. We're back to Mr. Browne, and it you could lead off with a brief—or not so brief—biographical sketch.

BROWNE: Yes. I'll be brief. I mean basically I came here in the fall of 1967, as a transfer student from the New Brunswick campus, which I began in sixty-six. So somewhere between my freshman and sophomore year actually at the time. And I was here until I guess the fall of—actually through the sixty-nine, seventy school year. I actually enrolled for the fall seventy semester but withdrew. I had…one of the consequences of my, I guess, exploits on campus and notoriety therefrom, I was offered a job in Washington working with a group called Youth Project, which was involved with…young adults around the country who were involved in social action projects. My job was to identify such groups, chasing down groups that we already had identified as potential, for assistance through the Youth Project. What we did was we provided, both directly and indirectly, financial assistance to such groups—indirectly through fundraising, plugging them in to foundations, and that sort of thing. But also hands-on kind of thing like helping them with basic community organizing techniques and stuff like management of, you know, books and that kind of thing. So I pulled out of Rutgers in 1970.

Prior to that I guess, I don't know, I was born and raised in this area. Went to schools in Newark basically from kindergarten through college—in fact I'm in law school here now. So I went to parochial schools basically, St. Rose of Lima, in the Roseville section of Newark. I graduated from St. Benedict's down the street.

COHEN: Oh! Didn't realize that. When we were talking before, you were talking about your involvement in community work, political involvement in community work. And could you go into that?

BROWNE: Yes. I guess the major impetus in my coming and transferring to the Newark campus, my first semester, I was in New Brunswick and I was sick and had to withdraw the following semester. As a consequence, through a series of events, became involved in the Newark situation. I actually moved, I'd actually gotten an apartment in the city. I lived in

Belleville, which is right next door. And I moved to Newark and got involved in some of the politics here. My roommates were with a fledgling Newark SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] chapter which never really got going, although I guess it might be significant to mention that one of the persons whom I met during that time was Phil Hutchins, who later became chairman of SNCC, who had been in Newark for some time organizing, along with Tom Hayden, a group called the NCUP project, the Newark Community Union Project which was in the south ward in Newark; that's another story.

Anyway, I had become involved with a community protest that was taking place at that time around a desire to have black person named secretary of the school board, Wilbur Parker. And there were some…a series of rather heated school board meetings that were held downtown actually at City Hall. And I also became involved in what we called the United Afro-American Society, which—Woody Wright was the head of that group, and he was also an organizer of the Black Power Conference, which was held in Newark later that summer.

And, Woolly and I had, well… it wasn't a falling out so much as we just kind of drifted apart. There were some differences politically that I, through my connection with Phil Hutchins, became involved with a gentleman named Junius Williams who was concerned about plans that the state had to build a medical school in the central ward of Newark, which at that time they were talking about a hundred and sixty-four acres. And they were talking about displacing a large chunk of the central ward community. So he was concerned about that and had been in touch with some people nationally, who were willing to provide some money to help set up an organization which would actually do some organizing in the community around that issue. And so the latter part of that summer I became one of the founders of the Newark—NAPA—Newark Area Planning Association. And as a consequence, I decided I wanted to stick around rather than return to New Brunswick and transferred to the Newark campus.

COHEN: About what year was that again?

BROWNE: We're talking about sixty-seven. This was the summer of sixty-seven. Of course that was the summer of the, well I call it a rebellion, the riots that took place.

COHEN: Well, how did the rebellion impact on your work, in your perception, on what you were doing?

BROWNE: Basically—as I said, I was…initially I wasn't, you know, I was more curious. I mean there was just…. It's hard to describe and recapture the real sense of that at that time. I mean it was so many things going on. But there was a sense of urgency, I guess. And it was just the sense of a lot of things were going on, I mean developing at the same time. And of course I, despite the fact that I had gone to schools in Newark and basically socialized in Newark most of my high school years, I really didn't know a lot about the political situation in the city. And so when that happened, I'd already been somewhat encouraged by the school board hearings. And when this occurred…. You know I was appalled by much of what happened…. my fiancée lived on Bergen Street, which right now is about at the front door of the University of Medicine and Dentistry. And we were coming from New York City on the Sunday—I believe it was a Sunday—that the riots actually kicked off. We were on a one-eighteen bus at the old Public

Service Building, and we got off the bus in mid-afternoon. And we were walking to Broad and Market to catch a bus to go up the hill. I guess we would've normally caught the thirty-one or the twenty-five; it didn't matter because neither one was close. No buses were running, and we had to walk up the hill. And I actually wound up staying at her house for the duration of the riots, I guess the four or five days that that actually occurred. So I really experienced much of what occurred. At had my own peril actually.

COHEN: You had what?

BROWNE: At my own peril.

COHEN: Oh, well!

BROWNE: I mean the purpose of me staying there was not to be out in the street.

COHEN: What did you see in the streets?

BROWNE: Well, basically, I guess, the first couple of days, the looting. For about a day and a half or so, it was pretty much open season. The central ward was effectively sealed off. And there really wasn't much policing of the area. And then finally, of course, the National Guard was sent in. And of course, you know, we saw personnel movers going up South Orange Avenue and Market Street patrolling the area. And, you know, from time to time there'd be skirmishes between police and groups of residents. I guess basically that's…. Mainly I saw, I guess, firsthand what most others were seeing on TV.

COHEN: How did that experience shape your attitudes towards political activism, militant action?

BROWNE: Well, it politicized me in the sense that I began to—I got a quick understanding of the politics of Newark. I was just being introduced to it and meeting a lot of diverse people that summer. And of course the black power conference later on that summer. But the riots themselves had a major impact on me in terms of seeing the—beginning to realize the, oh, what's the word I'm looking for? The desperation, the desperate circumstances that folks were living under in the city. And that there was really some need…I mean there was some real need for social and political change. I might add, just to digress a minute, that I guess the most powerful impact on me during that time that we speak is during my first semester at Rutgers. I picked up and read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. And I guess that would…I always look at that as being the point that really changed my view of the world. I mean up to that point I was—you know I'd gone to, I was at parochial schools, which at that time were predominantly white, and I was always one of, you know, I can't even say a handful; at St. Benedict's there were only two blacks in my class, myself and another, and less than a handful in the whole school. So although socially, during the latter part of my high school years, I began to socialize with blacks in Newark, basically other middle-class folks, I was part of a group called the Leaguers, which is over in the south ward Newark. And it's an organization that's been in existence I guess a hundred years.

COHEN: The Leakers, did you say?

BROWNE: The Leaguers. The Leaguers.

COHEN: I'm sorry.

BROWNE: Right. It was group of—a middle-class organization that dealt with black youth. And I guess they did a lot of things. But that's the most prominent that I remember was that they had a cotillion that was held yearly, at which those of us who were juniors and seniors generally participated in, which was a black-tie affair usually at the Terrace Ballroom in Newark. And well as cotillions generally are, you know, generally the audience coming out for the young ladies. So, you know, we'd spend the spring learning how to dance. And so I guess through the Leaguers and my cousin who at that time lived in Newark, met other young blacks my age. So I got involved in social life, which was rather thriving at the time. We had these high school fraternities that I became a member of one. And we used to be—used to throw dances, bus rides, different affairs. Handled considerable amounts of cash and the like. And it was folks from all over the city. One of the things I guess about a compact city like Newark is that despite its size, it wasn't, you know, people—it was easy to know people from different parts and it was easy to get to different parts. And public transportations was excellent. So it was easy to move around back in those days. But certainly a much different area and time than today. I mean you didn't have to…. I was never very concerned about my safety nor were my parents. Whether that was during the day or partying on the weekends. You know we thought nothing of going over to the city on the weekends, spending time over there. But getting back on point….

COHEN: But the digressions are wonderful. I'll follow you anyplace you want to go, topically or chronologically. I should have mentioned that before.

BROWNE: Well, anyway go ahead.

COHEN: I wanted to ask you, I wanted to go back to something, in fact it was part of your original digression. Now you've talked about the impact of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

BROWNE: Yes, yes.

COHEN: I mean how did it impact on your thinking, in what new directions?

BROWNE: Oh, well, yes. Okay. I was trying to show that despite…. that on the one hand I hadn't really—I'd always gone to white institutions, always was one of a few. And even though in the latter few years of my high school I began to socialize with blacks and began to, you know…. I mean it was on a social level. I don't want to digress too far. On the social level I always—it was always like I felt that this is where I belonged. Even though from kindergarten it was always predominantly whites, overwhelmingly. For reasons I still haven't fully put my hand on—I guess it has a lot to do with my home life—I always felt a barrier there.

COHEN: Between?

BROWNE: Myself and whites on a social level.

COHEN: Socially, yes. Okay.

