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34th Street Magazine

"The 1969 College Hall Sit-In"

By DENNIS BERMAN and SCOTT GALLIN

Scan any fraternity or sorority house composite from the Vietnam era and you'll stumble upon a strange breed of Penn student.

They came to the University in the mid-1960s, when the school was still shackled by the dainty social and sexual codes of the 1950s.

Admission to Penn and the Ivy League promised affluence and a stake in the stolid world of the East Coast elite.

And for most of the 1960s, the stuffy, traditionalist Ivy League experience was what they got.

Women were funneled into the tiny rooms of Hill House and attended separate classes in the College for Women.

Regulations forced men to wear coats and ties for meals served in Houston Hall. Girlfriends could visit only during appointed hours.

Penn's mission, after all, was to prepare young men and women for the responsibilities of citizenship in JFK's America.

With each graduating class, a pool of future lawyers, doctors, and bankers was primed for success, filling the desks once occupied by their parents. But by the end of the decade, a few students challenged the University's commitment to producing professional automatons.

Once, the type of eager sophomores who posed for composite shots in pressed jackets, button-down shirts and burgundy ties, students like Ira Harkavy and Joe and Lynne Mikuliak helped bring radicalism to Penn.

They catalyzed the movements that left other students with the era's most potent memories: sit-ins, protests and marches. Moreover, parts of a once quiet student body awakened to issues beyond itself. Campus activism climaxed in College Hall on February 18, 1969. The sit-in began when 20 students wanted to meet with then-president Gaylord Harnwell. Denied access, they

resolved to remain in the building until heard. Word of the students' action quickly spread. At its height, over 800 students clogged the building's wide halls and stairwells. For six days, they slept, ate and argued, their bodies crammed against the office doors of the administrators they hoped to convert. And they were not all from Penn. To show support, caravans of Swarthmore, Haverford, and Temple students arrived on Locust Walk.

Logistics were a patchwork of quick decision-making and sheer whim. No one was certain how it would end and when it would be over. Some students stayed inside for the entire six days. Others left to shower, attend class or sleep. The sound of guitars and banter of debate were seemingly ubiquitous.

Even though hundreds clogged College Hall, there was no University-wide crisis or take-over. College Hall remained open, an expression of students' desire for a peaceful event. Demonstrators let classes meet and the University attended to its normal business.

As students took their positions in the building, the movement's self-proclaimed leaders frantically plotted the next hour's strategy.

Lynne Mikuliak, then College for Women junior Lynne Hoagland, recalls coordinating dinner for hundreds of cranky students.

"As it got later and later in the day, it became readily apparent that we had to eat. We took up a collection and went out and got peanut butter, jelly and bread. We got tons of juice and had our first meal," Mikuliak says by telephone.

Chewing on their PB&J, they began to talk about what they had gathered for.

It all went back to the University City Science Center, a series of buildings still located at 34th and Market Streets. The University shared a financial and scientific interest in the complex with other research institutions. Dependent on government grants, a portion of the Center's work was focused on the military's expanding needs in Vietnam. Someone had to design the napalm, mines and guided missiles that proclaimed the supremacy of American democracy.

Not only was this center conducting military research, but its construction razed the houses of West Philadelphia residents on Market Street. In the wake of civil rights reform, the University was neglecting the new national consciousness over racial equality. It seemed an endless process: The University expanded and the neighborhood was fundamentally run over.

The students' concerns paralleled their peers' across the national landscape. While Presidents Johnson and Nixon escalated engagement in Vietnam, anti-war and social justice movements found an audience in the emerging counter-culture on college campuses. In 1969, the two sides

could face off within the three blocks that separated the Science Center from the protesters in College Hall.

But the sit-in was about more than the Science Center, the displaced residents and the War.

It advanced the students' struggle against the Establishment as a whole. Years earlier, it began as a call to overturn dress codes that maintained discipline in both appearance and attitude. By the time of the sit-in, what started as clamoring for University-level reforms had expanded to include changes in the community and the nation as a whole.

Partly driving their frustration was an administration that falsely assumed the student body was docile.

"The administration was authoritarian with the acquiescence of students, and then they began to withdraw acquiescence and once they withdrew acquiescence you reached a fork in the road," remembers history professor Michael Zuckerman, who attended Penn in the late 1950s and returned in 1965 to teach.

The College Hall sit-in marked the moment when University students rebuffed their in loco parentis status and declared independence from trustees and administrators who designed an outdated diorama reflective of their own straight-laced careers. The collegiate "adolescent" had come of age, and has stayed an adult ever since.

