

William Burwell, Track 2

Tape 1, side b begins.

JB: We're back on tape now.

WB: Kay.

JB: So, you felt that the charges, the kidnapping charges, were trumped up.

00:00 WB: Oh, yes. That was ludicrous, to suggest kidnapping. False imprisonment, that had actually occurred.

JB: What about threats?

WB: Well, they were real, you know. Some of the students got a bit carried away, Eddie Dancer and some of the other kids, students got a bit carried away, and frustrated. You know, we ran into these racism all the time, the BSU became the ombudsman between the Black students—for the Black students and the faculty. And so, since with this—with this large number of students on campus, I mean, we would have brought to our attention, every week, two, three incidents of overt racism. Some student would come to us and say, you know, today in my class, the professor said such and such. You know what I mean, you know. So, we would go the—if it was a History, we'd go to the History department to meet with them. And they, well, you have to meet with the Chairperson. Well, you have to go see the Dean. Well, you got to go see the Vice-President. Well, he's not here. You'll have to make an appointment and then you have to come back. And so, you know, all of us, and these kinds of frustrations were there. So it was—it was like, you know, people who—they just got carried away with all of this. And so, now was, it was striking out and striking back. And so, yeah, some of the threats were actually made.

JB: Several went to prison.

WB: Yes. Yes. Archie and Eddie and Wazo went to prison. They didn't spend a—the guy who'd really, I would say who was damaged, as it were, from this, in terms of the prison thing, was a kid Eugene. Eugene, I think his name—I can't remember Eugene's last name now, but Eugene, the student who set the administration building on fire. His whole life was changed. I mean, as a result of this, he was convicted of, what is it, it's not called larceny, what is it when you burn, what's the charge? Arson. He was convicted of arson and sentenced, to I don't remember, three to five years or something, and this kid never recovered from that. And he was a very impressionable kid, and when they sent him to the prison, he was only—this kid was maybe, they sent him to the boy's camp or whatever, seventeen, eighteen years old, and when he got into the joint, they turned him out, turned him into a homosexual. So, I mean, his whole life, you know, whatever you get. I don't even have any idea where he is now. But, you know, he is the real, real fatality, if you will, that came out of that. The other guys, Eddie, Wazo and Archie, they were given these huge sentences, but after, I think, I don't think anyone stayed in there

more than ninety days, a hundred and twenty days, maybe, which was about the same time that we—well, that's what I was sentenced to subsequently, the—for, to the January 8th, I was sentenced for January 8th. Brings another guy to mind, Limon Basta, and I went to jail for January 8th, and spent time in the common jail for that.

JB: Could you talk a little bit about that?

WB: Yeah. Well, following—following the events of November, when we found out that the police, then, had all these charges of conspiracy and kidnapping and false imprisonment, and they were talking, you know, up to twenty-five years, and, you know, so the trial started. So when the trial was going on, we on campus were continuing to bring pressure on the administration to make good on the demands. And to even intervene on our behalf with the court system. And then to do this, then, we had rallies and demonstrations just practically every week, but certainly every Friday, we had various kinds of demonstrations. Now, all of our demonstrations after November 4th were peaceful. Although, there was some vandalism that occurred in the evening time to promote the activities, as it were. In fact, I remember—I remember the entrance over to the administration building, not the campus side, but from the street side, where you park in and come right inside there, I remember going there one night, and fact, I don't know if I want to put this on tape or not, I guess the statutory limit has expired now, but I remember going in there and taking a paint bucket and throwing it up over on the name, San Fernando Valley State College.

5:00

JB: On the administration building?

WB: On the administration building. And then, I remember years later after I was hired there, it took forever for them to—you know, so that was that reminder for—I mean, maybe five years before the spot ever went away, you know? Kind of thing, it was always a reminder to me. But we carried on these activities, and finally—as time grew, we gained more and more support from White students and White faculty members. They began to join us in these activities, and they saw the injustices of what was being done there, and we, then, we actually politicized the White student campus with the help of the SDA, the White radical group there, we politicized the White students there. And, so, by January 8th, we had a march, from the administration building, or a James Hargett was there, a rather noted Black minister. And he gave this fiery speech, about, I think, "The Children of Bigger Thomas." Something like that was the title of it. We—the Black students, about a hundred and fifty of us, along with about two hundred White students, marched to the administration building from that open forum area, marched to the administration building and demanded to see the president. Oviatt was the acting President at that time. And Oviatt wouldn't come out to meet with us. And as a matter of fact, when we got to the building on that day, they—the security guards were there, and they said the administration building is closed. Say, how can the administration building be closed? And I remember saying to Archie and the other guys, you guys already got these felony charges hanging over you, you get in the rear, and let Jerome and myself, guys who don't have felony charges, let us go up in front. And I remember the security guard, when I got to the door and all these students behind me, and I pulled the door, and the door wasn't locked. Which should

