

JOHN BROESAMLE SUDDENLY A GIANT: A HISTORY OF CSUN COLLECTION

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM BURWELL JR.

March 21, 1990

Location unknown

Interviewer

John Broesamle

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Edited by: Philip Walsh

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PROVENANCE

This oral history of William Burwell Jr. was conducted by John Broesamle on March 21st, 1990 in an unknown location. This interview was conducted by Broesamle as source material for his book *Suddenly a Giant: A History of California State University, Northridge* (Northridge: Santa Susana Press, 1993). The first transcription of this interview was completed by Cameron Takahashi.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William Burwell Jr., born in Birmingham, Alabama, graduated from San Fernando Valley High School and went on to study sociology at San Fernando Valley State College in 1967. An ardent Black nationalist, he and other activists established the Black Student Union in 1967 and organized protests, which led to the creation of the Pan-African Studies Department in 1969. He taught at CSUN until 1981, when he resigned his professorship to pursue a Masters of Divinity Degree at Talbot Theological Seminary, where he also assisted in the development of a Minority Ministers Program. He organized and served as pastor to the First Berean Christian Church in Los Angeles, California, then became dean of the North American School of Theology in Knoxville, Tennessee.

WILLIAM BURWELL JR. ORAL HISTORY

SUMMARY INDEX

TRACK #1A

- 0:00-5:00 Burwell introduces himself and starts to discuss the race relations on the San Fernando State Valley College campus.
- 5:01-10:00 Burwell gives some examples of how racial tensions manifested in the classroom, then starts to talk about his involvement in the Black Student Union.
- 10:01-15:00 Burwell talks about the limitations of establishing a club on campus, what early iterations of the BSU looked like, then begins to discuss Black nationalism.
- 15:01-20:00 Burwell talks about the other people in the club, who they were, and what type of people they were.
- 20:01-25:00 Burwell discusses the solidarity and politicization that happened to people involved in the BSU.
- 25:01-30:00 Burwell discusses the BSU's intention and purpose at the time, recounts the story of the burning of the administration building, then discusses the nature of

their demonstrations and early protests after an overtly racist incident on campus.

30:01-30:45 Burwell relates events leading up to the administration building sit-in.

TRACK #1B

0:00-5:00 Burwell discusses the aftermath of the administration building sit-in and the police reaction to their demonstrations.

5:01-10:00 Burwell begins to tell a story about CSUN students and faculty demonstrating and attempting to get Delmar Oviatt's attention to negotiate with them about racism on campus.

10:01-15:00 Burwell discusses the aftermath of that demonstration, and the organization of the following demonstration in response to prior police brutality.

15:01-20:00 Burwell finishes up that story by discussing Oviatt's ultimate decision to negotiate with them at the cost of ceasing demonstrations.

20:01-25:00 Burwell connects the opposition to their activist movement to the national political mood at the time, specifically Ronald Reagan's presidency and candidacy, and then opines about Oviatt's name being used for the library.

25:01-30:00 Burwell lays out his thoughts about White sentiment in response to campus closing at the time, then begins to discuss the nature of negotiations with the administration.

30:01-31:51 Burwell describes how the administration supported his expedition to find out the best way to meet minority students' needs.

TRACK #2A

0:00-5:00 Burwell discusses the establishment of the Pan-African Studies Department, and how they hired faculty.

5:01-10:00 Burwell gives further detail as to the standards at which they hired professors for the Pan-African Studies department.

10:01-15:00 Burwell discusses the conflicts he had with his previous colleagues after the establishment of the department.

15:01-20:00 Burwell further discusses the conflicts above, and briefly mentions the progression of the different leaderships of people in the Pan-African Studies department.

