



After the Conklin Hall takeover, several more demonstrations took place on and off campus. This one, led by Marvin McGraw outside the Third Precinct on October 7, resulted in the beatings of several students by Newark police officers and the arrest of McGraw and Joe Browne.

TURNING POINT

**In 1969, a band of black students took over Conklin Hall
on the Newark campus—and changed Rutgers forever**

By Bill Glovin

Joe Browne, suffering from severe arthritis in his 56-year-old legs, rises slowly from a plastic chair in a first-floor hallway of Conklin Hall on the Rutgers–Newark campus and grabs his cane. It’s 7:30 on a Friday evening in May and there isn’t a soul in sight. “Let’s see where history was made,” he says. Browne heads for the Bleeker Street end of the building, where he and other members of the Black Organization of Students (BOS) first put a lock and chain around the handle of the side door, and then makes his way to Conklin 100, a large classroom with theater-style seating. This is where the BOS students strategized and camped out for 72 hours.

“This room really hasn’t changed much at all. We ran on adrenalin; I don’t remember sleeping hardly at all,” says Browne, looking as if a time machine just took him on a voyage to 1969. “Me, Marvin McGraw (NCAS’70), and Vickie Donaldson (NCAS’71, NLAW’82) talked mostly by phone with Peter Jackson (NCAS’69) and Gus Heningburg, who were across the street in Ackerson Hall,

negotiating terms with [Rutgers–Newark Vice President] Malcolm Talbott. We picked Conklin because that was where the campus switchboard was located.”

While it’s hard to picture the soft-spoken and seemingly mild-mannered Browne as a militant, he helped lead 23 members of BOS on a three-day, nonviolent siege of Conklin Hall in February 1969. At the time of the takeover, the public school population of Newark was 75 percent African American, but African Americans made up less than 2 percent of the undergraduate enrollment and 3 percent of the faculty on the university’s Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden campuses. “Our primary goal was to change the admission standards so that disadvantaged black students could go to Rutgers,” says Browne’s counterpart, Vickie Donaldson. “You had to be a ‘super nigger’ to get into Rutgers in those days. We felt that there was an unwritten policy that the university would only admit a certain number of blacks. We also wanted more black faculty and staff and more courses in black history and literature.”



JOE BROWNE
NCAS'80, NLAW'93



MALCOLM TALBOTT
Rutgers–Newark Vice President



VICKIE DONALDSON
NCAS'71, NLAW'82



MASON W. GROSS
President of the University

The takeover set the stage for new policies that would affect every dimension of Rutgers. It led to the creation of the Equal Opportunity Fund (EOF), a state-supported program that today serves about 2,500 disadvantaged students at Rutgers and about 9,500 students at other New Jersey colleges and universities. African-American students today make up close to 10 percent of the student enrollment at Rutgers; the university ranks first among public university members of the Association of American Universities in the total number of African-American students on its campuses. There are some 200 undergraduate and graduate courses offered by African-American and Africana studies departments on all three campuses; a campus center, a black cultural center, and a library named for noted

Not all the members of BOS were on board with the idea of taking over a building, the first in Rutgers' long history. Fresh in their memories were the Newark riots that killed 26 residents and brought national attention to the city only two years before. Tensions were still high between the city's black activists and Anthony Imperiale's North Ward Citizens Committee, which wanted to keep blacks out of its Italian-American neighborhoods and who once boasted that he was going to start SPONGE, an acronym for "Society for the Prevention of Negroes Getting Everything."

It was at Donaldson's house on 18th Street where the students often strategized and socialized. She had moved to Newark in 1967 from Quincy, Florida, where she had spent her teenage years organizing marches and workshops. Donaldson says that before they acted, they sought advice from black leaders they respected: Gus Heningburg, director of the Newark Urban Coalition; Bob Curvin (NCAS'60,

GSN'73), faculty adviser to several BOS students; and Bessie Hill, the first black member of the Rutgers Board of Governors.

"I told the students that it was their decision alone," says Heningburg. "But I also warned them that they wouldn't get much sympathy if they tore up the building, which was relatively new at the time. The SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] at Columbia had done something similar, and the public was horrified to see filing cabinets coming out of windows." Hill, sympathetic and politically astute, advised the BOS members to make sure they put their demands in writing—and get their facts straight—before they acted.