have told me something. But I pulled the door, and the door came open, and he just simply held the door with his arm, and he peeked in, and he said that the administration building is closed. I said, I am a student, administration building can't be closed to me, I'm a student here. So I knocked his hand away from the doors, arm holding the door. And again, I should have known something—because he put up no resistance to that, you know. And when I knocked his hand away and went on in the building, within seconds, coming from around that other side where the cashiers are now, were these helmeted riot-equipped police. And they attempted, they closed the door back. Archie made his way in and when he saw them grab me and stuff, Archie got in, and several guys that got in before they closed the door. When the police closed the door, the students on the outside said, you know, you got our leaders inside. And that was this big stone ashtray with sand right outside of the building. So students picked up this big ashtray and hurled it through the glass door. When they did that, the police, just like letting out mad dogs then, then they just came out and they started indiscriminately beating people. Whites, whoever.

10:00

And by now, I have been taken down that corridor and out the back door, handcuffed, and put on a police bus. We didn't realize it, but they had a whole bus, had a bus back there, and fifty to a hundred policemen already back there. So put us on the bus. And I remember sitting on the bus there, didn't really know what was going on out front, heard noises and commotion, then I remember Sheldon Jones being brought on the bus, handcuffed with his eye almost hanging out of his socket. Where he had, where a policemen had taken his Billy club and gouged him in the eye. And handcuffed him.

JB: He already lost his vision, is that right?

WB: Yes. Yeah. Alright. And Jim—Reverend Hargett and others, and all of us, he saved me, Reverend Hargett, he locked arms with me and he'd said, and they wanted to take me separately, they could see he was a minister, he had on a collar and all of that, and they were trying to take me separately [unintelligible]. But he wouldn't let them take me, he'd locked himself to me, so they handcuffed him too, and took us off, but his presence kept them from brutalizing me.

JB: He was wearing a clerical collar or otherwise identifiable—

WB: Yes.

JB: What was the charge?

WB: Unlawful—trespassing. Trespassing was the charge.

JB: I see. And you were incarcerated for how long?

WB: Well, I was put in jail that night, that afternoon, and we got out that night. And we had a big rally, then I went to my Black nationalist organization in Pacoima who had already called a meeting. And at that meeting, there were probably a hundred White students and faculty from

Northridge who came to the meeting that night. And vowed and pledged to go back with us the following day, to do it again. Well, because of the brutalize—brutality, the way that the police acted on the 8th, it enraged, it really enraged the White students. So when we came back on the following day, we had three times as many people supporting us. And I'll never forget this, I'll never forget. And ironically, because the 9th is my birthday, and I remember thinking, Man, this is a tough way to spend my birthday. But I remember coming to campus that day, driving down Nordhoff, and by the time we crossed, oh, oh, I can't even get, I can't remember the streets now, but probably, probably eight blocks or so before you get to the campus, I noticed there were, like, lines and lines of policeman, cars. And when came around the campus, came around the front towards the administration building, parked there in a student line, when we got there, there was the—in the place where the sundial was, there were leaflets. And the leaflets said that campus is closed today for a state of emergency. And then there were every, you know, half an hour with all of the ding-dong that would be this announcement, you know, this campus has been declared to be in a state of emergency. All public meetings would have been called off and are illegal, you know. So of course, the campus was almost, by then, this time, it was almost literally shut down. Well, what we did was, they said that the meetings—so they'd made it clear that all meetings had been cancelled. We went to every classroom, and announced that the rally was still being held. I guess it was scheduled for noon. By noontime, there were probably five to six hundred people who had gathered in the open forum, now. By this time, we had gained the support of a number of White clergy from Northridge, a Catholic priest, I recall, because they all had their collars and stuff on. Tom Laswell and some other people were there, and I remember we had designed this the night before, that we would have the—an arrangement, we—we