- 20:01-25:00 Burwell lays out how he constructed the Pan-African Studies department, and how faculty chose students to enter the program.
- 25:01-30:00 Burwell reflects on the Pan-African Studies department and opines about what he perceives to be long-term positives and negatives about the program as it exists today.
- 30:01-31:21 Burwell briefly begins to talk about his disillusionment with academe.
- TRACK #2B
- 0:00-5:00 Burwell explains why he was disillusioned by academe's response to instituting mandatory Ethnic Studies in GE, and his opinions on the matter.
- 5:01-10:00 Burwell briefly mentions his relationship with James Cleary, then begins to discuss the importance of the Black church both to him and the Black community.
- 10:01-15:00 Burwell goes into great detail about why the Black church is so important to the Black community, including ideas such as self-assertion, social activism, economic consolidation, and community belonging.
- 15:01-19:08 Burwell wraps up by detailing the differences of his political ideologies as a student now.

INTERVIEW NOTE

Interviewer: John Broesamle, noted as JB

Interviewee: William Burwell Jr., noted as WB

Date: March 21st, 1990

Time: 1:52:05

Subject: CSUN History

00:00 WB: You know? Um. But, fortune, that—

JB: I'll punch all off. I came prepared for anything.

WB: Yeah.

JB: Let me lean over so it can hear me, I'm sure it can hear you.

WB: Sure. Sure. Would you like for me to sit over there? Is this fine?

JB: This is fine. If you're comfortable, I'm comfortable.

WB: Oh, okay. Okay.

JB: You came to Valley State as a student, didn't you.

WB: Mmhm.

JB: And what year? What year was that at?

WB: '67. In the summer of '67 I came there and took a summer course with, boy, I was just thinking of this guy the other day, Council Taylor in the Anthropology department.

JB: I saw him just the other day.

WB: Yeah. He was teaching a course called "Peoples of Africa". That was the only course that I saw in the whole catalog there, you know, and I came in the summer of '67 with Jerome Walker, and I—you know, we took that course together, that's when I came here.

JB: Where had you gone to high school?

WB: San Fernando High.

JB: Why did you choose Valley State?

WB: Probably—first of all, because of the proximity there. It was—I was in the valley, it was the—I'm sorry, I'll put this thing on in a second (phone ringing)—over there. Okay, I'm gonna try to continue to answer that question as it related to my selection of Northridge, again, I think I selected Northridge, one because it was in the valley, and I was living and working in the valley. I was attending Valley Junior College, LA Valley College, and my roommate Jerome Walker, was over at Cal State Northridge. In addition to that, I had had a friend of mine, Russel Rhodes, who was Barbara Rhodes' husband. Russel went to Northridge, to Cal State, right out of high school. And he was the first Black guy that I had known to go there, so this had to have been about '61, maybe, could it have been that early? When did Northridge come into existence? Must've been—

JB: Transitional period debasement (??), we're learning (??) the period from '56 to '58.

WB: Yeah. So '61, he went there. And so, because of those recommendations, that's how I ended up at No—over there, yeah.

JB: Interesting. What was your major?

WB: Sociology.

JB: When you arrived, you arrived in 1967. How many Black students are there, as you arrive?

WB: There are twenty-three Black students, day and night enrollment, out of a total student population of eighteen thousand.

JB: What is it like being a Black student in that setting?

WB: It is frightening, intimidating, lonely, you know, as I think back on those—on that time period, I think that the one thing I felt more than anything else was a sense of isolation. I felt isolated. I felt that I was looked upon like, What are you doing here, on in some cases, professors acknowledged you, and other cases, they ignored you, and, you know, so it was tough. So much so, that's what was the impetus for the formation of the Black Student Union.

JB: I want to get to that, I want to talk with you about that. Perhaps we can focus, just for a moment, on the ignoring and the acknowledging—it, let—don't let me put words into your own mouth, but is what you're saying that you encountered racism among the faculty?