BROWNE: I never felt that I…that the thing to do was to ask a white girl out. And I guess maybe that's because of my general home life, and I never really had, there aren't too many instances that I can tell you in my younger years of a racial character. I mean I don't feel that I was ever overtly discriminated against in that respect, and it's only…. And it's amazing. It's only in recent years that I've really come to understand and learn much about the level of segregation in this city. Back in my youth…. Well, I guess it was in a state of flux and change. But I was very surprised at some of the things that I've learned from different folks over the last couple of years, in fact. But the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* I guess began to—I guess there was a sense of belonging, but always a sense of alienation to a degree because of my background. You know, just coming to Rutgers for instance. You know most of my classmates were from various public schools around the state, you know, urban areas maybe. And I always felt—and again, until recent years really—I always felt somewhat reserved about the fact I went to St. Benedict's. I'm proud of that fact. But, you know, you tell people you're from St. Benedict's, and, you know, they begin to look at you in a different light than if you'd come from Central or Weequahic or what have you.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: So I guess the Malcolm X autobiography, I began, you know, I began to consciously say, well, it's on me to break down, you know, this perceived barrier.

COHEN: Between you and—

BROWNE: I and other blacks.

COHEN: And other blacks who went to the local high schools.

BROWNE: Sure.

COHEN: So there was sort of dual social barrier you seem to be saying.

BROWNE: Sure, sure.

COHEN: Between you and blacks who went to high schools in the city and white folks.

BROWNE: I guess it was my own hang-up because, as I said, I socialized in high schools with folks and never really had any—comments might be dropped here and there, but it wasn't, you know, I mean I felt comfortable and no stigma. But, as you know, now I'm in New Brunswick, away from the city, new folks, you know, and I'm beginning to deal with people from backgrounds that I was familiar with, and yet I had not fully shared in as a youngster. I mean I'm not a family….

COHEN: Middle class, working class.

BROWNE: Sure, sure. I'm not rich, you know? I mean my father worked hard to get me through those schools. I mean he paid for my education. But I mean we weren't really far better off than, you know, a lot of other folks. Well, we were. Let me not belittle. I mean I think that my background, it gave me some significant advantages over the majority of blacks even at that time. And I'm talking about, I guess, the family. You know I had a father. And I had a pretty close extended family. So it was more than money that I think it enriched me …you know I think there was a significant gap to degree in my upbringing and how it benefited me. So I had some, you know…. I guess the point is the correlating of that with backgrounds that you encounter from other blacks. And I guess, in my mind, I always perceived a problem. But consciously I began to learn that I didn't have to emphasize it, my background. You know again, it's not so much out of any shame, as a way of attempting to avoid barriers, I chose. And that's the way I've conducted myself, I guess throughout life.

COHEN: How did the autobiography help you to bridge those barriers? How did it help you come to together with other people, other black people—other people?

BROWNE: I guess mainly because Malcolm himself bridged those kinds of barriers, bridged those, I mean from another direction. I mean he obviously was out there in the streets and a part of that milieu. But he…this is a man that was able to relate to royalty. I mean, you know, eventually. And who—

COHEN: To royalty, yes sure.

BROWNE: A man who had a keen understanding and sense about human nature, I think. And was able to approach folks…pretty much at their level, whoever they were. So I guess that's something like…that I consciously drew from that. And I'm by no means a humble person. But I'm not one who generally likes to go around, you know, tossing out I've done this or I've done that or I've been here, I've been there, you know. And my grandmother and my grandfather were…That's not their problem. I won't digress into that. But, you know, I just—I think I have a background that can stand up with the best. But I don't think it's something that I need to flower.

COHEN: When you came to Rutgers-Newark, first you were in New Brunswick. What was your impression of Rutgers-Newark at that time as a college and university?

BROWNE: Well, if it weren't that I wanted to be in Newark, it's not a place I'd probably want to come. I don't know. I mean I guess having come from New Brunswick, it was quite a change. I mean to say the least. You're talking about kind of a barren campus. This building was what, about a third the size?

COHEN: Yes, half the size.

BROWNE: And I mean there were only, four buildings I think. In fact there was Conklin Hall. It was Conklin Hall in the center.

COHEN: Boyden.

BROWNE: Boyden Hall.

COHEN: Dana and Robeson.

BROWNE: Yes, that's it. So I remember it now. It wasn't Robeson at that time.

COHEN: No, you're right, you're right. It was Campus Center.

BROWNE: That's right.

COHEN: That's right.

BROWNE: In fact I came here when Paul Robeson was pretty much a pariah at Rutgers.

[Laughter]

COHEN: I saw him many years ago when I was an undergraduate.

BROWNE: Well, you know, I tell you, I think that it's valid to say that it wasn't just us in Newark. I think that we had a close relationship to the people in New Brunswick. But I think that our movement at that time was, I think, a key factor. I mean not only did we press it—and it was one of the things that we pressed. But I think we are and can righteously accept some responsibility for the change in attitude that Rutgers has.

COHEN: Towards Paul Robeson.

BROWNE: I'm sorry?

COHEN: Towards Paul Robeson.

BROWNE: Oh.

COHEN: When you say our movement…

BROWNE: Yes, I'm talking about the black student, the student movement that McCormick writes about.

COHEN: Was that at the time when the Black Organization of Students was organized?

BROWNE: Yes. Well, no. That was later, I guess. The Robeson issue came up… I guess… it became one of our demands.

COHEN: Oh, the Robeson issue.

BROWNE: Yes. The Robeson issue.

COHEN: Could you brief us on that…

BROWNE: You know we were aware early on that Paul Robeson was one of the premier graduates of Rutgers. And that he wasn't, I guess, the New Brunswick folks brought it to our attention that he wasn't given the recognition. You know he wasn't in the—wasn't recognized in the gymnasium down there where they have the plaques of the All-Americans; he was conspicuously missing. And I believe he was the first All-American from Rutgers. Conspicuously missing. I mean and the attitude at that time was that he was an embarrassment to the university. And so I guess that was one of our—became one of our demands, one of the issues that we pushed around. I know it was in New Brunswick. I mean, you know, not only recognize the man, but name the building after him.

COHEN: In New Brunswick, yes. That's right.

BROWNE: And, you know, that was something that we wholeheartedly supported.

COHEN: So when you came to this campus, what was happening here in the movement?

BROWNE: Not a lot. I mean there were sixty black students on campus when I first came here that fall. Many of whom had just arrived along with me. So it wasn't…there wasn't a lot going on relative…. I mean I guess…. The campus took note of what was occurring—what had occurred—that summer. But I think, even though it was such an open, barren-looking place at the time, there was a sense of security on campus, generally. And when I got here, I had just been involved the prior year, near the end of my first semester at Rutgers-New Brunswick, the Student African American Society was founded. I was part of that.

COHEN: Yes.

BROWNE: Of course I was gone the end of that semester, so I didn't really…. They, although some of the contacts that Professor McCormick talks about.

[Break in recording]

COHEN: Okay. We're back, and you were talking about the influence of the autobiography.

BROWNE: Yes, I was about to say that one of the things that—and I think it was his undoing—was there was a great deal of idealism in Malcolm's latter thinking. I think he had the right idea, and that is that, you know, we need to bridge, we need to find ways to bridge the gap that separates us. I mean the whole thing of the tags of being a militant or a moderate what have you. I really think that he was rejecting the extremism. And I don't use that in the sense that we generally hear it in the press or what have you. I mean the close-mindedness of Elijah Mohammed in the Nation of Islam at that time. And I think he wanted to reach out. He wanted to find some way that black folks of whatever suasion could find a common ground because we're all in this together. I mean basically it was. And I say that—I believe, truly believe, that he

was…there was a great deal of idealism. Unfortunately, I guess I picked up much of that in my own life. And I guess it's why it's taken me this long to get to law school. Basically I believed I was going to have some impact on this world. I mean, you know, certainly in much more realistic terms I guess I have. But I saw this in much broader terms than I'm thinking now.

COHEN: Any other literature at the time that you were reading which influenced you in that way?

BROWNE: No. I did, you know, I read Falong [?] and I guess another guy at that time. I can't think of his name. Oh! But, no, no one who had the impact on me. That the autobiography did, I've never read anything that moved me in that way.

COHEN: Okay. Since we're on influences, you talk of Malcolm X, but you haven't said anything about Martin Luther King, Jr.