Peter Jackson, an especially articulate member of BOS, and Harrison Snell (NCAS'70, NLAW'73), the group's president, were to stay behind and negotiate terms with Rutgers administrators. Four BOS members first went into the building the night of February 23rd (see

“ For many, the **takeover was the **high point** of their life. And look at this place now; look at what **they helped accomplish.** ”**

Rutgers alumnus Paul Robeson; scholarships for black and EOF students; and an endowed chair in honor of Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Rutgers' first African-American faculty member. For seven consecutive years, the Newark campus has been designated the most diverse campus in America by *U.S. News & World Report*.

While the BOS group succeeded beyond its wildest dreams in lighting the spark for change, the takeover altered group members' lives in unforeseen directions. "It's more than a coincidence that almost every student who played a major role ended up going to law school; they saw the law as a way to change the system, maybe make things better," says Norman Samuels, the former Rutgers–Newark provost who taught political science to Browne (NCAS'80, NLAW'93) as a new assistant professor in the late 1960s. "For many, the takeover was the high point of their life. And look at this place now; look at what they helped accomplish."



NORMAN SAMUELS
Professor



MICHAEL IMMERSO
NCAS'73



HARRISON JOSEPH SNELL, JR.
NCAS'70, NLAWS'73



GUSTAV HENINGBURG
Newark activist

“The Great Escape”). At about 6:30 a.m., 19 others pulled up and piled out of cars carrying food, bedding, tools, and other equipment. Once inside, they chained the doors closed, went to the roof, and unfurled a banner that read “Liberation Hall.” As the morning wore on, supporters, counter demonstrators, and media converged on University Avenue. Rutgers President Mason Gross arrived from New Brunswick to consult with Talbott, who was in charge of the campus. Talbott, whom the students considered sympathetic, asked city and state police to not use force to enter the building and rescheduled classes in other buildings. Both administrators were confident that they could negotiate a settlement.

Not everyone was as patient. President Richard M. Nixon and Rep. Charles Sandman, a Republican gubernatorial candidate from Cape May County, were among those who condemned the action. On the New Brunswick campus, black students showed their solidarity by filling their cafeteria trays with food and dumping them on the floor. In Camden, students occupied the campus center for about 12 hours.

“People from both sides marched with banners and placards,” remembers Michael Immerso (NCAS’73), a white student who supported the takeover and later became student body president. “There were some mild skirmishes, but the most serious threat came about halfway through, when a group of about 20 white students picked up a telephone pole and started toward the building. They were threatening to use it as a battering ram. Two members of the campus ministry talked them out of it.”

When the students finally emerged at 5:45 a.m. on February 27, one female BOS member cried out: “We did it! We did it!” But the agreement that brought an end to the takeover quickly turned contentious. The Newark fac-

The Great Escape

An employee’s quiet evening suddenly took a strange turn

Alan Gilchrist (GSNB’72, ’75) preferred working in the Sunday evening solitude of Conklin Hall to the hustle and bustle of the normal workweek. The 24-year-old built testing devices for psychology professors in a first-floor workshop. In the early evening hours of February 23, 1969, something unusual occurred, a plot twist that never made it into hundreds of news accounts covering the Conklin Hall takeover. “Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed four black men duck into a room,” remembers Gilchrist. “I went over to investigate, and they told me that they were going to take over the building in the morning.”

Gilchrist, with long hair and a shaggy red beard, had thought about enrolling in graduate school at Rutgers and had traveled to Chicago in 1968 to protest against the Vietnam War at the Democratic National

Convention. “I told the students I was sympathetic to their cause, but they told me that they couldn’t risk having me leave and blowing the whistle on something that they had been planning for months,” he says. “They apologized for the inconvenience, and assured me that I would be released once the building was secure.”

One student was assigned to shadow Gilchrist for the night. “At some point, I realized I didn’t want to sleep on a couch in the lounge,” says Gilchrist, today a 60-year-old psychology professor at Rutgers–Newark with short hair and a close-cropped beard. “I knew the layout of the building better than the students and, as we moved from one section of the building to the other, I sensed my shadow lagging behind. As I turned a corner, I took off and ran out a side door.”

