

William Burwell, Track 3

Tape 2, side a begins.

JB: Alright, so—so the key lay in the power a department has that an interdisciplinary program lacks. What—did you—now, if their model was UCLA, what was your model? Did you find this existing somewhere?

WB: Kent State.

JB: Kent St—How ironic.

00:00 WB: Yeah. At Kent state, there was a guy by the name of Ed—well, what was his name? Wow. Crosby. Ed Crosby. At Kent State. Had a department. And that's when I understood the difference between a program or center and a department. Okay. So, when I came back to Northridge, I knew what I wanted. And by now, Harry Finestone and Jerry Richfield and these guys, now, we're kind of—we're pretty chummy at this point by now, I mean, I've been in a lot of these meetings with them, you know, and I've taken off my dashiki and put on a tie now, you know, to make myself more palatable to the Academic Senate and to people who had to vote on these things. And I remember sitting in Harry Finestone's office for untold hours with him trying to convince me that what I was asking was ludicrous, was just was not gonna be done, that it wasn't necessary, that I was gonna dilute the whole education, I mean the whole kind of thing there. But, when I went back to the students and I had told what we wanted and why, then we became adamant about a department. And had to threaten other demonstrations before they would acquiesce. Now we're moving to the—so towards the—so finally they're saying okay, alright. You can have a department. Then I ask for ten faculty slots. And they said, again, you're crazy, I mean, we are being—you know, kind of thing. With total, with complete power to hire. Then I asked, and said that these people would be hired by *our* standards. And I introduced that we talked about expertise rather than academic training, and I went through a lot of things to show that academic training does not equate to expertise.

JB: What was expertise?

WB: It was really just a catchphrase to give me—to allow me to hire some people who didn't have the academic training (both laugh). But, see, what I said was, expertise is, is you know, sensitivity, commitment and understanding of the Black problem, you know. And I can judge that, you cannot judge that. If you had any ability to do that, you would have done it. You know, kind of thing. And I can point to all kinds of people who have academic training, you know what I mean, but have shown themselves not to have any sensitivity. Then I pointed out that, and I wish I had the statistics to show the scarcity of Black Ph.D.'s, there aren't any for the same reason, it's a Catch-22. You say to me to go out and hire Black Ph.D.'s? There are none because the same racism that we're fighting against has pro—made it impossible for—that's why there are so few, because you don't let them in the college, you don't let us in, you don't get us into graduate school, you don't support this, you know what I mean, so the few guys are there—

and most of them are not grassroots people, the ones who happen to make it to a Ph.D., they make it because they become White! You know, so, and I know that all of this was viewed as passing, something that was going to be temporal, so it was kinda like, Well, just let them have it because it won't be—it won't last very long, kind of thing. But by then, I had become much more astute about campus politics than they were aware of. I understood then the value of tenure and those kinds of things, which they didn't know I understood. And I would—I would allow them to think as whatever level they thought my understanding was, that's the level I allowed them to function at. But I knew better, I knew, for example, about that the difference between a lectureship and tenure track. And so, I insisted on not just hiring people, but hiring them on tenure—in tenure track positions. You

5:00 know, that kind of thing. So, as time went on, that's really how we kinda entrenched it.

JB: When they perceived that it was going to be tenure track hires, did they—were they disillusioned of their notion that this was going to be a passing phase in the university's history?

WB: Oh man, yes. Oh man, yeah. They knew—they saw, then, what was gonna happen. So every single appointment. That became the battleground, then. The battleground, then, became tenure for the faculty. For the next five years or so. That became the thing, there. What we're gonna allow them to hire these guys, but we will fight about tenure track positions, because if we have lectureships, when your contract and they will look—the smoke clears, in a year they're just dismissed, that kind of thing.

JB: How do you choose faculty? Now, when you—in the summer of '68 you'd chosen students via political test, in effect—

WB: Same way we chose faculty.

JB: Didn't matter if the students were bright or not so bright—

WB: Yeah, right.

JB: —Same standards for the faculty?

WB: Well, we weren't quite that liberal with the faculty, primarily because they wouldn't allow me to be. Dave Benson was really, you know, you gotta go out and find some guys with academic training. And I wanted guys with academic training, but I did not want White Ph.D.'s, you know? If I could've found some Black, politically Black, and then academically qualified, I would have hired them, but there were just not—there were none, you know? So, then, if you got two guys with a master's degree, which guy do you choose, then it became political. What kind of background does he have? What is his commitment? What's his consciousness level? Et cetera.

JB: What was his consciousness and his background. Was there a governing philosophy or ideology as you were framing the department? What was the test, in other words?