BROWNE: Well, no, he's a person that I've learned, and come to respect in many ways. But, no, I didn't agree with Martin Luther King, Jr. at the time. I didn't believe that nonviolence was the way to go. I have my—I'm ambivalent about that today. But at that time I was emphatic, I mean that that, you know, somebody hits me in the cheek, you know, I'm not going to give him the other cheek. I'm going to take his. I mean that was the way I thought. And I didn't see that nonviolent, quote-unquote strategy, as being it. Now, I mean I guess that I had more of a—I believe that it was, if you were to say, how did I think at that time? I think that it had to be a little bit of, well, let me go back. I didn't—I couldn't—characterize it per se. I wasn't for nonviolence, but I don't think that—my attitude wasn't the attitude that we should pick up the arms and run out in the streets. I mean it wasn't that attitude either. I just felt that there had to be—we shouldn't constrain ourselves one way or the other, and that the circumstances should dictate our response. I think without getting off into it, I think the approach that the ANC [African National Congress] has used in South Africa is more akin to my attitude about—which I think reflects what I just said. Let's not reject…. In other words, don't reject violence outright. I mean because, I mean especially at that time, I mean we were being confronted with some pretty violent folk. I mean, you know, we had the civil rights workers killed down South and who were summarily detained for the most trivial offense. And I just didn't think that laying down, you know, kneeling down or what have you, was the way to go in response to that. Today, like I say, I'm ambivalent on that question. And certainly I do believe that Martin Luther King achieved, you know, his tactics and his policies led us a long way, and I give him all the credit. But I didn't think that—that wasn't my politics, to be blunt about it. And in fact, just the final thing is, to bring us back to that 1970 point, one of the first things I did upon coming to this campus, was I'd mentioned that I'd gotten involved in the formation of the Student African American Society in New Brunswick, and I was somewhat taken aback that there was only an NAACP chapter here—

COHEN: Yes, I wanted to get into that later.

BROWNE: —on the Newark campus. So I was certainly very vocal from the beginning in agitating for some other form of organization, one that didn't strap us philosophically. And also, the NAACP had had some pretty clear strictures. I mean they could censor you for doing certain things. I just didn't think that that was the vehicle that we needed to be driving if we were going

to you know…. Because I definitely felt that sixty black students was a shame, was appalling, and we needed to do something about that. But I didn't think we could do it within the NAACP.

COHEN: [unintelligible]

BROWNE: Yes, we can go back to that. [Break in recording]

COHEN: Okay, this is Gil Cohen again. So now we're at October 29, 1991. Back with Joseph Browne. And we—I'd like to pick up where we left off talking about the NAACP. If you could just— What didn't the NAACP offer that you felt and your colleagues felt was needed on the campus?

BROWNE: Well, the NAACP for some time has been very…its policies are based on a nonviolent, more of a from-within approach to effecting change. Certainly the tactics we assumed later in terms of confronting the administration of the school, in terms of taking over buildings, in terms of our overt rejection of purely nonviolent tactics was one that was counter to the policies of the NAACP, as I understand. And, you know, it's more of a, you know, straitlaced kind of approach that's required. And I didn't think that that's what we needed to be about. That wasn't a very, initially, a most popular position because many of our students…. I mean basically we're talking about a middle-class student population. We had sixty black students on campus. Most of these students came really from outside of Newark and from old middle-class, black middle-class, backgrounds, which, you know, very conservative in their attitude and outlook…and tend to prefer I guess the trappings of genteel society, which…. So, you know, I mean it was my position to—the need for anything other than the genteel approach. But in time we were able to get a majority to agree to the need for some change.

COHEN: What was the articulated mission of the Black Organization of Students?

BROWNE: Well, we wanted to bring…we wanted to see a greater black presence on campus, and we wanted to, conversely, foster a broader presence of Rutgers in the Newark community in terms of affecting the educational situation within the city. And we thought that as an urban university, that Rutgers should address the needs of the urban community to some degree.

COHEN: Well, you put it before, the NAACP had a program of I think the term you used was genteel approach, you know, to social—to change. In articulating the mission of the Black Organization of Students, what did this mission say about the methods of the Black Organization?

BROWNE: Well, we weren't strapped or committed to any particular approach. We felt whatever worked was basically the method to use. I mean we attempted to make some…of what conditions were, and we tried to devise our tactics accordingly.

COHEN: When you formed the organization, what kind of…ideological or philosophical discussions were there among the members in articulating the mission, goals?

BROWNE: That's so often the case, I guess, in struggles, whether they be community-based or student-based or even labor movement, etc. They aren't necessarily crystal ideological outlooks that are brought to the table. Basically we had concerns that there needed to be more black students on campus. There needed to be more black faculty and staff that Rutgers needed to have some effect on the greater community. I mean these were our concerns, and we pretty much talked in those terms. And our tactics—and I guess even our ideological philosophy—pretty much flowed from there instead of vice versa.

COHEN: Did the Black Power movement and the Black Nationalist movements have any significant influence in the thinking of the students in the formative stages of BOS?

BROWNE: Well yes and no, , I think that…. one of the things that I liked about BOS was that we were never ideologically rigid from that standpoint. And there were diverse viewpoints. I mean we had…I think that it's fair to say that from the very beginning that the Black Organization of Students represented the spectrum of attitudes that existed in the community at large. So you had folks from the very conservative NAACP types to I'd say the rather militant, you know, Black Panther-oriented on the one hand. Or, you know, we had folks who probably had leanings towards an Elijah Mohammed Nation of Islam kind of thing. We had folks who were aligned with folks like Mary Baraka and Ron Karenga who represented the Black Nationalist wing of the movement. So we had straddled the spectrum.

COHEN: What were the…. first, what was the membership in the beginning? Let's say the number of members in the organization.

BROWNE: Well, as I said, there were probably sixty students on campus, and I'd say that we had more than fifty percent who were active in the organization. Probably some twenty or so who were very active.

COHEN: What were the unifying themes that brought the spectrum of opinion?

BROWNE: Well, what I addressed earlier. I think unlike the community at large, well, even at that time I think there were a lot of unifying themes that united folks across ideological lines. And I think that the concerns that I outlined earlier pretty much united us, that we had our disagreements in terms of how to go about that.

COHEN: Who were the chief participants in the early stages, in the formative stages of the organization?

BROWNE: Well, Richard Roper who was the—he was the president of the NAACP, and he was the first chairman of the Black Organization of Students. There was let's see. I guess Harrison Snell; he was an early, I guess, vice chairman of the organization. Jane Rell, who was very active; she later became—went to work with the admissions office. Who else in that first year? I mean there were a lot of young folk. I mean most of us were down at the freshmen, sophomore…. There were a handful of folks, most of us were predominantly freshman and sophomore, there were a handful of folks who were I guess, in their junior and senior years. I guess Richard's the one who—

COHEN: Who is?

BROWNE: Richard Roper.

COHEN: Richard Roper.

BROWNE: Was the person who I think was the—he was the leader.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: And he was a pragmatic person who attempted to bridge those ideological gaps, I think. He somewhat, I think personally, he was somewhere in the middle. I guess somewhere to the, if we can put it on a left-right kind of thing, to the right of me. But I think he was—he saw the need for some—for changes. And I think he took an active—I don't think, I know he took an active role in—they changed to BOS in terms of formulating some of our earlier stances with the administration.

COHEN: When were these first, as you say, stances or approaches to the administration made, let's say, prior to the original demands, the original twelve, then eleven? What was that like if you could describe that period before the demands were actually laid out.

BROWNE: Well, we've just been talking about it basically. I guess we're talking about in the fall of sixty-seven. It was really organizational concerns which predominated because I'd say that it was pretty much the greater part of that first semester that this struggle in terms of NAACP versus the new form of organization went down, and it was the latter part of that semester that the change took place. So at the beginning of the spring semester, sixty-eight, we began to formulate some of the specific demands and began to interact more directly with the administration, particularly Malcom Talbott.

COHEN: Malcolm Talbott. Was he the first person that you, the organization approached?

BROWNE: Oh, yes. Sure, sure. I mean he was the vice president in charge. And so he was the person that logically we should talk to. And he was accessible.

COHEN: Yes, that's what I want— What were those first contacts like with Malcolm Talbott? How responsive was he?

BROWNE: Well, as you know, I'm sure, just from being here at the time, and certainly from Professor McCormick's book, we had a high regard for Malcolm Talbott. And that was from the very beginning. He was a very warm and accessible person. He never…he was always down to earth. I mean he didn't—a person in his position, he didn't necessarily stand by, what is the saying? Stand on the—

COHEN: Stand on ceremony?

BROWNE: Yes, yes, yes. Convention. And then I think from an ideological standpoint, he was an old-line liberal.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: Who was supportive of the civil rights movement, of the causes that came out of the civil rights movement. And so he basically…. So I think politically, his inclination was to have some understanding about what we were talking about and some agreement with the need for some changes.

COHEN: Yet at the same time you were also negotiating with the officers in the admissions office, C.T. Miller and Robert Swab?

BROWNE: Yes.

COHEN: What was going on there? I mean you're getting these relatively good working, seem to be good rapport anyway with Malcolm Talbott. And yet from the record, this didn't seem to be going on in the admissions office.