As a reflection of that maturity, student leaders peacefully negotiated with the University brass. The sit-in was a novelty at Penn, and administrators sought to avoid disaster and restore order to College Hall.

Inside, the sit-in grew serious yet strangely social. Today, Lynne Mikuliak remembers the sit-in as a rite of passage for university students, a rite not necessarily constructed for the best reasons.

"Just like you have to take History 101 or English 101, back then it was like Demo 101 as our obligatory 'of the Sixties' demonstration," says Mikuliak, who later married fellow demonstrator Joe Mikuliak. "There were definitely aspects of it that were a heck of a lot of fun."

Still, a sit-in is not a sit-in without a list of demands, and the movement's factions took hours to agree on common goals. If the byword of today's student activism is apathy, 1969's student groups were almost too enamored with their pet political causes. Leaders had to consider the platforms of centrists and leftists, labor supporters and socialists. Even after demands were agreed upon, some groups were not happy.

"There was a group of [outside] people who called themselves SDS [the leading national group Students for a Democratic Society] who were associated with Lyndon Marcus," recalled then senior Joe Mikuliak, who was president of the campus' official SDS chapter.

Marcus, Mikuliak explains, has since changed his name to Lyndon LaBouche. Later notorious for his political fearmongering, seeds of Marcus's eccentric personality peeked through in College Hall.

In a speech delivered near the end of the rally, Marcus seemed to be "some image from a revolutionary poster."

Mikuliak remembered Marcus's ideology as unrealistically pure and over-simplistic. "They always thought they were right," Mikuliak remembers.

The sit-in distanced itself from ideology and through large meetings of 50 to 100 people, developed a more practical list of demands: That the Science Center Board of Directors vote to return the land on Market Street to the community; that the University and Science Center produce money to build low-rent housing eliminated by the laboratories; and that the charter of the Center be amended to prohibit classified, military-related or defense research.

Anxious for closure, the Trustees conceded to most of the students' demands.

"The trustees agreed to raise \$10 million for community renewal programs, to rebuild equivalent housing demolished by University construction and to set up a Quadripartite commission to study future development ideas of the University," reported the DP on February 24. As the settlement's final condition, students were to leave College Hall by morning.

Trash and weary bodies were cleared from hallways. Student leaders like Ira Harkavy announced victory.

"We have won more than any college movement in history," claimed Harkavy, who was then head of the student negotiating team and who, at a campus-wide assembly a few days later, received a standing ovation.

At first glance, it seemed that this skirmish between students and the administration rendered all parties victorious. "There was a relief that everything worked out," Harkavy now recalls from his fifth floor office in the Mellon Bank Building. "There wasn't a sense of bitterness. Since no one got hurt there was a sense of progress. I had a great sense of relief and some sense of accomplishment. And I was also very tired."

Though the demonstrators claimed success, they were still unsure about the long-run implications of their actions. As sons and daughters of the well-to-do, each heard stories about

a family friend tainted by the hand of McCarthyism. Who could foresee whether speaking against the University might haunt them in years to come?

"You knew that there were infiltrators, you knew that there were photographers, you knew that notes were being taken. You didn't know whether this was going to cost you your career," says Zuckerman.

There were dangers, however, more immediate than being locked out of graduate school or corporate America. In 1968, demonstrators at Columbia were beaten and bloodied in hostile encounters with police. The school even shut down as fragmented student groups waged a protracted political struggle with administrators.

President Gaylord Harnwell could have easily called on police to remove the protesters by force. Fortunately for the students in College Hall, the administration agreed to work with them.

"Penn was nothing if not cool about it," recalls Lynne Mikuliak. "We had a very 'bust heads' police commissioner and Penn could have easily called the police and said, 'get these kids outta here,' and they never did."

There was sense that the campus had changed and that for once, the students had won a battle. They were convinced that West Philadelphia had won, too.

"The University has become human, at least partially, for the first time," said Herman Wrice, president of the Young Great Society and a spokesperson for the community in 1969. The students' widespread acceptance of West Philadelphia's interests mirrored sentiment in place at other prominent universities. Columbia championed Morningside Heights. Berkeley took an interest in Oakland. These movements prospered nationally because small cadres of activists were able to convince a larger and decidedly more moderate pool of students that their individual battles were worth fighting.