WB: Oh, no doubt. No doubt. The racism, though, that I encountered, was covert and subtle. It was not the overt type of racism that we'd later on encounter or had reports that were being encountered by other people. My, the racism that I encountered would be more of—well, I can recall, and I don't even remember the person's name, but on several occasions, when the issue of Blacks would be discussed in class, it would either be brushed off as being inconsequential. You know, not enough time to even spend any time on—I remember, and I guess maybe this was at Valley College, coming into that whole scene, but I remember
5:00 reading the history book, and that was about three pages out of a four-hundred page history book that was really—that reflected anything close to what the Black experience was all about. The dominant attitude that I ran into was one that Blacks should assimilate as quickly as possible into the mainstream. That one should become White if you expect to be accepted. Either that, or just—just ignoring me. I mean, and if I raised an issue—and I came there—I remember, I came there as an individual who—I was a Black nationalist when I arrived on the campus, so it wasn't easy to ignore me. You know? It took some effort on the part of instructors, because I was constantly bringing up the issue, Well, how does this relate to the Black community, et cetera, but I would always get brushoff answers, or get the response, you know, the instructors were like, This is irritating. And also, the students, and I'll never forget the feeling of the—that I received from the Greek fraternities and the white athletes there, they were—their response was like, you know, why are you infringing upon us, you know, by asking these kinds of questions? Who cares? You know, that kind of thing. So that was basically what I ran into.

JB: Let me—let me ask you, a couple of examples of the kinds of questions you would ask that they would find so annoying?

WB: Well, if we talked about, oh, the Emancipation Proclamation issue, it would—I don't think they would actually say that "Lincoln freed the slaves", but it would be given, in the sense that it was a humanitarian gesture on the part of America to free the slaves, and I would raise the question of, and because I knew better, I would raise the que—I would maybe say, well, is it not true that Abraham Lincoln said that his issue, that his purpose was to preserve the Union? Whether if that meant freeing the slaves, fine, or maintaining slavery. Those kinds of questions would be irritating to an instructor. Or if, in a sociology class, if we—we talked about the family, they would talk about the fact that the—they would talk about the broken family, and the Black family being a family that was—was a broken family, and so, I would raise the issues of, Well, to what extent should society take responsibility for this? Or, you seem to be suggesting that there's something inherent in Black people that makes them immoral or irresponsible, rather than taking under consideration the racism that's existed. Those kinds of questions would be irritating and not welcome.

JB: Bothered the white students, bothered the faculty?

WB: White students, yeah. Yeah. And sometimes it bothered the students more than it did the faculty.

JB: Did you have much exposure to the P.E. department?

WB: No, I did not.

JB: Because one hears many, many accounts of racism in that department, specifically.

WB: Yeah. No, I did not. I was, let's see, when I came to Northridge, I was beyond my desires for athletics and those kinds of things, and only took classes over there, really, just to meet the requirements to graduate.

JB: How old were you?

WB: Let's see, I guess when I came to Northridge, I must have been twenty-five.

JB: Oh, you were a little older than the norm.

WB: Oh, yes. Yes. I had already been in the service when I was going to school there on the G.I. Bill.

JB: Oh, really?

WB: So, yeah, so, and that was part of how my leadership was, also. Cause I was, as a matter of fact, in the Black Student Union, I was the oldest student in the Union. You know? So that gave me some ability to speak to the younger students, yeah?

JB: Campus life for Black students in the years that you were there, as a student, '67 and thereafter, what year did you graduate?

WB: Let's see, what was it, there, what is it, '70. '70.

JB: Alright. Let's say in those inclusive years, what was social life on the campus like for Black students?

WB: Initially nonexistent. There was no social life. You know, one of the—one of the—one of the—as a Black male on campus, where there are maybe three Black females, you know, obviously it limits your selection there, there's not much to choose from. And then, you don't really dare court, date any White females, because you incur the wrath from both sides, particularly at that time of Black consciousness, so it was nonexistent. The entertainment that was brought to the campus was all geared to the White—to the White taste, the plays, the drama, everything there was for the White student. There were no activities, there were no Black history of cultural things, or that was just—it was just nonexistent. I mean, you went to—even in the community of Northridge, I mean, off-campus was terrible. I mean, if you went to a bank off campus to try to cash a check, I mean, it could be a university check. I mean, it was—people stared at you, looked at you, what are you doing here, kind of thing. Basically, as a Black student, we used to call it Disneyland, because it was like a make-believe, it wasn't real, that kind of thing, it didn't resemble anything like where you lived. And so, you came to Northridge, you came to school, then you went home. And you tried to be sure that if you had an evening class, that you parked your car in some well-lighted area. Because it was not at all unheard of for—to be made sport by the Greek fraternities, you know, catch you walking across the campus and across that field out there—out there where, I guess it was Monterey Hall? And over that area, I mean, it was dangerous.