BROWNE: Yes. I was—I took a leave-of-absence that spring.

COHEN: Spring of sixty-eight.

BROWNE: Yes. While I was continually involved with BOS during that period, it wasn't as close as it was in the previous semester and as it would be later.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: But there were—there was certainly a great deal of activity going on, I mean in terms of as…the admissions question. Generally, though, it was an unfavorable response from those who were—Richard being one of them—who were dealing directly with the admissions office in particular. Which is not saying there wasn't some progress. But I guess it was more form than substance that came with those contacts early on. I mean there was a—that's one of the agreements that came out of it was that black students were recruited to do recruiting in the Newark schools that summer, that spring and summer. And…I think there was an informal, some kind of informal review process that we were a part of, you know, from the applicants that came in during that period. However, the net result was that I think we increased our ranks by about forty students, which I guess some might look at as being, you know, that's better than fifty percent, sixty percent, whatever. But we thought that still we were—that was still a paltry number. And so we were definitely not happy come the fall of sixty-eight.

COHEN: So that brings us to the fall of sixty-eight. What finally led up to the decision to take action?

BROWNE: Well, in the fall…. Well, just backing up. In the spring of sixty-eight, the culmination of the demands which had been formulated at that time. And I don't remember, I know they're in Professor McCormick's book.

COHEN: Sure.

BROWNE: We—It led to…. Well, we were negotiating here on Newark campus. And through our contacts with New Brunswick students, we began to formulate a strategy on a university-wide basis. And that culminated in, I guess, April, the latter part of sixty-eight. Where there was a board of governors' meeting, where we were able to address the governors.

COHEN: Oh, that was the big march on campus that McCormick writes about. That was covered then.

BROWNE: Right. But it was, I would say, a lot of form and little substance, I think, the net result of the sixty-eight, the spring sixty-eight, activities. And in the early part of the fall, we again took up continuing to address the question of more students. We were not satisfied with the students that were here. Just to digress one more time.

COHEN: Sure.

BROWNE: McCormick does talk about the fact that it was a—I forget the name of the…. One of the things that did come out of that is there were some monies that were made available for black students for scholarships and assistance and for recruitment. And there was a program in place, okay, in the fall of sixty-eight, which many of the new students that came in, many of those forty students, were part of. However— this was the fall of '68.

COHEN: This was the fall on which campus?

BROWNE: Yes, it was on this campus.

COHEN: Could you refresh my memory…

BROWNE: Yes, if you give me the book for a minute, I can probably place…. It was nowhere—it wasn't close to the scale or scope of urban university. And it was—basically it really…what it did was continue to bring in basically the kind of student, type of student, who was already here.

COHEN: Oh, I see. You were looking for people from big cities, from the high schools, is that what it is?

BROWNE: Yes. But when I say the students that were here, I mean basically middle-class students, maybe a larger number of students from Newark, but still offset by or equal to a large number of from, you know, East Orange to Montclair and the like. Whatever the case, we were still not satisfied. And we felt that we had an opportunity to start, to be able to start early on in the year to address these admissions concerns in particular, that we would have, you know,

starting in the fall catching up with students, you know, as they are from—making decisions in terms of where to go.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: That we would be in better shape. Well, come the end of fall semester, it was apparent…I mean there was no, there was still no real apparatus in place. And the numbers of potential applicants was very low. And I guess it was that kind of information that prompted us to begin to talk about more direct action.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Once it reached that point, what were the discussions like among the students and among the people who they were working with?

BROWNE: Well, you know, it was….

COHEN: If you could relive that.

BROWNE: Yes. I mean it started out, I guess, as….

[End of Tape #1]

COHEN: Okay, we are back. And my question was what were the discussions like at the time that the students were considering taking action? If you could relive that.

BROWNE: Well, we'd come to a basic consensus that there was a need to do something. By no means was there a consensus as to what that something should be. I should say that Harrison Snell is now the chairman of the Black Organization of Students. I was vice chairman. And more so than the previous year, I'd say that there was definable—I shouldn't say that. There's always a definable, there was always a distinction between viewpoints. You can distinguish, I guess, those who were more moderate and those who were more of a radical bent. But I would say, I think, that Rich Roper did a commendable job in terms of bridging that dichotomy.

COHEN: Was he on board then?

BROWNE: No.

COHEN: Richard graduated in—

BROWNE: Yes, he graduated in sixty-eight.

COHEN: Eight, oh.

BROWNE: Yes. Mm-hmm. Yes, he graduated in sixty-eight. So he was no longer here.

COHEN: So at that time Harrison Snell is—he's the president now, you are the vice.

BROWNE: Yes. Right. And Harry—a likable fellow—he was certainly one of the moderate faction on campus. And certainly didn't have the charisma of…. Well, I'd say that Rich had a charisma about him. He certainly commanded, you know; he was a leader. And I think that Harry lacked many of those leadership qualities. Certainly Harry was not someone who was good at bringing diverse elements together. And so I think that there was definitely two sets. I tend to demure the use of factions because I think there was…we worked out very well as things happened. But at least early on, there were certainly two sets of folks within the organization: those who pretty much held to the moderate approaches and those of us who sought a more activist kind of approach. Being aware of this…those of us who advocated the activist approach began to pretty much talk to one another and came to a certain agreement in terms of the need to do something. Again, it wasn't defined. We didn't really know what. But I guess one thing we felt we wanted to do was to probably tighten up our demands, and we did that. And that was something that we could do. That was something that we could all pretty much join together on.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes.

BROWNE: And that there was pretty much agreement across political lines. But as we were doing that, those of us who advocated the activist approach began to talk amongst ourselves. And also we had—and while we were in the process of doing this—we also had a very close relationship with Bessie Hill, member of the board of governors. And we spent…most of our demands, I would say, during that time were formulated in her living room.

COHEN: In Bessie Hill's living room.

BROWNE: Right. And she gave us valuable assistance…. The demands I think we had pretty much formulated by the end of the semester. A lot of the formal discussions in terms of what to do took place during…the break and right after the break, spring break, between semesters. And …we decided that we would—people would walk in on an as-need kind of basis. And we attempted to…when we came to some decision, I don't really know at what point we decided a takeover would be the best. But it wasn't really a long time between the takeover and our beginning to formulate specific plans for that. And we were very concerned about keeping a cap on about word getting out about what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. At the same time, we knew we had to talk to folks, I mean as…. Once we'd concretized plans, we had to, you know, we made sure that there were people in the community were aware that some things were doing to be happening and get ready to support us. We also began to talk…. There were some who pretty much supported us and were going to do—for one reason or another, couldn't go into a building. So that worked out well because we were able to then formulate an agenda whereby they could do some things from the outside and give support. And also began as soon as we…as soon as we took over, to begin to pull in those and shore up those who were on the outside who maybe weren't a part of that planning process. And then basically Pete Jackson was the person who, I guess, who played the lead role in that in the external….

COHEN: External. Oh, he was the liaison?

BROWNE: Yes.

COHEN: I thought that's what he told me. At what point did the tactic of occupying, taking over the building emerge as the method of choice?

BROWNE: I'm trying to put a finger on it. I guess we're talking about—things weren't happening in a vacuum. I mean student protests were busting out all over. I mean that was certainly spring, even though it was wintertime, I mean, but the spring semester of student protests around the country. So we were by no means the first to come up with…it wasn't a unique plan.

COHEN: No.

BROWNE: I guess Cornell and other campuses were—San Francisco State. You know I mean we had other examples, and we decided that it was something that we could do here.

COHEN: Mm-hmm. Yes, yes. What alternatives, if any, were considered?

BROWNE: Well, to continue the negotiating around which we felt was not being taken seriously from the administrative standpoint. I mean, you know, these negotiations could have gone on forever. I guess, you know, marches, protest marches, whatever, on campus, in the community. Or possible alternatives. Shutting down the campus, a tactic that we did use later on. But we felt that, we felt that the takeover strategy was one that…. for a lot of reasons, we felt we could be successful with.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: Again, you know, I don't— I sometimes feel as revealing or betraying confidence in terms of Malcolm Talbott. I guess that we by this time had…we felt like we knew Malcolm very well. And we basically had confidence in the man and felt that— We didn't think that the dogs at least would be unleashed on us—at least not early on anyway. We certainly saw that as a prospect; but we thought that as long as he remained in charge, that his, you know, he would prevail. And that he wouldn't—that he would attempt to…. On the one hand that he would escalate, that things would escalate to a higher level in terms of the administration dealing with us. And that he would be a level-head. And our assessment was correct.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: I guess what we didn't have…. And we pretty much felt that way. I guess from our sense of the New Brunswick situation that it was pretty much the same. We didn't know the players as well. And we really didn't have the greatest of senses of Mason Gross. But fortunately they all turned out to be level players.

