

Kari Stromberg Interviewer
David Williams II Narrator
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KS: How did the national civil rights movement effect the organization, NMU organizations and protests?

DW: Well I think certainly all the students that were out there, you have to remember the vast majority of the African American students who were at Northern Michigan at that time, came either from Detroit, Flint, Chicago, and we had a fair amount from the New York area. So clearly what was happening in the civil rights movement was something clearly that we all knew about. In many cases, some of us had experienced more than others, so I mean I don't think that there was any type of formal indoctrination relationship, introduction, but certainly it was happening, and we were all very aware of it. From time to time, we would have speakers that would come up, and I do remember Nick Gregory, he had come up during the time. So I think it was just the influences that individuals of us had, coupled with what we saw at Northern compared to what we probably been experiencing in our hometowns and in our community.

KS: Okay, and did you did you model any protests after, any of the strategies that you used in your protests, did you pick up on the sit in movement and therefore, used that as a model for your protests?

DW: Ya, I mean that the answer to that is yes, I don't know if there was any time that we sat down and said you know look what's happening in Greensboro, or Nashville. Clearly, we were all very aware the sit on concept that was the proper thing, we were well aware of the non-violent peace and had committed to this would be a nonviolent sort of thing, but I do believe, that we were when you said the civil rights movement if you expand that to be all that was going on, we were clearly well aware, of what was happening at other campuses. I would say some of the things we knew, we knew that there were campus sit ins, you know the interesting thing is one of the things we did end up doing, we went on the basketball courts for an awareness thing, so people would be aware, that was never planned so to speak, to stop the basketball game, the effect that came at the point we were out there, but we clearly understood the concept of sort of marching, sit ins, nonviolent, that sort of thing, clearly we were very influenced by that.

KS: And did you have any, before the protests, did you have any attempts to work with the administration at NMU, to change the policies?

DW: Yes, I think there were numbers of times, we presented different proposals, made note of different issues, that were concerning us, situations, and I think that members of the administration, were some members, were more willing than others to work with us, some were more willing to talk about it. Some were at that point not willing at all. I think across the board, but you know we talked about the lack of African American faculty, and we talked about the lack of the no African American RA's, and treatment

that we were receiving in relation to relationships to people in the town, the list of wishes had been brought forth to the administration, and to others on campus.

KS: Okay, was the Charles Griffith case was there any reasons, other than the blanket to incite the sit in at the dean of students office or was it/

DW: I think the Charles Griffith's case was sort of a boiling point, and I don't know what you know of that, so probably the best of me to tell you were it grabbed the fancy of the students. What of the real interesting concepts of Northern Michigan at that time was you generally had two groups of free moving black people in Marquette. I mean there were really three areas, one is the air force base, KI Sawyer and you have to remember the time of that was we were in the Vietnam war so we you had a high level ready alert base and many guys were going to Vietnam from KI and many were coming back from Vietnam, you had a growing number of African American students, going to up that point probably 110 on the campus and of course, there was a prison there. Now, I think that went out because that was not really a factor, in that. So you had a free movement between African Americans from the base and African Americans on the campus. That relationship was not always a smooth relationship. I bring that up because Charles Griffith was one of and right now, I can only think of two. He was one of the people who actually had been a serviceman when many of us were students. And after he got out of the air force, he went to school. So Charles was very much a person who everybody knew and had been during that period of time when it was not a great relationship, he had been one of the air force guys who was very friendly to the black students, and so amongst other things at that point in time, Charles was the president of the Kappa Alpha Phi's, when I was the President of Omega Si Phi, so I mean Charles was someone everybody knew and respected, and had known for a long period of time. Charles also was a photographer, and one of the things that we had at that point of time in the newspaper, there was thing called Friday's fairest??? Charles was the one who took the photography, I said that because Charles was in many aspects he had kind of gone further than most of the blacks students had done, he was older, he had been in the air force, and he had this sort of position that many of us did not, he actually was on a much cleaner, better relationship with the administration, people like that. It became very interesting because it all centered around, Charles Griffith, and Beverly had been his girlfriend, I think he probably I don't know if he was dating anyone else or not, but it all centered around, a situation where the panel that actually heard discipline, decided that Charles Griffith had violated a rule, because Charles had a woman in his room. They never prosecuted the woman. And what it was was, the theory being, was because the woman was white. And so that really got everybody upset about the fact, you take this guy who has done all of this. You have to understand that the penalty they came up with was you are out of school. It was like wait a minute, it was first offense. If he is guilty, and what ever happened to the woman, and you are you saying you can't identify the woman. And it was pretty clear to people that at least was what most people thought was that this woman was white, and that they could identify but they were not going to prosecute her. So furthermore, when we got into the discussions about it, it was very clear that they were not, they being the university, he engaged in any sort of procedural thing, and Charles was allowed to pick a group to represent him, of which I was one of them, and