15:00 knew we were gonna be arrested, so we had an arrangement where the clergy would form a ring on the outside, then the next ring would be White students, then the next ring would be Black female students then the next ring would be the Black male students, and in the very center would be the Black student leadership, that was Archie and myself, and others, and all that kind of thing. And we got to campus that day, and all those people were there, and all this was going on, and on that field, athletic field, adjacent to the music building, they drove up these buses, these police buses, and they begin making this announcement. You know, by the—this is an illegal assembly, and by the order of the people of the State of California, I'll never forget how ironic that was, you are hereby ordered to disperse. And I remember we started chanting, "We are the people of the State of California". You know? And so, and they began a countdown, and they toted us all off, of course, to the jail. And, of course that was a riot because the jail had no facilities to take care of that many people, and so they had no booking for some, so they had to come up with something—and at this time, the policemen had not been trained in riot control. So they didn't know how to handle any of this stuff, I mean, these guys were, they just didn't know how to handle all of us. So what they did was, they start—they would, you'd stand up there with the cop who arrested you, with the arresting officer at the bus, and they would hold up these little numbers, put these little numbers, and take a picture of you, and book you, as it were, right there and put you on the bus, cause they couldn't go through the normal booking procedure because there was just too many of us. And when we got over to the jail in Van Nuys, they had to turn the officer's mess hall into a booking area there, it was an ordeal, so. That night, the human relations officers, public relations officers,

two Black guys from the LAPD were sent in to meet with the leaders and negotiate with us. So we agreed that we would be willing to sit down with the president, that that's what we wanted all along, but we had gotten a little hard-nosed at that time, and we insisted that they meet us in Pacoima. So we didn't know, really, if it was another setup, if we went to Northridge to meet them, that they would get there finding that we'd all be arrested or beaten up, whatever. So we had them to come, and they escorted Delmar Oviatt to John Blad, was the guy who was there at this time, he was a Black guy who had been hired as a special assistant to the president, to try and again be a—the go-between the Black students and the administration. So we met over there, and Delmar—and Oviatt agreed to negotiate. And the ca—the agreement was that he would sit down and negotiate with the ten point, the demand with us, if we would agree to cease the demonstrations, you know. So that was our agreement. So we stopped the demonstrating, and we began this long process of negotiating the demands. And out of that, we wanted them to hire someone to set up a Black studies—and we didn't know what we wanted, you know, and they tried to get us to say, I don't know if we could get Harry Finestone with, very instrumental in trying to get me—what happened was, we wanted Archie to be the guy who would be hired by them to oversee it, he was the leader of the BSU. But because Archie was facing felony charges, they said that they could not, the state could not hire someone that was currently being under—being charged for crimes against the state. I wasn't there on November 4th, so I was the only person that was acceptable to both the students and the faculty and administration, so that's how I ended up getting named the head of the organization.

JB: Out of happenstance.

WB: Out of happenstance.

20:00 JB: Before we move on to the formation of the department, which intrigues me, the twists and turns are fascinating. I want to just take the opportunity at this point, to ask you to look at this whole set of events, November 4th, January 8th, the whole pattern events that lay between, before and after. From two perspectives, one as a student, as one who was deeply involved as a student, the other as a person who was an effective department Chair for many years afterwards, and an effective campus organizer of, creator of that department, how would you reflect on the way that the administration handled these crises? What was going on?

WB: Well, you know, I suppose, you know, I thought about this a lot. Again, we have kind of these slogans, power only yields to greater power, and that kind of thing, I think they responded, they reacted typical. I can—I can see right now, the response of Pieter Botha and people in South Africa to the movement there, and I see the parallels. They were very obvi—it's still going on. The initially the administration, the powers to be, first of all, stonewalling. They refuse to have any dialogue. They maintained that, You're law breakers, you're illegal, this whole kind of thing, and the response is force. At that time, Ronald Reagan was governor, and he had been swept in on the issue of law and order. See, the Watts revolt had just occurred the year before, and that's what he came in on, law and order. And he was gonna prove a point, that the way to deal with these guys, his—his Ronald Reagan's quote in the L.A. Times about

the Northridge affair was, "They ought to be grabbed by the scrubs of their necks", I'll never forget that. You know? That was rou—

JB: The scrubs!

WB: The scrubs of their necks!

JB: Then you drag them!

WB: you know, kind of a—and so, that was the response, was, you know, we just grab them by the scrubs of their necks, and throw them in a cell until they stop this. So the administration saw us as law breakers, and they responded with force. Okay? They were insensitive, they were intolerant, you know, they were—they were unyielding, that the events took the form that they did, because they left us no other avenues. I mean, it's just—I can see it happening in South Africa, now. We had to go to a by-any-means-necessary because peaceful means were simply not being responded to. I mean, listen, Oviatt was refusing to even meet with us. He said, categorically, what you are asking is absurd. You know?

JB: Specifically, specifically in reference to the ten demands?