COHEN: I want to ask about how many students…was there a vote taken, or what was the procedure for finally saying, okay, we're going to move? I mean that's kind of….

BROWNE: Yes. Well, I guess what it came down to is that it was—it really was a numbers question. I don't know what the numbers were. But we're talking maybe a two-week period in

which, you know, the planning took place. And as I said initially as a need to ask for it kind of basis. And I mean basically we didn't have—I don't recall we ever had an open meeting to discuss it. We had meetings, and I'd say that the numbers were in our favor. I mean those who were, hey, I'm with you and who took an active role in the planning and preparing we had the numbers.

COHEN: Were most of the sixty students…?

BROWNE: We're talking about a hundred.

COHEN: Oh, they're talking about a hundred students with the extra forty you mentioned before.

BROWNE: Yes.

COHEN: So were most of those students in attendance at the meetings where the decision was made to move on Conklin Hall, that you can recall?

BROWNE: Yes, I'd say close to. Certainly the majority of the active members of BOS we were a part of.

COHEN: And how was it decided which students would go into the building? How many students, which ones?

BROWNE: Well, as I said, we had made some plans in that respect, and decided that we needed a certain number of folks outside. Actually the majority went into the building. And there were—I think Peter was the person who we were going to be relying on predominantly for the outside. Ivy Davis was one of the persons who was outside with us. Harrison Snell, of course he was chairman, and of course he wasn't initially a part of the planning and never was in fact. But we certainly had to inform him what was going on. He came, he was aware of it, chose not to go in. So, you know, so there were certain folks who we knew weren't going to come inside either because of the position or because, you know, their expressed views were going to play a role from the outside.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: And as I say, I've never—nothing I've been involved or few things I've been involved in in life went off that smoothly,

COHEN: About how many students actually went in the building? I think….

BROWNE: Now, I'm lying if I can tell you the exact number.

COHEN: Oh….

BROWNE: I know it was…it had to be close to—it was over 30 of us, I'm sure. The exact number I honestly I don't know.

COHEN: Sure, sure. Were the students moving in and out of the building?

COHEN: And once they went in, that was it. Yes, yes.

BROWNE: One of the strict prerequisites was that once we were in, we were in. And there was not going to be any shuffling in and out, either from folks who wanted to join us or from folks who wanted to leave us.

COHEN: Okay.

BROWNE: You know certainly we had an arrangement if somebody got sick or something like that to get them out if they had to. But, no, we didn't have folks moving in and out the building. And basically it was telephone radio contact with folks on the outside.

COHEN: Could you describe the logistics of the whole operation?

BROWNE: No. We just got, you know, we did a door count. And got chains and padlocks for each door in the building. That was really the—it wasn't much of a strategy. And kept someone, you know, generally got a watch on most of the doors. But I don't remember what the number of doors were. But there were a lot of chains and locks…

COHEN: I've seen the chains on the University Avenue side where you were absolutely….

BROWNE: Yes.

COHEN: Yes.

BROWNE: But we came in from the Bleeker Street.

COHEN: Oh, from Bleeker Street, off the…

BROWNE: The Bleeker Street side, right.

COHEN: And when you came into the building, what kind of reception did you get? [Laughs] Well, it was at what time in the morning?

BROWNE: It was early. It was somewhere between four and six.

COHEN: Yes. And who was there at the time?

BROWNE: Oh, well, I'm sorry. We had somebody in the building who—I believe Bob Byers and somebody else—who remained in the building overnight, I believe. Now I'm getting a little

fuzzy in terms of the day—I believe it was a Monday. Or was it? Whatever the case was, we had somebody in the building who opened the door so that we came in.

COHEN: And he was the only person then in? There were no staff?

BROWNE: Not to my knowledge. We didn't coordinate with the staff.

COHEN: There was no staff. And then what was the next move then?

BROWNE: Well, basically we came in. And we had Peter contact the media and basically people found out we were there as they arrived. The next day people were arriving to work in the school. But we had, as soon as we were in, you know, we made phone calls to different groups and organizations in the city. So I guess there were community folks arriving that morning, too, in support of us.

COHEN: Before the move—

BROWNE: Oh, and of course the liberation hall sign was unraveled early on. So that was one of the things that they saw as they came to school.

COHEN: Yes, yes. Before the move, what contacts did the organization make with community organizations? And what community organizations?

BROWNE: Well, we had contact I guess with the welfare rights organization a group that many of our students had been involved in demonstrations and protests and arrested in conjunction with…. At that time there was a group called the—gosh now, I just lost it. There was a leadership group of black organizations that we used to meet at Baraka's Place at five-oh-two High Street, who had been informed of Baraka's organization. Black Panther Party

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: I think most of the activist groups had been contacted. Again, nobody—I don't think we told anybody or many people specifically what our plans were. Except that on the morning of February twelfth, whatever it was, you know, be on the lookout for—on the alert for something happening down at the school, and we were going to jail. And, oh, also SDS [Students for a Democratic Society].

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: Joe Myron was I guess the white activist on campus. You know basically those were the groups.

COHEN: You were faced with the possibility of police action, perhaps action on the part of local citizenry, what, if any, contingency plans did the students have in case such a confrontation became a reality?

BROWNE: Well, we….also had—black law students were, well, not a part of anything we did; we were mutually supportive. During that time that they were also extremely active in—they'd just gotten the Minority Student Program in place. And so through them they had, you know, they were prepared to get legal assistance where needed. And we had contact with some lawyers as well. And basically there was…. I mean during that time protest was not unusual in this town. Or across the country for that matter, but certainly in Newark. And, like I said, we'd been involved in numerous welfare rights demonstrations which ended with a number of us going to jail. And generally there was an apparatus…. I mean the leadership group that I just mentioned, and I really am sorry my mind draws a blank; there is a name for it, would come up with bail money and get us out. So we were fairly confident. And again, we had—because we had made those contacts and there were some promises made that if anything went down, we'd be supported. So we felt that if something like that occurred, that we would be able to raise money, whatever.

COHEN: Did you think, and the students who were in there with you, think there was a real chance of violent confrontation at that time?

BROWNE: Many did. Many did. Many did. And certainly there were some moments that certainly the Imperial? and them folks coming in with the telephone pole.

COHEN: Oh, yes, I remember that very well. [Laughs] I was there.

BROWNE: There were times that we felt that it was getting a little hairy. But again, I frankly felt that as long as the university personnel remained in charge, that we'd be all right.

COHEN: Could you describe the telephone pole episode?

BROWNE: Well, of course being on the inside, I wasn't…. All I can say is that I mean, as you know, I'm sure there were…it was certainly at least a hundred or so folks out there pretty much constantly around the clock from the time we went in the building or shortly after we went in the building. And we gained a lot of respect. I mean, as I say, I think that it tended to coalesce those who remained outside who were ambivalent and strengthened their resolve and our support. And it was heartening to see the kind of support that we got throughout that period. I guess I never really felt threatened.

COHEN: You didn't?

BROWNE: No. But there were many that did. I guess I felt my role was, as a leader of this whole thing, was that I needed to, you know, necessarily think…. I'm not sure if it was a conscious thing at the time. But I know that I felt that, you know, I had to be a stabilizing force. So again, I'm certain that this was not a conscious process on my part. I didn't feel that I could—that my role could be one of fear…because I sensed enough of it amongst the troops. So I had to be a stabilizing kind of force. But I honestly, as I said, I had a lot of confidence in Malcolm Talbott.

COHEN: Yes. I want to discuss the demands and the…. Well, first of all, if you could just—the demands changed. And for instance in the original demands, there was no, from what I could see, there was no mention of admission of all black high school students with a diploma.

BROWNE: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: But going into the archives, there was—I think it was the unmet demands that came out, including the demand that all black students from Newark schools, I think it says, be admitted. And I was wondering how that change came about from the original demand which didn't say that. If you recall. I mean so much has happened since that time. Do you have any recollection of how things evolved?

BROWNE: To be honest with you, it was…I think it was a process of…. I guess, I always was of the view that it needed to be a broad demand. Because I come from the school that you ask for the world, and, you know, hope for what you can get. I mean that was my attitude. Well, maybe not…. And I'm not so sure that we honestly believed that we were going to be able to get the final. And we felt that we needed to be as broad as possible. And there were some things going on. I mean Rich Robey …at the time.

COHEN: Who was that?

BROWNE: Richard Robey.

COHEN: Okay.

BROWNE: And, of course, Gus Edinburgh was doing some work with the board of higher ed. And we knew that there was some thinking going on in terms of some big bucks being made available to deal with affirmative action in terms of college admissions. We didn't know—we had no idea what form or shape this was going to take. But we thought that we should, that we could be fairly broad. And so I guess we went from being tentative on the question to being forceful.