they just basically took the position he was guilty, and we don't care if you come in here, with evidence, there was a tape, and I can remember some tapes were found that they had not told us about. So I think who Charles was, what he represented and what he had been through, and this sort of thing, of unfair treatment, had finally got the students to basically say wait a minute, enough is enough, it is clearly we are not getting any progress from trying to sit down and talk. We are being treated different, clearly wrong, and Charles Griffith was a good example because they were prepared to send him home.

KS: So he was the physical example/

DW: Absolutely, absolutely.

KS: Okay, What was your role in the organizations that sponsored the protest?

DW: I am not sure if anybody had official roles, I think what sort of emerged was, the emerging of people who became in the university's eyes sort of leaders. And that could be leaders because we were thought of as being as leaders, and Charles was the president of the Kappa's and I was the president of the Q's and I think that there was only one person who I remember who had an official title, and that was Patrick Williams who at that point in time was the president of the black student's association. I think that what happened was there was a clear path over this period of time, who were deemed leaders. Certainly, if my memory serves me correctly, at that time when Charles' case came up, I was actually, what year was that?

KS: It was 1969, to 1970 year.

DW: I was back in graduate school, so I was in graduate school and was working for vice president rombaus??? Who was vice president of student affairs. And was one of the people who to the degree who could be was willing to listen to us engage. I would say that partly me coming back in grad school and working on that job, some of the results of earlier on of some members of the university trying to move things forward, and they just did not go far enough, so I think part of me being there, we hired you back here as a graduate student and we kind of expected you to keep the lid on, and where like you, and I think they got upset with me because I was one of the ones who represented Charles.

KS: Right

DW: In all fairness, I was probably perceived and probably was a student leader as we define student leaders at that time.

KS: Right, not official, but in the movement that makes sense. So what were your views as an individual of faculty, and the administrative support for your cause, as well as the student body, and also the community outside of the university?

DW: Well I think the faculty was I mean I would be remiss to say it was split, but I don't think it was split down the middle but I think there were certainly faculty members who

were supportive of us, I mean thinking come to mind. Robert McClellan I think was a history professor, Hope Trap was a political science professor I remember right of the bat. There were others, clearly, a lot of faculty members that were very much opposed to us. I never really saw it coming from my vantage point I really never saw faculty members act on that, so I really cant sit here and tell you because faculty member x was against us, that that person was difficult towards us on class. I never saw that and that was good. The community was very much against us, and I would say the general student body, while there was some in support of us, I would say the vast majority were non-understanding to the point of against. I mean think part of the negativity from the students was what they knew what they knew about this, was what they heard and seen on TV and never really took the time to understand it or did understand it. There were some incidents of that being displayed outwardly for the most part, it was clearly you know most people were against it, but most people didn't act on it.

KS: Okay and the administration were they willing to work with you?