WB: I suppose the basic test was awareness and commitment, you know? How much did they know about the Black experience, how much had they—one of the real things that we looked at was, what kind of activity, beyond their academe, had they been involved in? We always wanted to know, well, do you have MoHo(??) membership in NAACP, or CORE, anything, ever been on any marches, ever been arrested? All of those were strong points, if you can say, Yes, I have a master's degree, but I've been a members of this, and I've been cited here, arrested here, and I mean, the more you did of that, the higher up you went in our scheme of things.

JB: Am I wrong? I'm detecting a bit of a turning here, now, from the students earlier, who are expected to be politically aware and sympathetic to a group of recruiters who are Black nationalists, now the faculty are expected to be activists, but not necessarily Black nationalists, am I wrong?

WB: No, they were expected to be Black nationalists, but we understood that Black nationalism was such a recent phenomenon, because even myself who would, I was the guy in charge—I had become a Black nationalist just a year before. The evolution—and the evolution of the whole Black struggle, the civil rights represented the apex of what were about at a particular time. Doctor King, and that whole thing, you know. So then, if you had been involved in that, then we considered you to be at least a candidate. But then we went about trying to politicize you nationally, to become a Black nationalist, you know? And so, we would ask questions like that. You know, what do you think of—how do you compare—give us a comparison of King and Malcolm X, and which do you think is the most viable means, way for us to get things accomplished? Nonviolently or by-any-means-necessary? That kind of thing. What do you think of the Garvey movement, back to Africa, those kinds of things. Also at that time, by now, this is in the late '60s, now. Things are changing on the national scene in a bit, now. See, because by the '70s, by 1970, now, I'm in a real struggle with the same students that I had trained and recruited, Archie and those guys.

JB: What's going on?

WB: Because I now feel that we have won, now it's time to move on to do what we were there for in the beginning, which was to get education for Black—for minority students. They, then, the younger students, Archie and those guys, had now become radical Black nationalists to the point that they saw my efforts as being integrationist and Uncle Tom.

JB: So, they moved beyond you.

WB: Oh, yeah. They believed in, that the only—they believed that the only thing we could do was to start our own educational institution. That we had—see, Black nationalism, to a large extent, was about separatism. So, he talked about, they were about, well, what we gotta do is, we gotta have our own school, that kind of thing. Well, that meant, then, what they wanted me to do, then, was to discount almost trying to do anything in Northridge. But just use Northridge as a springboard for starting our own educational institution.

JB: How did you respond to that?

15:00 WB: I thought that was ludicrous. I thought that they were tremendously naïve, had no understanding of what it would take to start an educational institution, you know, that kind of thing. And I said, Listen, you guys are, I mean, you've forgotten what the goal was, you know, that kind of thing. Let's—let's—we gotta deal with what we have here, see, that was the idea, then, of do you—I forgotten the term that we use, but it was, whether or not we are going to change the existing structure, or whether we were going to overturn it. Well, I had come to the conclusion rather quickly there was no overturning it, and I thought that the November 4th and the events of that proved to us that we did not have the force to overturn it, although I was partially responsible for that, because I'm the one that talked that kind of talk to those guys. Archie, though when they came to my Black nationalist organization, I had guerrilla training, you know, up in the mountains and in the foothills up there, you know, weekly, I mean, I had thirty, I had an arsenal in my house. Yeah, in '69, when they hired me at Northridge, I bought a house in Pacoima, and painted the house red, black, and green, and put a eight-foot map of Africa on the garage door. And I must have had in that house—I must have had twenty or thirty guns in that house.

JB: Is that right?

WB: Yeah. And the police knew it, and they never came, that's why they never came, they never came. They never came to the—they never even set foot on the property. But, see, I'm the one who took Archie and all those guys, and I told them, hey man, what we gotta do is—I mean, we talked about how we could—how we could start the revolution. Because I thought, initially, I thought that it was a revolution that was gonna—we were gonna have to overturn the capitalist system because that's what all the lit—that's what Mao, and that's what all of them said, you know what I mean, capitalism is the monster. You gotta destroy capitalism, you know? So, we want to do that by force. So we talked about, we planned how we were gonna blow up the train that ran down San Fernando Road, to block off the police department from being able to get in, then all of the sudden, from that point of view, then all of the sudden, here I am saying, let's put down the guns, and let's pick up the books. And they were saying, Man, you're selling out on us. You've been over there with Harry Finestone and those guys, and the man, you're selling out on us. They wanted me, some specifics, they wanted me to hire everybody I could, either on a student work-study or a student assistant, put them on payroll, they wanted me to confiscate, get as many—as much as we could get out of the AV lab, they wanted me to get cameras, projectors, all that stuff—all of this, typewriters, everything, that would be hauled off to Pacoima or South Central where we would start our new—our educational institution. I thought of that, I said, Listen, that's criminal, I mean, you guys are gonna get me in jail—I'm the guy who's gonna go to jail because I'm the guy that signs for these things, you know? So then I had developed, by that time, by '70, I'm in almost hand-to-hand combat with these guys.