COHEN: So there was a conscious decision to up the ante, so to speak? I mean from the time—

BROWNE: Yes.

COHEN: Because the unmet demands came out, I believe, after the Conklin Hall action.

BROWNE: Sure.

COHEN: So there was actually an upping of the ante from the original demands, I see.

BROWNE: Yes, yes.

[Break in recording]

COHEN: Okay, we are back. I was just saying that one of the demands was the, for a moment—and I'm quoting from I forget which; I think it's the original one—commensurate with the involvement "commensurate with Newark and its surrounding communities ." But to the question of what were the target municipalities, is the question, Newark and surrounding areas? Do you recall what they were?

BROWNE: I think we were talking about Essex County, I guess. Or I may be wrong on that. We might have been a little bit broader. I think we, I guess—I think we were talking about Essex County, and I forget what our figures were. But even if you're taking the surrounding areas, I mean blacks were, you know, we're talking about twenty percent, something like that. I don't know what the numbers were. And I think we had twenty or thirty percent. It was somewhere—I know those figures stick in my mind.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: So when you're talking about specifically…while the demand may not have addressed the specifics there in our mind, I guess, like I say, twenty or thirty percent was somewhere in the back of our minds in terms of—well, not so much in the back of our minds—but it sticks with me, the numbers.

COHEN: How were the negotiations conducted once you were inside the building, with the administration?

BROWNE: Well, I spent a lot of time on the telephone. But I think that Peter Jackson was both an able emissary, and we had a lot of confidence in Peter. Harry was part of the team, negotiating team, that spoke in the negotiations, and honestly we didn't have the kind of confidence in Harry. Although I'd say he did a commendable job as well. But in terms of, from a negotiating standpoint, I think Peter…pretty accurately presented—and represented—you know the views that we had agreed to prior to going into the building.

COHEN: Now that had been during the negotiations or after the negotiations, there was a report of a signed agreement. Now was there a—

BROWNE: When we came out?

COHEN: Yes. Was there a signed agreement? There was a dispute about a signed agreement, and I have not come across such a document.

BROWNE: I think you first of all—there was a lot of posturing. I mean, we can be frank. And we…. There is some dispute as to whether there was a signed agreement or not. I think we had a handshake basically.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: But, you know, as far as we were concerned, I mean I guess it was an agreement. We became…. And two things happened. I mean I think we felt that we made again a tactical

decision that we had gained considerably from the building takeover. Not so much that we had extracted all we could. But that it had served us well, and it was time to give it up. We did feel, coming out, that we had a good, firm agreement. We were aware that maybe it wasn't as firm as it ought to have been. But we pushed it as a firm one. I mean you know this—that there were certain understandings that we intended to have—live by. But you got to it earlier, I think, you know when we talked about the escalating of our demands. One of the things that we became aware of shortly after…we weren't, you know, McCormick again hits it on the head. We were somewhat naïve and somewhat immature in terms of our understanding of the university apparatus and how it worked. We understood the role of the faculty. But we weren't…. But I guess it didn't really…we had a somewhat intellectual understanding of it, not in a practical. And so it became clear shortly after coming out of the building that what agreements we thought we had, many of them were impossible to implement without the faculty.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: This concerned us. And, like I said, so I mean much of what then occurred was posturing. I mean to be quite honest with you. Confrontation in Talbott's office was the purest posturing. Okay. Pure posturing. I had talked to Malcolm Talbott. I was over on Prospect Avenue the night before having dinner with him. And…though we didn't really plan anything together.. I think he was the least surprised of anyone to see that his office…

COHEN: Took over his office? Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: And, you know, like I said, I mean we had had an amiable dinner the evening before. And I ended up jumping up on the desk, you know…. that was pure posturing. We were concerned that we were losing too much of what we thought we had. So the demonstrations, closing the school, the confrontations and stuff were really acting out, trying to keep the pressure on.

COHEN: Okay. Specifically, what did you think you were losing that you thought you had?

BROWNE: Well, again, we…it's somewhat unclear what we had, I mean to be quite honest with you. Well, in admissions, for instance, we thought we were going to be rid of Miller and [unintelligible], and we did eventually. And there was some possibility that we were going to have, you know, that we were going to be able to get a black director of admissions. We wound up with Lincoln Lawrence and Jan Morrell. But it was clear that we didn't know …. The nature of the admissions program was still indefinite, and we saw this. And we had already been through a couple of times where we saw that that wasn't going to work. So we needed…we were concerned about getting that tied down, so to speak. The faculty, I mean, you know, there was a general agreement that we would have more black faculty and staff. We wanted to see that…we wanted to start seeing some faces go along with that.

COHEN: Sure.

BROWNE: So I mean there were a lot of loose ends that we realized existed, and that we needed to have nailed down.

COHEN: Do you recall the faculty vote on whether to consider or accept the students in the top fifty percent of their classes, how much of a factor that was? Do you have any recollection if it?

BROWNE: I remember the vote. No, I don't remember in terms of …

COHEN: The fifth or sixth, I forget now, it was after the…you of course had come out of the building. The remedial program, which of course was included in the original demands, which eventually was left to the Academic Foundation Center and the Academic Foundation Department. To what extent did the students figure that remedial program to be a response to questions raised about maintaining standards of admission and scholastic standing? Was that—

BROWNE: No. Again, we didn't—you're talking about the Urban University Program?

COHEN: Well, first it had been called that by the University. And it was then the Keane Academic Foundation Center.

BROWNE: It was, you know, an Urban University Program. I mean…oh, gosh! Amazing sometimes how your mind goes on you.

COHEN: The economic opportunity fund…

BROWNE: Yes, on the…I'm trying to think of…. Jim Ramsey.

COHEN: Oh, yes.

BROWNE: Of course he came in as the assistant director of that. And, you know, and I certainly think one of the best things to come out of the Urban University Program. Unfortunately the director— I mean we were involved in all this, his was not what it purported to me. But I mean we knew that…. I mean let's put it like this: We knew that we were talking about that—as I said earlier—going back to the beginning, back to sixty-eight and sixty-seven, and the thrust of what were some of the things we thought about and that we talked about, you know, it was the question of our impact on campus and campus impact on community. Well, we understood from the beginning that we're talking about folks who are ill-prepared, or many of them. And so this was one of the roles that we saw the university being able to provide. I mean to compensate for some of the deficiencies in the educational system that had produced these students. So there was some concern on our part in terms of the status of these students. It grew as the realization of how that played out on campus and in the college community. The stigma, that really, you know, applied to Urban University students versus the 'real' college students. But we were basically in agreement. I mean it would be foolish not to understand and recognize that…it's like trying to throw a babe into a pool. I mean, you know, without some help, I mean they're going to drown. So we were in agreement with the remedial agenda. On the other hand, we weren't in agreement in the strictures that would apply to matriculation. You know, I mean there was some of these students, the way it was structured, I mean, could be there for two, three, four semesters without being…. Well, I mean there was certain, in other words, a progression kind of thing. But they could be there for a year or so without ever taking a course for credit.

COHEN: You were concerned.

BROWNE: Yes, we were concerned.

COHEN: About the students would be retained for too long a period of time in the remedial program, is that right?

BROWNE: Right, right, right.

COHEN: That was a problem?

BROWNE: Oh, it was a concern, concern for sure. That was a concern. I mean we felt that they needed to be matriculated as soon as possible. But it wasn't…when I say experience, I mean there was concern initially, but I don't think there was the recognition of how great a factor that would be. I mean which was addressed later on, you know, the Academic Foundations coming into being. And the whole transition from this amorphous kind of side group was being actually made a part. You know I mean the whole structure was anathema, you know, to a college—to a college, a university.

COHEN: On the subject of the Academic Foundations Department, what is your sense of this, its contribution to the university over the years? I mean we're talking now twenty years about.

BROWNE: Well, again, I haven't been as close to that as I would have liked to have been. But I think that it's a legitimate—it plays a legitimate role. There's been a lot of argument, I guess, over the years in terms of… what role should higher education play vis-à-vis these ill-prepared students coming out of the high schools. I mean it's a question that is still…. You know they're talking about now somehow paying, somehow the secondary schools paying the colleges and universities for doing this remedial kind of stuff. I mean and there's…. You know I mean I think it misses—it begs the question. But I mean there's some validity in it, in that secondary schools just aren't doing the—aren't cutting the mustard…. I think again higher education needs to play some kind of role there. And it's probably—it probably has to do with the reformation of, the reformation process, in secondary schools, more so than the remedial stuff at the other end. But I think that there are…. I mean we've got to deal with a certain reality, I mean that these students exist. Many of whom have great potential. You know many of whom—so many of them have great potential and who should be on a campus such as Rutgers-Newark, not at Essex County College. Some students ought to be at Essex County College. I mean, you know…. But I think that to the extent that an Urban University exists that there's—that it shouldn't exist in a vacuum. And that means that it has to be able to be accessible to folks in that community. And be able to address the problems that they bring with them.