Gilchrist drove home to Sparta and never uttered a word to anyone. When he returned to campus the next day, University Avenue was closed and hundreds of people had gathered in the street. Says Gilchrist, “I guess you could say I was the first and only official hostage.”

ulty, claiming that admissions and academics were areas under its control, made it clear that it would not honor some of the negotiated agreements. That led to two huge bonfires, sit-ins, bomb scares, and the boycott and cancellation of classes at different intervals in March and April.

“I came to New Brunswick a few weeks later to address a special session of the Board of Governors right over there,” recalls Heningburg, pointing to Brower Commons from a table at Au Bon Pain on the College Avenue campus. Heningburg, 74, now a consultant, was back in New Brunswick in May to hear his friend, NAACP

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Then and Now

Lessons learned from the Conklin Hall takeover

“What drives too many of us is the almighty dollar; the things that you all fought for are getting further and further away from us,” said Monique Baptiste (NCAS’03), one of six Rutgers–Newark students and young alumni who in March addressed former Conklin participants in a symposium called “The Relevance of the Conklin Hall Takeover to the Hip-Hop Generation.” “We are tired of hearing, ‘You have no idea what we went through; you’ve got it easy.’ Ours is an entirely different struggle, one that isn’t solely defined by black versus white.”

The group used Baptiste’s comments to focus on issues that might inspire more activism: the decline of social services for minorities, high dropout rates in Newark public high schools, and last year’s debate over whether there are too many ethnic and race-related courses in the curriculum at Rutgers–Newark.

But the topic that brought several alumni to the podium was a generational clash in attitudes toward the use of the word “nigger.” “That’s something that separates us; we fought to remove that word from the vocabulary, but now it’s everywhere,” said former Black Organization of Students (BOS) member George Hampton (NCAS’75), now vice president for urban and community development at UMDNJ. Defending his generation’s use of the term, student John Michael Ennis explained that the fact that he and his peers are comfortable with it means that the struggle over it is no longer relevant.

At the end of the students’ panel discussion, moderator and social work major Tyneisha McHarris said to the former BOS members: “Speaking on behalf of all Rutgers–Newark students, we might not be here today if it wasn’t for your efforts. So thank you.”



Ceremonies in February noting the 35th anniversary of the takeover included remarks by dignitaries, including Joe Browne (center) and President Richard L. McCormick (in tie and jacket). A plaque recognizing the courage of members of the Black Organization of Students and crediting them for helping create the Equal Opportunity Fund program now hangs in Conklin Hall.

Board of Directors’ Chair Julian Bond, speak at an event celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. “I told the governors that they had the opportunity to do something truly significant, something that would open the doors and maybe set a precedent for disadvantaged students everywhere—not just at Rutgers, but in all of New Jersey.”

At the end of an eight-hour session, the Board of Governors voted unanimously to admit “all educationally and economically disadvantaged graduates of secondary schools” residing in the cities of Newark, New Brunswick, and Camden. The board committed itself to establish “a new and pioneering program by September 1969.” “Their program offered special tutorial support to black students,” says Henningburg, “and it eventually morphed into EOF, which I chaired for its first 10 years.”

Henningburg drove from his home in Secaucus to the Newark campus on February 24th to attend ceremonies that commem-

orated the 35th anniversary of the takeover. Several BOS alumni and their mentors saw each other that day for the first time in more than 30 years; others were seeing classmates who became their closest friends. One of the event’s organizers, Clement Price, professor of history at Rutgers–Newark and founder and director of Rutgers’ Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience, called the ceremonies “the most moving public event in the history of the campus. It was a remembrance, a reunion, and a celebration all rolled into one.”

Price (GSNB’75) says the takeover helped provide new opportunities for countless people, including him. At the time, he was a first-year instructor at nearby Essex County College. He joined a three-block march to Rutgers–Newark in support of BOS, the first time he had ever set foot on the campus. “One of the demands was that the students wanted more African-American history courses taught by blacks,” says Price. “My hiring at Rutgers was a direct response to that demand.”

