

“Wynter Performance Celebrating Hispanic...”

Jan 20, 2013

Philadelphia Tribune

“1967 student rally lead to few changes”

Damon Williams

When upwards of 5,000 public school students marched on the School District of Philadelphia's Parkway headquarters in late fall of 1967, little did those students - the majority of whom were fighting for African and African-American history to be infused into their curriculum and to be allowed to wear Afrocentric clothing and hairstyles - know that their actions would spark a revolution in education that would lead to several education reforms enacted in 1968 and still relevant today.

Longtime educator **Walter D. Palmer** played an instrumental, organizing role in that rally, which also resulted in a confrontation with then-Police Chief Frank Rizzo and led to the arrest of **Palmer** and several other students and activists. **Palmer** views the march of 1967 as both an agent for the changes to come and as the result of pent-up frustrations with the district that was building for decades before the march.

Palmer in 1955 established the Black People's University, which provided training and education to African-American juveniles and young adults. He trained fellow activists David Richardson, Ronnie White, Curtis Jones and Chaka Fattah, among others. According to **Palmer**, Black People's University was a "catalyst for trying to change public education in Philadelphia."

"A lot of the stuff started before the 1967 march. [Educators and the school district] seem to have not learned its lesson, and that's why we keep repeating the same stuff. We had the Brown decision [Brown v. Board of Education case, in which the federal government declared segregated public schools unconstitutional], so it's obvious that Black people were fighting for educational reform, relief and an equal education opportunity," **Palmer** said. "Some people were pushing for integration, but I was not. From 1955 to 1965, we were educating folks across the city about the importance of the story of Black people being told by Black people."

Just prior to the 1967 eruption, **Palmer** convinced the leaders of the street gangs of the era to embrace an African history education platform, and those gangs began to shout from street corners about the inequality in education. **Palmer** said his group utilized the gang network to educate

housing project residents, the majority of whom sent their children to schools which were facing a serious overcrowding problem.

"We stood on street corners, educating people about the need of Black history in schools and more Black people on the Board of Education, because there were very few," Palmer said. "That was the basis for the revolution you see going on today. It was born out of the '50s and '60s."

The march of 1967 - and the resulting drama - will forever be etched in the annals of Philadelphia public education. The Central Coordinating Committee and the Student Action Committee were two of the main student-run organizations to participate in the march.

On that fateful morning of Nov. 17, 1967, thousands of African-American students poured out of Bok Vocational School, William Penn High School, Benjamin Franklin High School and Kensington High School and met up with a throng of students from West Philadelphia High School, West Catholic and Bartram High School.

According to Palmer (and independently corroborated by author Matthew J. Countryman in his book, "Up North: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia"), the march transpired as Mattie Humphrey, then a representative of the Black People's Unity Movement, along with Edward Robinson and Paul Vance, convened and met with district superintendent Mark Shedd to go over the 25 points of contention that the group brought to Shedd's attention.

In the weeks and months leading up to the demonstration, Palmer said a number of young men approached him about meeting with youth leaders in middle and high schools, to discuss how the students could achieve some education reforms.

"In the 1960s, there was a real cry for people to become Afrocentric, and kids were getting hassled for changing their names to African names and targeted by police because they were wearing a kufi or dashiki," Palmer said, noting that he started to dress in African garb as a way of supporting the students, and established the Black Student League as but one response. "We understood that education was a tool for liberation, so we trained young people how to best articulate their case and demands."

Palmer worked with this group for at least two years before the 1967 demonstration, and it can be argued that the march wouldn't have happened without his influence.

"In the meeting, the students presented a number of demands, including the addition of Black history courses taught by Black teachers, the assignment of Black principals to Black schools, increased representation on the school board, exemption from the requirement that all students salute the flag, and the removal of police and non-teaching assistants from all schools," Countryman wrote.

"According to Palmer, who was not in the meeting, at one point a student leader from Bok opened one of the large windows to yell out to the student protestors that the school board officials had agreed to 24 of their 25 demands."

Palmer said there was a united front formed by all the students and among the different gangs, who were highly organized. The gangs would endorse the 25 principles, and they all gathered at Palmer's downtown offices to plot the strategy.

"We established November 17, 1967, as the target date to have Black students walk out of schools all across the city and present these 25 demands to Shedd," Palmer said. "We selected about two dozen students that represented all of the schools, and two dozen adults. One of the demands was that children have the right to have African names, wear their hair natural, allowed to wear African clothing and to not be bullied and harassed.

"We wanted a bill of rights, and wanted more Blacks on the board," Palmer continued. "Black history was only one of the demands; we're talking about systematic, structural demands. People think we just demonstrated and that was it. It was a protracted struggle that went on for more than a decade."

It is cloudy on what exactly sent the march from peaceful demonstration to an angst-filled confrontation with the police department, but the fallout from that demonstration was intense and felt throughout the remainder of the 1967-68 school year and beyond. Palmer and a few adult protesters were arrested, and several students were beaten, some severely, by the police.

Shedd, a rather liberal school superintendent, was able to push through a few moderate reforms, but they were poorly received and he was eventually forced to resign in 1971. Rizzo was roundly criticized for the brutality displayed by the police, which led to a pair of court cases and the publication of a scathing report by the North City Congress titled, "A Comparison of Police Action in Kensington Riots of 1966 and at the School Board Demonstration, November 1967," which noted the discrepancies shown by police in their decision to attack school students while simply observing the Kensington riots.

"That era was a turning point," Palmer said. "No one challenged the system before us, and culminated in the explosion of 1967."

For Palmer, a lifelong educator who, in recent years has established the Walter D. Palmer Leadership Learning Partners Charter School, said many of the same problems exist now as did 44 years ago.

"From 1967, 1968, we kept pushing for all kinds of reforms, but we didn't get real motion until 1997, when we organized and fought for charters and vouchers. The charter school legislation allowed Black people to set up charter schools," Palmer said, noting the part of the next wave of issues to come will include reversing the demonizing of charter schools as the root of erosion of public education. "There's still an imbalance in terms of how much money goes into Black education, and this is and always has been about the business of maintaining and controlling Black education in America, because it's profitable, not because they care.

"And they are doing this on Black people's watch," Palmer continued. "You have a Black mayor, a predominantly Black city council, and yet, white folks are controlling the purse strings and the outcomes of education in Black schools."

Sidebar

Coordinated Citizens Concerned 1968 flyer calling for Frank Rizzo to be fired in response to 1967 demonstration. - PHOTO COURTESY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Feb 1, 2013

Philadelphia Tribune

"Dismal showings by Pa. charters in new AYP

Damon Williams

The startling results of the U.S. Department of Education's mandated recalculations of the Adequate Yearly Progress - AYP of all the charter schools in the commonwealth has caused immediate fallout, now that the recalculations show only 28 percent of all charter schools met AYP, as compared to 49 percent determined under the calculations made last fall.

According to the School Boards Association of Pennsylvania, the recalculation led to 31 fewer charter schools making AYP; that drop from 77 charter schools to 43 represents a 21 percent decrease. With the recalculation, no cyber charter school in the commonwealth made AYP. Seven