JB: That must have put you under tremendous stress.

WB: Oh man, you have no idea, you have no idea. I can safely say that from about 1970 to about '73, for three years, I don't think I ever slept one night that I slept all the way through and didn't even have a nightmare, or wake up in the middle of the night, or getting my gun, thinking that I heard—because I was threatened, my life was threatened daily.

JB: By them? Or—

WB: By them. By them, yeah. Yeah. In fact, this guy, Momadula Mumba? I gave him the chairmanship by force. I mean, they, I mean—Archie, Wazo, these guys, they came to my house with shotguns and things, we had a fistfight! I went to—they went to Cleary, and Cleary said that he would not hire anybody until he heard from my mouth that I was stepping down. And I went to the meeting that day with sunglasses on because my eye was swollen up. Well, Archie and I had fought the night before. And I mean, I had meetings where they put guns to my—they put a pistol to my head, say sign this, you know, sign off on this, or you're dead. For a year or two, in 1970 or '71 were terrible years for me. So, I was truly isolated. And then they had intimidated the faculty so, see, Theo Solvo was the chairperson, in fact, I mean by on paper, when I was the guy who ran it.

JB: From the beginning?

WB: From the very beginning. We hired—see, I was hired as the Assistant Director to a nonexistent director. I, as a senior—see, this is '69, I don't graduate, I don't get my bachelor's until the next year, so they can't make me the head of the program. So I was the assistant, but my first job as assistant was to hire my boss.

JB: Theo?

WB: Theo!

JB: Who becomes Chair in what, '70?

WB: In '69.

JB: '69. And he's followed by Obena.

WB: And he's followed—he's followed by me, or maybe he's followed by Obena.

JB: Isn't it that Obena is followed by you, then?

WB: Yeah, Obena's followed by me.

JB: My recollection is it run '73, '7—

WB: No no, No no, Theo's first, then me, then Mamadu, then Obena.

JB: Ah, okay.

WB: Yeah. After I was—I guess, maybe after I got the master's degree, I don't know what year that was, what was that, that was '74? So maybe I'd guess about '73, maybe, I think when Siller's mouse, Siller's(??) and those guys were around, that's when I became the chairman, okay? And then, they forced me out for Mamadu. And he went about doing some of the things they tried to get me to do, which meant that the university forced him out, and Obena came in.

JB: In terms of any question I could ask now almost sounds prosaic compared to what we just talked about, we've talked about how you recruited faculty, how did you go about recruiting students for the new department? Same way you had before?

WB: Essentially. But of course, by now, there wasn't so much recruitment that had to be done because now, I mean, they were beating down your door now, there were a lot of students now who wanted to come to the campus now, wanted to get in. So, we were forced
20:00 more with a selection process than we were with a recruitment process. In fact, it had been that way from the very beginning, really. It was always, you know, it became a thing of, we only have so many slots, we always have more students, more applicants, than we have slots.

JB: How did you frame curriculum?

WB: That was—that was a—I remember that time period, I was up there in Sierra Hall tower, they gave me a little office on one side and Rudy Acuña one on the other side. And I had the unique experience designing a department.

JB: You did.

WB: Yeah. I—I—and what I did was, see I had traveled, in my travels, I picked up catalogs from each one of these places I had gone to. So I'd look, for example, and I'd find what they called, you know, I mean, I looked in the GE package and you gotta have some social sciences. So, I look under the courses under social sciences, and I look at the other campuses and see what they were offering under that, and that became our thing. And I remember when we created those, I created six-unit courses. I remember one of the courses called the psychosocial development of the African American. And it was a six-unit course that could meet the psych requirement and the sociology requirement. Kind of thing. And the key to it was to get it through—what was it called, what was that committee called?

JB: Educational policies committee?

WB: Yeah, EPC.

JB: EPC.

WB: The key for me was I had to always couch it with “Black”. You know, I put Black before everything. And my course descriptions, and justification, and that whole kind of thing. So, it really was—when it was all said and done, it was really very traditional.

JB: In other words, it was a shadow curriculum, with a Black emphasis, Black prefacing everything.

WB: Right, exactly.

JB: An echo.

WB: That’s what it was, yeah.

JB: You mentioned Rudy. There were disagreements with the Chicanos, were there not? Here and there, along the way?