The commemoration speeches, given in the room where the students had once camped out, attracted a multicultural and intergenerational crowd that spilled into the lobby. One of the first speakers, President Richard L. McCormick, apologized to the students on behalf of Rutgers. “President McCormick said he was sorry for the kind of university that existed in the late 1960s,” says Price. “He said that change should have not required a building takeover and a situation that forced the BOS students to put their good names and reputations in harm’s way. There was a collective gasp of surprise and appreciation as he said it, followed by rich and earnest applause. I’ll never forget it.”

Provost Steven Diner announced the creation of a new endowment fund that will help EOF students live on campus and participate in study abroad and unpaid internships. The event concluded with the unveiling of a

Browne, reflecting on the ceremonies several months later in a Newark soul food restaurant. “I spent parts of four decades as a Rutgers student,” he says, laughing heartily at the thought that it took him so long to complete his education. Asked about the takeover, and McCormick’s statement that the students put themselves in harm’s way for their beliefs, he says: “While we didn’t know for sure, we were pretty confident that we weren’t going to get our heads blown off.”

When the waiter returns to the table almost 30 minutes later to tell Browne that the restaurant is out of porgy, the dish he ordered, he barks at the waiter that he doesn’t know why it took so long to find out. A moment later, his huge, hearty laugh emerges when his guest suggests that he is finally showing the passion that once made him a militant. Suddenly, he turns serious again. “I guess you could say my priorities changed. At

“President McCormick said he was sorry for the kind of university that existed in the late 1960s.”

plaque—just inside the University Avenue entrance—that acknowledges the courage of the BOS students and their role in the creation of the EOF program.

Another moving moment came when provost emeritus Norman Samuels introduced Browne and the two fell into a bear hug. A year or so after the takeover, Browne dropped out of Rutgers and headed to the South to fight racial discrimination. With the help of Samuels, he returned to the Newark campus more than a decade later to complete the credits he needed for his political science degree. In 1993, he graduated from the School of Law-Newark. He’s now a hearing officer for the city’s sanitation department.

“Norman has meant a lot to me; that was a special moment,” says

some point, we all began to worry more about where our own lives were headed,” he admits.

That brings Browne back to his days as a student activist so many years ago. “We thought we were making the city of Newark a far better place. In some respects, we did, but in other respects, we didn’t accomplish much at all. But you can safely say that we made Rutgers a far better place, and that counts for something.” □

*Senior editor Bill Glovin wishes to thank Gilbert Cohen (GSL’s ’59), librarian emeritus of the John Cotton Dana Library at Rutgers-Newark, and history professor emeritus Richard P. McCormick, author of *The Black Student Protest Movement at Rutgers (Rutgers, 1990)*.*

She is a nursing student and he is running for president of the student council. His advisers have suggested he meet this girl—Beth, as everyone calls her—the president of her nursing class, and ask her to join the ticket. She is one of 300 nursing students, 300 possible votes.

She joins the ticket and they start the campaign, but neither of them has any passion for politics, or perhaps it is more correct to say that they have no passion left for politics after three weeks on the stump, falling in love. So they both drop out of the race.

He devotes himself to his studies and, eventually, to her. Within a year they marry.

That was 1972. The nursing student went on to earn her doctorate, write two critically acclaimed books, and earn a wall full of accolades, including membership in the Rutgers Hall of Distinguished Alumni. Eventually they settled in Montclair, New Jersey, raised two sons, and became college professors, which was fitting, they thought, since they had fallen in love between classes.

And that is the end of the story, a story of a man and three women—his teacher, his friend, his enduring love. It is also the story of a college campus in the heart of a troubled city where they all met.

The man will always remember his days there and the three women who transformed that gray, concrete campus with its absurd blocks into a kind of shire of memory. He got an education there, to be sure, from some fine professors, but he also got so much more in the bargain—a life. □

*Michael Norman (NCAS’72), a professor of journalism at New York University, was named a Distinguished Alumnus of the Newark College of Arts and Sciences in 2000. This spring, his wife, Elizabeth Dempsey Norman, was inducted into the Rutgers Hall of Distinguished Alumni. They are currently writing a book called *Tears in the Darkness, a story of World War II in the Pacific told across three cultures, to be published in 2005 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.**