JB: They'd mug you? They'd attack you?

WB: Oh, yeah, yeah. Chase you, you know, just for the fun of it, you know. Take lemons, those lemons out of lemon trees, throw lemons at you, and, you know, yeah.

JB: Other than that, in terms of interrelating with Whites, there's a minimum interrelation with whites. And it's very much a commuter campus for Blacks, take classes, and go home. Home being back in Pacoima, home being South Central for some? That's one? Let's talk a little bit about the first Black student organizations. You mentioned the BSU. I understand the BSU had trouble getting charter because there wasn't enough black students to sign the charter?

10:00

WB: Right. That—

JB: On the application.

WB: Yeah. The application said that in order to have a student organization, you needed a petition with thirty students being interested. And, as I said, day and night enrollment we can only turn up twenty-three, and I think two of them didn't want to sign the petition, so we had to get Mike Lee and other guys from the Students for SDA [SDS, Students for a Democratic Society], white radical students, to sign the petition with the understanding that they would not, in fact, be members. Yeah.

JB: And they were to be members, it was to be a Black organization.

WB: It was a Black organization, yeah.

JB: Were there other Black organizations, or was BSU it?

WB: BSU was it. Yeah.

JB: You mentioned you were a Black nationalist when you came to Northridge. Could you summarize what your views were, and how close those views were to what BSU's views were?

15:00 WB: Well, um, um, at the time in '67 when I came there, um, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* was just being put out there. And, um, um, a number of us were, were, getting caught up—See, I had initially, I was involved in the civil rights movement, coming out of Birmingham where I was born, I had that kind of background. But in '67, early '67, I changed over to Black nationalism, was the difference being, the civil rights movement was a nonviolent movement, that was a lot of protest, uh, uh, within the law, as it were, and Black nationalism, uh,uh, being, by any means necessary kind of a thing, violent if necessary. So, Black nationalism also was a separatist kind of a movement, whereas the civil rights movement was integrationist. So I was about separatism, as it were. And, when I came there, I—Jerome and I were the leaders. I remember our very first meeting of the BSU, Jerome presided over the meeting as the acting Chairman of the BSU, and I was the guest speaker. You know? So, then, we had brought all those guys, Archie Chatman, and Art Jones, and those guys, we brought them, those were the students on the campus to the meeting, I think George Boswell and some others, there, and the BSU, the ideology of the BSU became one of Black nationalism, because we started it, and that was our ideology.

JB: Could you talk a little bit about Archie Chatman, Art Jones, George Boswell, some of the other Black students you knew in those years, when you were a student? As people, as individuals?

WB: Well, yeah, yeah. I remember my first meeting, that meeting, that first BSU meeting, I remember it was held in the afternoon because the student athletes, we had to wait until they got through with a practicing, football practice. Archie Chatman came with a cast on his arm, he'd broken his arm, so he couldn't play that semester. But he—

JB: Football? Football player?

WB: He was a football player. And—but I remember he had these cleats around his neck, shoes hanging around his neck. Art Jones was also a football player. And he came. Art was a bit older than Archie. And to me, at that time, they were—Archie particularly, was a young, very bright, and very impressionable student. And I remember, when I spoke that day, how intensely he listened to everything that I had to say. And from that point on, of course, he came to Pacoima. See, at the time, I had a Black nationalist organization in Pacoima, Afro-Pac, Afro-Americans of Pacoima that I had also started.

JB: Larger organization, smaller organization, how many members?

WB: Well, it had, oh, I suppose we had about thirty members, but we were the—the black movement in the San Fernando Valley.

JB: Really. Afro-Pac?

WB: Afro-Pac was.

JB: P-A-C?