Strains of 1969 radicalism bled into the 1970s. An outbreak of rapes on campus mobilized a protest in 1973. Angry women entered College Hall and demanded the creation of a Women's Center. Almost a decade later, the campus was again caught in a crisis over rape and, more recently, found itself divided over free speech and civil liberties. Yet none of the recent issues have captured the campus' outrage like the 1969 protest. And even that era has not made a believer out of everyone.

Twenty-five years later, Harkavy still finds himself fighting the same forces and working to remedy the same problems he dramatically tackled as a college senior. Though he is now part of the University, serving as assistant to the president, director of the Penn Program for Public Service and director for Community Partnerships, he still haggles with Trustees when funding his initiatives.

Harkavy understands that for all his academic work in urban history, all his University-sponsored programs, and all his personal, almost innate, commitment to helping his neighbors, the sit-in has had minimal impact on the very community he so triumphantly defended in his youth.

If anything, he has witnessed the deterioration of its fate.

"A lot of concerns of the community were real then and are more real now," he says. "The problem with the sit-in was that nothing was really institutionalized...nothing continued over time.

"What we have happening in American cities is that they have had significant long neglect and decline and now it has hit crisis proportions," Harkavy continues.

Progress in West Philadelphia is still hindered by limited employment opportunities and a decaying social and physical infrastructure. Despite the efforts of the University and other institutions to provide some educational, medical and financial resources to the community, more positive and sustained efforts that began in forms like the College Hall sit-in are still needed.

Walter Palmer, a black activist and teacher who was involved with both the University and "Black Bottom" (the neighborhood now called University City) agrees that though the movement had symbolic value, it ultimately lacked the substance and momentum necessary to extend into the nineties, or even until the short summer months that separated the 1969-70 school year from the February demonstration.

Students across the country lost two valuable enemies as the military's involvement in Vietnam and the fervor of the Civil Rights struggle diminished. The departure of students like Ira Harkavy and Joe Mikuliak also left the University's movement without leaders and a sense of direction.

Continuity was absent - always a weakness of student movements. It would be hard for College Hall protesters to perpetuate their ideals when most intended to graduate within four years.

By her senior year, with enemies like the War dissolving, Lynne Mikuliak saw activism waning. A year after the sit-in, SDS flew apart. Bands of radicals splintered, mounting their own ideologies over the organization's.

"I don't think that there was any activism whatsoever in the next she recounts. "Political activism died in 1970." "A lot of white students became more fully prepared by virtue of the interaction that took place in 1969, 1970, 1971 to deal with the world at large and to deal with a multifaceted world," Palmer said.

Today, Palmer continues, "If the University decides it can no longer afford or if it is no longer expedient to do it, they can always retreat. But the community can't afford to."

Certainly Penn's sit-in was about real problems that concerned students. Yet it was also the quintessential college experience of the times, the mortar of reminiscence that then, and now, holds the classes of 1969 and 1970 together. In that, the sit-in is just another memory, a special occasion like a Jimi Hendrix concert or a freshman's first experience with marijuana. It makes for great storytelling at class reunions. It does not mean change is happening in Philadelphia in the year 1994.

After graduation, students involved in the sit-in dispersed to all parts of the country, most of them leaving Philadelphia and the problems of their college environment behind. Still, there were those who continued to live here and who tried to maintain the sit-in's ideals.

"I still have some hope. I definitely have some hope that things are getting better. I think I believed that things could change much more rapidly back then. I understand a lot better why things are the way they are," says Lynne Mikuliak. "I'm still aware of the uneasy mingling of the community.

Indeed, not much is left of the College Hall Sit-in of February, 1969.

"What has happened is that we have lost people in the community, [just like] you have lost radicals on campus," notes Palmer. "We've lost a lot of good people. Maybe they decided to move on or move out, and not reach back, died, got sick, or just got tired."

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Daily Pennsylvanian

"Against Racism"

A Guest Column by **Walter Palmer**

On Wednesday, March 1, 1995 an article appeared in The Daily Pennsylvanian called "White Women Against Racism excludes blacks from event." The event was sponsored by the Women's Center as a part of their historical mission, i.e., to identify white women who have the interest, sensitivity, caring and courage to sit down with other white women to not only discuss but confront individual and institutional bigotry, discrimination and racism in all of its insidious forms.

The center also hosts such meetings with African-American women and other women of color exclusive of white women. Further, the Women's Center has taken the lead on Penn's campus to bring white women and women of color together once they have engaged in dialogue; both around the history of "White American Racism" and all of its institutional practices; as well as having these women look at themselves and how they may be perpetuating the myths or practices of this learned evil behavior.