COHEN: To go back a bit to something you touched on before, where you were talking about the March thirteenth demonstration and the shutdown of the campus.

BROWNE: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: What precipitated the decision to do that. You talked about being disappointed, not getting what you thought you'd gotten. If you could recall…that was rather a major decision, too it seems. What precipitated that decision?

BROWNE: I'm trying to remember now. I think that there was still questions that existed in terms of the…I think the faculty still had to address the specific character of the admissions program. And there was a lot of resistance, I mean there was a lot of balking, you know. There was a lot of hostility, I think, in terms of their prerogatives being preempted by the administration.

COHEN: Mm-hmm.

BROWNE: And a great sense that, you know, that they were giving away the store. And that was their territory. Like I say, we were not as sophisticated in the way it worked. And as we were saying…that we saw and understood this conflict. And we knew that it was scheduled. They had to make some decisions. So again, I mean that was part of the posturing that I spoke of earlier.

COHEN: What kind of support did you see in the faculty?

BROWNE: Hmm. I guess I felt that there was some support. I guess the faculty that I was close to tended to be the liberal arts faculty.

COHEN: Liberal arts?

BROWNE: People like Samuels and what was the anthropologist? C.L.—

COHEN: Strobel

BROWNE: Strobel. Like I mean it was…. in total, mushy.

COHEN: [Laughs] Okay.

BROWNE: Total mushy. Strobel brought that to mind. I was someone close to her, you know, during that time. Certainly she gained a lot of power down the line after that. But we felt that—but we felt it overall—it was that we didn't really have the kind of support that we would have liked to have had. And I said I mean, basically…. And that was the other side of it. I mean it didn't occur to us early on that maybe we should be lobbying the faculty. I mean in retrospect, I think that would have been a valid, legitimate approach that we should have undertaken. But it didn't occur to us. It wasn't until after we came out of the building that we began to fathom the role that the faculty played in all of this. So that we really—I can't say we miscalculated because we didn't know.

COHEN: Now during that period, what role did—he was a faculty member, had been a student—did Bob Curvin play? As liaison? Am I correct about that?

BROWNE: He was our faculty advisor.

COHEN: Yes, that's right.

BROWNE: He played a very strong role. I would say that…I'd say that we didn't confide in him in terms of what we were planning simply because we knew he would oppose it, you know. Bob was more of the moderate school. And so we deliberately bypassed Bob, you know, in terms of the plan to take over the building. Although, again, he was one of the people that we immediately—you know, like I said, some folks we had calculated would support us. But it wasn't until we got in the building that we actually, you know, then made the effort to enlist their support. And Bob was one of them. He was…. I think that was probably…I think it hurt him a lot, personally.

COHEN: In what respect?

BROWNE: Well, because he saw himself as…he was a community activist himself. You know here the—gosh ….

COHEN: You mean the Congress Of Racial Equality, CORE?

BROWNE: Right, right. CORE. And he had played a strong role, you know, in the early part of advising us, and certainly in terms of our relationship with Malcolm Talbott. I guess he was our entree to Malcolm. And as time went on, you know, we really began to bypass him in terms of our relationship with Talbott. And like I say, I guess there was a feeling that we had that there in the fall of sixty-eight, as we were asserting a more militant stance, Bob was not that happy with that. So like I say, we deliberately bypassed him. So I think that, you know, he felt that we undercut him or whatever. And I guess because of that, he was playing, you know, I mean he was kind of like on the outside. I mean like even in the building. I mean I guess because Henningberg tended to play a more dominant role on our behalf than did Bob Curvin. Okay? And Henningberg wasn't even a part of the university.

COHEN: Uh-huh.

BROWNE: So, you know, I think the relationship with Curvin was never really the same after that, you know. And I guess I played—I was the one who took a leading role, one of the persons who took a leading role in making some of these decisions. As I said earlier, I think that we probably would have been well advised, and I'm sure that Bob tried to explain some of these things to us at the time. And I just didn't quite grasp where he was coming from. And basically, as I say, I mean at a certain point, you know, I saw Bob as—you're going too fast, slow down kind of thing. And I didn't really want to hear it. And I must say that that wasn't from a malice perspective at the time. It was just that I mean we had basically been holding back, I thought, and restrained for a year and a half. And that it was the time to do something a little bit more decisive than we had been doing and to go a little beyond what Bob had been advising us to do.

COHEN: After the students left the building and discussions were going on in the faculty. Did he serve at all as a bridge, do you feel?

BROWNE: Oh, yes.

COHEN: In terms of presenting a case to the faculty?

BROWNE: Yes, yes. I mean again, once we were in the building, I mean he was—he supported us.

COHEN: Yes.

BROWNE: And he did play a role within the faculty. To be honest, because of the character of the faculty and because of the role that Curvin played, Curvin, while I remember the faculty basically came, he was part of the—oh, what was the program that Bob was—Community…? I forget the position that he had, but it wasn't…. he was…. I don't think that Bob could exert the kind of influence at the time that he would like to have exerted. And…while he was certainly an advocate on our behalf…once we had, the motion began and the wheels started rolling… felt he was undercut. And he probably was in the sense that he was unaware of what was going on. We hadn't done the lobbying that would have been advisable prior to taking over the building, which further…undercut his ability to be an influence …I mean he's confronting people whose minds are made up, basically, either we were right or we were wrong. And those who said we were right, you know, they had their questions and doubts about us. And those who said we were wrong, I mean we were dead wrong. Whereas had he been…had we taken him up….

[End of Tape #2]

COHEN: Okay, we're back. Okay, okay, we're back.

BROWNE: You know the only other thing I have to say on Bob is that from an intellectual standpoint, from you know, twenty/twenty, I think that if we were more sophisticated, we probably would have at least listened a little closer to what Bob had to say. And maybe have made a greater use of Bob in terms of his position on the faculty. And in terms of taking to heart some of his advice regarding the faculty, I don't know that we would have…but we weren't ready to slow down. Although we probably could have done things a little differently. I always said somehow we kind of shut off that message. I mean, you know, because as I said earlier, just….

COHEN: What was the message?

BROWNE: To slow down. And as I said, Bob basically felt that we should take a more moderate approach. And what saying is that we probably could have used a combination of approaches. And that we should have sought—we should have devised, we should have definitely had the strategy relative to lobbying the faculty, that we totally had none, no strategy there. On the other hand—and that might have offset because, you know, as I say that, I also—All of the positive things I've said about Malcolm Talbott, I think that the one thing that—I think he was a bit of an optimist. No, he's very much an optimist. And I think that we had really—we were led to believe the fact that he would come along. That wasn't the case. He was wrong. I mean that's one area that Malcolm was definitely wrong. And his problem was—I mean he's on

the law school faculty, you know. So I mean—and the faculty, you know, NCAS [Newark College of Arts and Sciences] saw him as an administrator. So I think he wore different hats. And he couldn't influence the faculty as he thought that he could.

COHEN: What at that point, what did you want from the faculty?

BROWNE: Well like I said, it wasn't until after we got out of the building. And what we wanted was, hey, they control the admissions process, you know. And they had to make the decision. So that's what we wanted. But like I said, I mean at the point that we understood clearly, at least certainly in my mind, that this was the power….

COHEN: The faculty?

BROWNE: Yes.

COHEN: Whereas you expected….

BROWNE: Well, we thought that the administration, you know, that the administration was the way to go.

COHEN: Oh, in terms of what the admissions—basically, admissions standards would be? Is that what we're saying?

BROWNE: Yes. But as it turned out, everything we wanted, really, the faculty for the most part would have been the way to go.

COHEN: So what didn't the faculty give the organization what the organization wanted?

BROWNE: Oh, well, see. We're missing each other here. I'm not saying—because we weren't talking to the faculty. Okay? We weren't talking to the faculty. And after we came out of the building and we realized the role the faculty played, now all we could hope was to try to influence in some way. We felt that I guess, again, I mean it's like a snowball kind of thing, you know. Here we are. Thought we had an understanding—

COHEN: I see.

BROWNE: —from the administration. And now we understand that the administration couldn't give us what we were asking for.

COHEN: Yes.

BROWNE: And so we had been really barking up the wrong tree. Okay? And that was why the posturing afterwards was so important.

COHEN: But after all was said and done, after you were out, what didn't the faculty give you? After you realized that it was in the hands of the faculty as far as admissions standards, what

didn't the faculty give you? What would you have liked from the faculty that you didn't get at that point?