DW: Strangely enough, I think that is when time went on and one of the real interesting things in my life was years later when I was a schoolteacher in Detroit, northern Michigan came down for one of its recruiting days and I happened to go over there. The number of my fraternity brothers and some of the Alpha's that lived in Detroit, we were all school teachers, it was very interesting because there were a number of the administrators that were there that had been at Northern, and it was in a very strange sense it was an encounter of what had been two enemy's who had gotten together, but very really now years later, understood each other better and who were thankful in many cases. I can remember some of them being very open about that fact now that time has passed we understand what you were saying and we kind of think that you I remember I think that you made Northern Michigan better. I do have to say at that time that sure was not the case. With the exception of very few, Jack Romba?? Being one, and a few others we met with an awful lot of very know just don't want to talk to you. I remember Dr. Jamrich who was almost of a sense of that one of two things I will choose who I want to talk to which just wasn't going to work he wasn't going to define our leadership for us, although that was trite. I mean and that really hurt the administration and the people who basically got pulled out in that. Well we are going to talk to you three, those three would never get accepted back into the black student body, but I think Dr. Jarmrich's real point was as long as you are using these tactics I am not going to talk. In other words, we have nothing to bargain about as long as you are using those tactics. But you have to remember those tactics, were the only tactics we had and they were not violent tactics, there was not any element of violence or even threat of it, and when you take 80 to 100 students that are all standing in the middle of the basketball court, clearly surrounded by people who were calling us all sorts of names, I mean if there was any threat or violence it was coming from the other, not from us, there was only a 100 of us what could we do. At that point in time at Northern still has it, as a student you could have a rifle but all you had to do was check it, and the dorms but all you had to do was check it out, and there were rules you had to have the muzzle pointed down and that you were to head out into the woods. Well there was a lot of lax enforcement at that point of time; I remember distinctively a couple times when you might have arrived on your floor to be met by

somebody at the other end of the floor with the rifle pointed at you. And you know it was not a very easy feeling to get over, but ya so the administration, I don't fault them, I think they did what they knew I think they did not have any basis of understating on how to deal with this, this was new to them, it was happening in a lot of places. They probably would have been well put to actually I think that at northern they would have been well put to go, down Michigan to Michigan State, where it was happening in other places and try to find out what was going on but they were pretty much at a point where they just weren't going to talk to you.

KS: Okay, and was there a concerted effort of the African Americans students to leave NMU after the results of the pressing charges after the dean of students protest?

DW: I think that there was some, I think that one of the things that the administration did do which you know kind of showed, what they knew and didn't know, there was at one point of time a proclamation by the administration that actually I think it might have been spring of 1970, when we had four weeks of school to go, that they told the black students and then this was clearly a list of the demands that we had students that were very much in fear, and they said well you can go home, with what ever grades you got, or something, I cant remember. Even though that was a demand, I thought that was a very interesting response to it, even to this day whether it was a response was to really believing and accepted the fact that the students were in danger, or if this was, you have to realize that the perception that we had was we they didn't want us up there, we weren't wanted in this community across the board. Or if this was we really didn't want you anyway so go home, but surprisingly, most of the students, not all, 70-80% of the students came back. There was probably a greater of greater percentage leaving than normally did, but a lot came back and I think that is attributed to a couple of things. One was many of us had gone far enough that you were going to lose credits to leave, two even through all of this and even today, the substantive education at Northern Michigan was very good. I thought that what we got in the classrooms was very good. Thirdly, I think as much as some people thought this was, and some participated in thought it was a passing fancy, or something to do. The vast majority were very serious, and very committed bout it I can always remember my mom and dad, my mom was just beside herself, you are 500 miles away from home, I am from Detroit, what are you doing, we can't get to you things like that. But for me going home and explain to them is this is something that I have to do, and you know my dad basically saying I understand that, and you know I had to, I always thought that was a great growing up thing for me, because I had to recognize, that what I do, there will be consequences to that, and am I prepared to deal with that. Two, to try to be very clear on the fact, I don't want to rope anyone else in with my decision of consequences, so I think the vast majority of us, were very committed to this, we saw what was going on, you picked up the Charles Griffith case became sort of a lightning rod to us, we saw what was happening to us was unfair, but you know coupled with the fact that it was substantively good education, we also felt that we had every right to this, just like everybody else. And while what, and the last part of that was running really didn't do anything, unless you were going to go home, and not go to school most colleges were going through pretty much the same thing.