WB: P-A-C. Yeah, for Pacoima. Burn Bryant was a member of my organization, Jerome was a member, let's see who else, Rev Scott was a member, Hetty Fullenwider was a member, don't know if you remember her or not, but—but what happened is—so I was a black nationalist then, so I brought my Black nationalism to the campus. And the people who were in the community followed me to the campus, so to speak. Well, Archie, then, because Archie had had no exposure to Black nationalism, and, so he just followed around, and he wanted to—and he was an avid reader, he'd read everything that I said, I'm reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm*, I'm reading Garvey, or Kuma, or whoever, he was our history major, so he would just, just, you know, eat em up, the books up, and stuff. Attended all of the meetings with us, wanted to know what was going on. And very quickly came to the, you know, he just rolls to the top as the student who should be—who was the most committed. And because, I was an older student, and in fact, was not really in the mainstream of the Black student population as small as it was. I decided that Archie should be the guy to head the BSU, Jerome and I made that decision.

JB: Because he was an age-peer, of the younger students?

20:00 WB: He was an age peer of the rest of the—mmhm. And then, most of the students were there, Black students where in the P.E. department, they were there to play sports. So he knew them and had that kind of kinship with them. So that's why we decided that he should head it up, and—cause I was basically a community person. My activities were in the community, so I headed up the community organization, we made Archie the head of the student organization.

JB: How did EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] fit into all of this? And how effective was it? Or wasn't it?

WB: Well, first—I mean, the first thing you want to do is increase the number. You want to get some more Black folk on the campus. So that became the number one priority. And at that time, we heard, in '67, we heard a program that was just being initiated in the Cal State system, called the Educational Opportunities program, which had really become an outcome of the civil rights movement. This was one of the things that hap—so we investigated it, and of course, found out that we could use this program to bring some other students, additional students. So Stan Charnofsky was appointed to head up this program for us, and I remember we, initially we wanted to bring five hundred Black students on campus the first semester. And after a great deal of negotiating, we finally settled for a hundred and fifty. You know. That they would be brought on, in this—under the EOP program.

JB: In the fall of '68.

WB: Now we are in the—no, we must now be in the—my chronology may be a bit mixed up here, but I think this must have been the summer, that's when it was, of '68.

JB: Alright.

WB: We brought them on in a summer program.

JB: That's right, there was a bridge program.

WB: Right. Yeah. And we politicized them. As a matter of fact, they had to show some political awareness to be accepted, cause we were the guys that did the interviewing. We interviewed all the students. And I have students—I have a couple people who remind me now, I know a girl now who says to me, I heard about you guys and the way you were, so when I got ready to go to the interview, I fixed my hair, washed my hair and so it would not be straight and be natural, because if you came to the interview with straight hair, anything, and then—that, the whiter you look—if you look white, you weren't getting in.

JB: No [unintelligible], period.

WB: And it didn't matter what your grades were. You know. And if you came with Black consciousness, didn't matter how poor your grades were.

JB: Really. That's the way it was?

WB: That's the way it was. The criteria was Black consciousness. So, we picked the most politically aware students we could, and we spent that summer politicizing them. And every student there who came in under the program had vowed allegiance to the BSU. And we hired Archie and all those guys to work in the summer program.

JB: How do you mean, “vowed allegiance,” they committed themselves to belonging? Supporting? Being active in it?

WB: That’s all of that. So by the fall of ‘68 , when the fall rolled around, we went from twenty-three to a hundred and seventy-five, almost. You know. And that’s when we became a force on the campus.

JB: Would you say that in that recruitment plan lay some of the origins of November 4th? What followed? That is to say, you’re bringing in students who are aware, who were activists, you have made them more so. And there’s an explosion that fall.

25.00

WB: Yeah. Yes. Yes. What you see—the year before, we had been—BSU’s had been springing up on high school campuses and other places. So, when these students came in, they had a sense of awareness already. We politicized them, and by politicizing, I mean, we only—we said to them, listen. You have the responsibility for bringing—creating a climate where other Blacks, other of your sisters and brothers can be brought to this campus. You know? We are the pioneers, we have to do this thing. Now, those—to say that laid the seed for November 4th is an understatement, because they became much—so political they outdistanced our own anticipation of what they would be. And I guess the classic example of that was Eugene who set the administration building on fire. You know. This came out of a frustrating meeting that we had had as to what the administration was doing, and, I—Mio, probably Mio Gerard, Archie, some of us, somebody must have said something like, you know, we knew all these revolutionary slogans, and I think there was one that said something like “power yields only to a greater power.” Something, some of those Mao Tse-tung, kinds of things, you know. So, this guy, this kid, knew that something had to be done. No one suggested anything to him, but he took it on his own to go there. We were as surprised as anyone when we found out the building was on fire. We had no idea.