BROWNE: Well, we were still trying to get, as I said, a definitive—to get more definitive admissions policy and program. And we still were concerned about the question about the Afro-American Studies Program and black faculty and the staff—black faculty. So that's what we were continuing to agitate for. Because, you know, it became clear to us that we has a piece of paper without them.

COHEN: I wanted to go back again to talk about some of the people who were directly involved, some of the leaders of the action. Vickie Donaldson played a prominent role.

BROWNE: Yes.

COHEN: We can asses her role?

BROWNE: Yes. Well, Vickie…. Before the takeover, the…. Let's see, it was Harrison Snell was the chairman, I was vice chairman. I believe Vickie—she might have been secretary or something. But in formulating the strategies for the takeover and the like, I mean it was folks like Vickie Donaldson and Marvin McGraw who played leading roles in the planning and in gaining support and bringing in others …One of the roles that Vickie played in particular was that her house was one of the hangouts, so to speak, for the weekend card games that used to dominate the Campus Center. We'd go to her house and we'd be at her house. So it became an informal meeting place from which many discussions took place. And after, and it was because of the role that they played, in particular Vickie and Marvin we talked about. Well I was like the chairman of the organization. I'm not really sure. I guess the only thing I'm sure of is somewhere between the takeover and shortly thereafter, we had what we called the triumvirate kind of, so Vickie and Marvin. And actually we played a…it worked out fairly well.

COHEN: What was the division of labor in this triumvirate?

BROWNE: Now again, we relied—we did have a division of labor. I mean basically—I'm at a loss to give you specifics on it. But, well, one of the things I think that…we played different kinds of roles. I think Vickie, for instance, who worked for Curvin in fact, you know.

COHEN: Worked for Bob Curvin, did you say?

BROWNE: Yes, she worked for Bob Curvin. You know, work-study.

COHEN: Oh, he was on the faculty.

BROWNE: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: Okay.

BROWNE: You know she interacted with him a lot and other students through her home. And also she was one of the card players. I used to—I refused to learn how to play Whist. I used to harangue folks every day, you know. You don't have to do that, just playing cards all day. It used to burn me up. Vickie used to be sitting right there with them. Marvin was, you know, I guess the more intellectual type. But Vickie was very good, writes very well too.

COHEN: Yes, so I understand..

BROWNE: So a lot of…I mean a lot of the—the man thing would be like sitting down and us, you know, there might be a group of us. I mean seven, eight, ten, a dozen or more of us in Vickie's house, at Bessie Hill's house, somewhere. And we'd…have these deep…it was really a chaotic process I mean, you know, in terms of discussions. You know a couple of us would be over here and somebody else would be over here, and suddenly we'd be arguing across the room. And you know Vickie was very good at when we had come to a consensus. Or even before. I mean just writing down the various views. And she was excellent at that, you know. So she played an important role in the formulation of things. Not that she…. Vickie also talks [laughs] extremely well and a lot. [Laughter] I mean not that she didn't play a role in the formulation of things. But she also was able to capture that on paper. Whereas Marvin was always, and they were at odds with each other. You know Marvin was, he was a deep intellectual. But, you know, very good in terms of articulating many of the things that we were attempting to do. That's the three of us there. There were others who played…many who played—Jim McGill, Doug Morgan. Vivian King was…Vivian was, I think, was good at the intellectualizing and in articulating concepts and ideas that we had. There were a host of folks, though. It was by no means a one-man—I couldn't have done this by no means, even pretend to take credit for what happened. I do believe, though, that I, like I say, I tried to be a stabilizing force. I mean despite the public image that I may have represented on campus. You know I basically—I tried to work, you know, with folks and between folks. And I think I was somewhat successful at it.

COHEN: Sort of a big question: How would you…what is your assessment of the historical significance of the Conklin Hall Action and the aftermath?

BROWNE: Well, I think the…. Well, let's not over blow it…. I don't want to belittle it. But let me start by saying if we didn't do it, somebody would have. This university couldn't have remained immune to change that was taking place in the country at large. But I mean it was the right time and the right place essentially. I think that the importance is tremendous in terms of finally—Rutgers finally addressing issues that it had heretofore attempted to remain aloof from: in terms of…concerns of black folks. You know I think that, you know, we talked sort of generally, previously, but I mean from admissions to finally giving Paul Robeson his due. And to having an atmosphere where, you know, I think blacks can generally feel comfortable and can learn.

COHEN: Yes. Anything we've talked about before that you'd like to go back to?

BROWNE: Well, there's probably a lot that I'd like to go back to. I just….You know what I should have done and maybe, I don't know what your time is like. But I had some responses…. I've got a letter that I never even mailed to Professor McCormick about the book. No, there's

not…. I mean I think that I'm proud of what we did. I think we did the right thing even if not always in the right way. I think that one of the things that…. In the process of developing BOS, developing and going through the struggles that we did on campus, etc., one of the things that I was always, had particular concern about and turned out to have some success, that we not be isolated from the community. That we address community issues and concerns as blacks. I think that we did that very well. I think that as an organization, BOS never got it right. I think during that period we did pretty well. No question about it. But I think one of the legacies that we left, the focus was never quite clear, particularly in terms of the campus. …One of the legacies that I am proud of, but I have some regrets about, was the fact that finally we got BOS to address the community issues, I mean right after the takeover, etc. You know, there was the whole push for electing a black mayor and etc. And BOS played a very large role in that whole political process.

COHEN: In the community?

BROWNE: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. What we had…. I mean there were a number of our students who went on and played a role in the Gibson Administration: Marvin McGraw, Doug Morgan, George Hampton, Vickie. And I think BOS continued to, you know, as I see it, continued to attempt to do that kind of thing. And probably—again, I haven't been here—but from what I've seen, it's kind of lost sight of its mission on campus. You know I don't think it's staying on top of things as well as it could have. So for instance I'm not—only because I'm a law student now, that I have, you know, I'm in a position to kind of see. I mean the AALS over there, what is it? The AALS, the Association of African-American Law Students, I mean still plays an integral role, I think, in the law school and the law student program. And I don't think it's lost sight of that or been deterred from that over the years. Whereas BOS it seems has over these years played an increasingly… you know it's often been almost absent from the campus, and I think that's unfortunate. While I can't take claim fully for that, I certainly think that that's, you know, that the kernel of that was in trying to…was planted back in the early days.

COHEN: Talking about law school and close to wind up, I want to sort of switch gears to not dealing specifically what that period is like. As a student in SAS [School of Arts and Sciences] and now as a law school student.

BROWNE: Mm-hmm.

COHEN: How well prepared did the college prepare you for the law school?

BROWNE: Well, when we got together the last time, I think I, not on tape, we were talking. For me personally, I didn't afford myself of the college experience in the sense…. I mean I'd say that my personal life is a reflection of what I'm saying about BOS; in the sense that I was always more community-oriented than I was into the—in the college per se. And looking back I, you know, missed a few things that I probably shouldn't have. Or let's say I didn't take things as seriously as I should have during that period. Obviously I gained…I mean I have gained from my experience at NCAS. I think…I mean in a sense I mean that was a learning experience. Certainly, like I say, I am willing to…. I mean I can see many shortcomings in terms of how we went about doing things and basically because we overlooked a lot and we weren't as thorough as we could have or should have been. We were young. We were idealists. [Laughter] I mean

this is, you know, the good times despite all the adversity. So I mean it was a learning experience. I mean I'm certainly a better person for it, and I've gained a lot from it. From an academic standpoint, I have to admit that I didn't afford myself intellectually of the opportunity that was here. And in fact I tended to belittle that. I guess when I returned—you know there was a ten-year gap between my finishing school. So I left in seventy and had a year to go.

COHEN: Oh, that's right. What year were you…?

BROWNE: I was gone in my senior year.

COHEN: Senior year. Oh, it's right there. Right.

BROWNE: Which I finished ten years later. I left in seventy and finished in eighty. I came back and saw things more seriously than I did the first time around. Of course now I'm trying to, now I just want to get out. And really didn't…. I mean I didn't get too involved in much of what was going on around campus. I didn't seem…. Like my presence was desired or needed with the BOS folks. I did concentrate on my studies more than I did the first time. But overall I think that I could have gotten more if I had, you know, and that's my own—I blame myself for that. But it hasn't necessarily…. Well, it has. I mean I've had to kind of tighten up and pick up on study-habits that I didn't…. I had to correct, repair habits that I had developed in the past. I'm doing fairly well right now. I feel pretty good about it.

COHEN: Anything else that we haven't touched on which you'd like to wrap up?

BROWNE: No. Unless there's something else you want to ask.

COHEN: Oh, I guess we could go on and o…and it's getting late in the day. Thank you very much.

[End of Tape #3]

----------[End of Interview]----------

Reviewed and edited by Catherine Carey 10/22/2012