KS: What did the students that you came in contact with think of the agreements that were made after the protest of the dean of students like were people happy that some of the demands were met, or were they unhappy about how many that were not met?

DW: You know I think that kind of goes with how long that you were there. I mean I actually would say to you after leaving in 70 getting my master's degree and actually coming back in that one year in that 12-18 month period. I actually saw an awful lot being done, there were steps, I never did experience Northern Michigan getting black administrators or black faculty. I can say that they did a very big effort of trying to take some of the graduates and keeping them in graduate school and putting them in some sort of interim type middle type of positions. Ya, I think that they kind of realized there were things that they could do, and I think that they did work on some of them. I think that we were pleased you know it was a mixed bag, there were things we didn't get that we wanted and I think that we were pleased with some of the things the university was trying to do, and that they kind of heard what we were saying and they were at least tuned to the fact that there was a problem or an issue that this is not a place, where we are feeling very comfortable about. I think that in the beginning they did not understand, believe it or they didn't care, but by the end of it, they realized these people have something that they are saying. And so I think overall I mean all came together and realized even though it was a struggle we made the place better. Now, I kind of lost touch for years and was back years ago, I think they made some progress. May be not enough as some people wanted, but there was progress made.

KS: So do you think that the protest that happened on campus did affect the future of NMU and their policies in regard to race?

DW: Ya, I have no doubt I mean the question that one always asks is what if it happened anyway, but my gut reaction is it probably would have happened anyway, but probably not that quickly. And was it sustained, and that I don't know, you would know better, than I, you can see what is up there now. But I think for students who were there, who I was a graduate student were sophomores and freshmen may be juniors the next couple of years were better for them, than my first few years. I think that contributed to it, and there was probably some negative that came out of that, there probably some people who were at Northern Michigan, administrators, faculty, community, students who prior to this, took the I really don't care, and that protest and what we did, took them on the other way, which may have disenchanted them, or haters, or whatever so I am sure some of that. I will have to say in talking to certainly to the people when I left and my visits back up there when I left, I think there was some progress that was gained either temporarily and may be long-term but I just don't know that. Certainly, there was some progress that was gained from that.

KS: Well thank you so much that was all of my questions. And I just wanted to thank you for sharing your time with me, and it was wonderful to help me out with this.

DW: Let me ask you a question because one of things that I did notice when I was up there and you know I have this picture on the wall I cant see the dates, just out of the blue

one day I got a call from one of the guys who had a mid level administrator when this was going on, and he had remained up there and was running the alumni association and then he called, back in 1999 but any way he asked me to come up to give a speech and subsequently I got this award for outstanding alumni, the thing that was so interesting when I was there there was a student much like you who was very interested in this. It was very interesting because there was another woman who was there, and she had been a student at Northern, white women during the time, and she had come a 100 miles to hear me speak, and then introduced herself. The thing that was so shocking to me was the student who was asking both her and I about this, we referred her to the newspapers. She said they don't exist.

KS: Oh now, they do, I actually used a lot of them in my research they were in the archives.

DW: She evidently could not find them. And I found it to be very interesting because I told her because a lot of what happened was in those newspapers and they have a good account of that. And she had said, maybe they just couldn't get to them, but when she was telling me, and it was during the period time, where she just couldn't find any the period between 68-70.

KS: I know that those are some of the years that they don't have on microfilm you actually have to go through the papers papers. They definitely do have the papers.

DW: Okay, well good luck on your paper.

KS: Thank you so much.