WB: The ten demands, you know? More minority students for, more minority teachers for, fair employment practices, those kinds—he wouldn't even deal with that. He just refused to even meet with us. So, a lot of the things were just trying to get a meeting with him! And he wouldn't even—he wouldn't meet with us, period. January 8th and 9th were about—he didn't meet with us until January 9th. Now, from November 4th up until then, that was enough activities going on that should've said to somebody, hey you gotta sit down with these people. He wouldn't do it. You know, and so, they handled it terrible, and I mean, of course, Blomgren, I mean, he just dropped, he just took off, as it were, ill, and these kinds of things, and he just left it. And then, Oviatt, was you know, Oviatt was—he was pretty strong, stern, and, you know, I suppose one of the big things that took me the longest to get over the naming of the library, after Delmar T. Oviatt. I thought that was a real insult to the whole student movement on the campus there. Because he personified what it was we were up
25:00 against. And to make the library, to name it after him, was the height of insensitivity, and I've told John Cleary that. So they did not handle it well, at all.

JB: Did they learn anything? They must have learned something, or at least yielded to greater force, because the next thing you know, you're the common choice to create, or to head the creation of a new program.

WB: Yeah. They—they yielded because the campus was being shut down. I mean, they had no choice. I mean, either they were going to sit down and talk to us, or the educational process was not going on. White parents were not gonna let their student—the kids come, I mean, people were afraid to come to school there, you know, kind of thing. I mean, skirmishes broke out between—see, these same White fraternity—Greek fraternity kids took, you know, a wheel

deal with them. And they became the violent force. Well, I mean, that, to us, was—I mean, we looked forward to meeting with them, so there were all kinds of skirmishes going on, violent, fistfights, no, no knives, they were fistfights, you know, lemon throwing, you know, those kinds of things. And I think that the attendance at the campus must have fallen off at about 50%. And then, the White as—the White students, the White radical students were disrupting classes. Mike Lee and those guys would literally take over a class and disrupt the whole teaching process. So, I don't know how much they—whether, they responded because they had no choice but to respond. They had to—they had to deal with us, or they could not care. And every day, I mean, the campus had become a fortress. I mean, there were—from November 4th, up and through January 9th and on afterwards, that was always fifty to a hundred policeman on campus, half of whom were undercover, in classes, and these things. And it was intimidating. And so, obvi—the educational process itself, had been almost—but ground to a halt.

JB: So, greater force?

WB: They had to—yeah, they had to sit down.

JB: Would you do it differently if you were doing it today? If you were opening that campus up to Black students, was that the only means?

WB: Yes. Yes. Yes.

JB: You graduated in 1970. When do you become involved in establishing a new department?

WB: Well, what happened was on January 9th, '69—'69, we get out of jail. The 10th or the 11th, a day or two afterwards, we start the negotiations process. They hire me, I'm a senior in Sociology at the time. And I'm given a—they put me on a lectureship for the spring semester.

JB: Who does this? Dave Benson? Del Oviatt? Who—who makes the—

WB: Yeah, yeah.

JB: Both of them?

WB: Yeah, both of them. Right. Yeah. And then, they want me to—so what do you want? You know, kind of thing. Hire Black faculty, yeah. So they said, okay. So they had each department to trot out, to go look back over their staff, the faculty, see who they could hire, and they trotted out everything they could to show us, you know, in the History department there was a course there, your officemate taught it, slavery.

JB: Ralph Keller.

WB: Keller. You know, said, we got a course here in Sociology, oh, we have a course here called the minority family in America, and so everybody trying out their courses, and—well, how

30:00

many Black faculty? Well, there's a guy in the Math department—so, the idea was, initially was, that each academic department would hire a Black person, or not each one, but they would hire—and these, they would have somebody to offer these courses, because that's what was being done at UCLA, which they pointed to as a model. And I did not have this kind of astuteness just by fate of the grace of god or whatever, I wouldn't accept it. I said, Well, you know, I don't really know what we want, you know, but, what I want is an opportunity to find out what we want. So, they allowed me to travel to about, oh, I took about two weeks, and the university paid for me to go to, I went to about eight campuses on the East coast and then down south. Looking, as well as campuses around, looking at what was being done as it related to meeting this deal of trying to get the Black experience in the curriculum and stuff. What I discovered was, was that the only way to have any permanence and have any power, was that I have an academic department. I discovered that a center, or a program, has no power.

JB: They had in mind a center or program with faculty dispersed out to the various standing departments.

WB: That was Harry Finestone's big, big push.

[END OF TRACK 2]