WB: Yeah, yes. See, we initially had a problem with them, and the problem with them, with them was, they wanted to reap the benefits, but they didn’t want to do the work. They wanted us to do all the protests and to go to jail, and then when the goodies are handed out, they’d be around to say “me too”, you know, we want that too. You know, what do you guys want? Well, we want the same thing, kind of thing. But they didn’t go to jail on November 4th, you know, none of their dest(??) students didn’t burn down the buildings, they weren’t there, kind of thing. So, we always had this thing—but we understood that they had the—a legitimate complaint as we did. But from the very beginning, Mike—almost called his name who headed up the first Chicano organization. But I remember—we’d almost have fights with them because they wouldn’t show up, we’d say, man, we’re gonna duke it out with these Greek guys, you know what I mean? And such and such—they wouldn’t be there! We’re gonna do this also—they wouldn’t show up! You know, kind of thing. So, from the very beginning, that’s how the problems began, you know, we accuse them always of not carrying their share of the load, but always wanting to share in the goodies once they came. And they accused us of wanting a bigger share of the pie, you know, cause, paying with those one hundred and fifty students were brought in, and I think it was thirty Chicano students that were brought in by comparison, you know, kind of thing. And our point was, well, we should have the whole pie, we’re doing—you guys oughta be glad you’re getting a fourth of it, because you haven’t done anything. Well, that group, that animosity and stuff grew us over the years, but again, I now know, that is typical in dealing with the oppressed. The oppressed, you know, when the master drops a few crumbs down, the oppressed will fight each other for the crumbs. That always happens. It’s what’s happening in South Africa, right today. So, the parallels are there, and so, that’s all—you know.

JB: You didn’t understand it clearly at the time, you understand it now. The pattern is much clearer to you than it was then?

WB: Yeah. Yeah, I didn't—didn't see any of that then, yeah.

30:00 JB: Has the Department of the Pan-African Studies become what you expected it to?

WB: In many ways, it has far exceeded what I expected it to be. In some ways, it has been disappointing. Let me say: I feel, John, right now, and I say this to various people, that, if they're—I can look at the Northridge experience and say and feel like I have made a contribution to my people. I've left a legacy, I've made a—I've done something significant for my people. And Northridge—so, I am—I am grateful, I am gratified, I am fulfilled to know that it's there. Even now, you know, in Los Angeles now, I am—I never cease to be amazed at how many students I run into, at how many people know me from Northridge. And I think about the fact that I taught three or four classes for ten or fifteen years, you know, each semester. So, I, you know, I counted it up, and I said, in LA there are over a thousand Black students that have sat under me, you know? And I'm proud of that, I feel good about that. I see them all the time, some of them belong in my church, now. I meet them in all walks of life, now, lawyers, and—and I meet them, and so, I feel very, very good about that. My disappointment has to do with, I think, the faculty, in many ways. I—I have—I was very disappointed in the in-house fighting, the pettiness that'd be—they began to fight one another to the detriment of the movement. I was disappointed in that a level of activism that I thought should have been maintained was not maintained. The focus got lost among many of them, particularly on Obena. The—the fraternalism that had resulted when I was there dissipated. The students, the consciousness of the students became secondary to—they assimilated much too quickly and readily and took on the same values that I had fought against, kind of thing. That was not the follow-through on the commitment that I'm gonna get trained, then I'm gonna come back to my community leaders, ient(??) in it. But that was, you know, once I said I was gonna use this as a way to get out of the community, rather than come back and stint(??) in them. So far too many people who came through Northridge, Black students, are came, and did not come back to the community, but moved out of the community. You know, my friend, I always talked to, Barbara Rhodes, moved to Palos Verdes, you know, those kinds of, Jerome moved to Northridge. So, I was disappointed with, you know, and I am disappointed with that aspect of it. But bottom line, when I draw the bottom line, I feel that it's one of the greatest accomplishments of my life. Feel very good about it, and very folk know the extent and the things that I had to go through, you know, when I mentioned to you about this little skirmish with Archie, now, very few—I couldn't even afford to let that be known.

JB: Well, we've known each other, now, for twenty years, and I didn't know it, you know, until you just recounted it. One sensed things were going on, one knew there were tensions, one knew that they were deep, one had no idea, at least I had no idea that they were that deep, and you and I saw each other virtually every day. You left the department, you left the university, it's been, what, three years now since you've taught with us, but you resigned from the department in what year?

WB: Yeah, '81.

JB: We were talking a bit before we went on tape about your reasons for leaving nine years ago. Perhaps you'd like to reflect on that a bit, because you've moved well-beyond, and yet, in a way, it's been kind of a circular thing.

WB: Yeah. Yeah, I—I grew disillusioned with academe. The last significant thing that I tried to do at Northridge, the process of trying to get that done disillusioned me with the whole academe. That was to try and make it mandatory that every student have an ethnic experience before they graduate. That it be required through the general education. And that was my last fight there to try to get that done. I spent two years or so, in EPC meetings—

[END OF TRACK 3]