JB: He’d taken things—

WB: He took—Took it on himself.

JB: Literally.

WB: Literally.

JB: Extremely literally.

WB: To do that. Literally to do that. Now, after he did it, we tried to aid him and cover it up, we took him to a doctor over in Pacoima, and, you know, that whole thing, matter of fact, Rev Scott was a dentist. And we took him to Rev, and he treated him. But of course, when they came and the police came to the dorms, he had this bandage. He’s—what happened was, in the process of setting the building on fire, he got burned himself. Got a first-degree burn. And

so, when they came through, it was relatively easy to—it was a—he was the only guy there with the burns, so.

JB: What was Rev Scott treating him for? The burn?

WB: Yeah, for the burn.

JB: The burn.

WB: Yeah. Yeah. So—and another way to show you how these things happen, November 4th was an absolute spontaneous event. That was the point we were trying to make in the trials when they had accused folk of conspiracy. We had not conspired, and the—that's the evidence that was the fact that I wasn't even on campus. I mean, I was in Pacoima when November 4th occurred. Because the way it started, of course, was just a meeting, another one of the endless meetings we had with the P.E. department, or the History or Soc, we were always meeting with somebody, you know, over these saying of various issues. So this was just another meeting that they were gonna go to the P.E. department. And I know that came to the activities on November 4th, you know, so. Yeah, I'm doing.

JB: This is fascinating. You weren't there, but if you had been on campus, I've heard you say you would've been there.

WB: Oh, yes, no doubt about that. No doubt. As a matter of fact, when I came to campus that evening, they called me in Pacoima, Archie and the guys would say, And you really missed it man, let me tell you what happened boy, we really did it today. So I rushed out to the Northridge Hall, and the—they told me the story of what happened. And they said, Hey man, we're gonna be on the news. And we turned on the TV and there they were, and I almost said, Man! I've missed it. You know. Kinda makes so—

JB: Did they have any sense of what was gonna follow?

WB: No, no. Not only that, but the demands were made up on the spot. That was really Archie. And Wazo by then. Robert Lewis did. You know, they made up those demands on the—all of that was, I mean, just decided on the spot. But we had been given—I mean, it was typical, typical runaround. When the President's not here, when the guy you need to see is off campus today, that was always the deal. So it was just that at this time, the students just took it to say, well, okay, if he's not here, then not only are we gonna wait for him, but we're all gonna wait, nobody, we will wait til the president comes. And that's how the false imprisonment came about. And of course, the kidnapping charge was because they would found out that the difference between false imprisonment and kidnapping has to do with distance. If you take a person, if a person goes, travels with you so many feet, then it's considered kidnapping. But if they don't travel that distance, then it's considered false imprisonment. So the people from the P.E. department were—we were charged with

kidnapping them, because they walked from the P.E. building to the administration building. That was considered kidnapping. But the people that were herded into the room, that was considered false imprisonment. You know, and I—each of these things were just spontaneously. And going to the Administration building was the suggestion of the P.E. department. We said, We wanted them to fire this guy, Markham I guess it was—

JB: Yeah, Don Markham.

WB: —And they—he said, you know, I don't have the authority to do that. They said, Who does? He said, The President. Only the President.

JB: It's Ar—Glenn Arnett who is saying, I don't have the authority.

WB: Yeah, Glenn Arnett saying, I can't do that. I don't hire and fire, only the President does that. And they said, Well, then we need to see the President. And he said, Well, the President's in the Administration building. Well, we said, let's go see him.

JB: Let's switch over.

[END OF TRACK 1]