EPISODE 2: <u>"Protesting before it was cool" TRANSCRIPT w/ Citations</u>

KACIE LUCCHINI BUTCHER: Hey, it's Kacie. If you haven't listened to Episode 1, go back and start there. Things will make more sense.

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KLB: So I've been thinking a lot lately about evolution…

ALLIE MORRIS:ALLIE MORRIS: You mean like Charles Darwin? Natural selection? Heritable allele frequencies?

KLB: What? Is that science? You think I'm some type of nerd? No, I'm talking about Pokemon.

AM: Oh, okay. I never really got into that. Kinda just missed that whole thing.

KLB: Okay, well it's the highest-grossing media franchise in the world. But whatever. Like I was saying, *evolution*. You know how you start with a low-level Pokemon, but then you train them and battle other Pokemon… maybe you find an elemental stone… And all this helps them *evolve* into a more powerful version of themselves?

AM: I know you gotta catch 'em all… but what I'm not catching is how this relates to our history podcast.

KLB: I'm getting there. In a lot of ways, history is like Pokemon. Say you're talking about the history of college student protest movements…

AM: Uh huh…

KLB: The image that comes to mind is probably big marches with signs and chanting. Or civil disobedience… sit-ins on campus and clashes with police. But that's not always what student activism looked like. You don't just start with Hitmonlee being able to use Megakick. Or like, Gyrados busting out Hyper Beam. You gotta start out as Magikarp.

AM: I like Squirtle. He's cute.

KLB: And it's the same thing with student protest. Those big, historic protest movements that we think about… those only happened after decades of smaller-scale

activism… students trying out different tactics… learning how to organize … *evolving*, just like Geodude evolves into Graveler, who evolves into Golem.

AM: What about Jigglypuff? Is that one? Detective Pikachu? Tinky-Winky? No, that's a Teletubby… Baby Yoda? Scooby Doo?

KLB: Sigh…

[THEME MUSIC]

KLB: From the Rebecca M. Blank Center for Campus History, this is *Reorientation*, a podcast exploring the history of UW-Madison you won't hear on your campus welcome tour. I'm Kacie Lucchini Butcher.

AM: And I'm Allie Morris. This season we're exploring the *evolution* of student protest at UW-Madison. How we became known as a protest school, and what that even means.

KLB: But before we get to the major protest movements that UW is known for — Vietnam, the Black Student Strike — we need to go back to when the Charmanders and Bulbasaurs on campus in the early 20th century were mastering the basics of organizing.

[MUSIC]

[OLD-TIMEY VOICE] Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere…

KLB: What are we listening to?

AM: Shhhhh… We're reading a historic plaque.

[OLD-TIMEY VOICE] "... We believe the great state of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."

KLB: Oh! It's sifting and winnowing, I know that one.

AM: Yeah, it's like one of those fundamental tenets here at UW. The idea that academic freedom is an essential part of the university. And it's spelled out on this plaque, right on

the side of Bascom Hall. But did you know that it was also the source of one of the first student protests on campus?

KLB: Oh no, did the guy who wrote it turn out to be a huge racist or something?

AM: No, it's still a little early for students to be protesting racism. So it actually started in 1894 when an economics professor at UW named Richard Ely was accused of being a *socialist.*[1]

[SCARY NOISE]

After an investigation, the Board of Regents exonerated Ely and wrote a report that strongly defended academic freedom. That's where the sifting and winnowing quote comes from.

Jump forward a few years to 1910 and the graduating senior class decided to give the university a present. They chipped in for this nice brass plaque with the sifting and winnowing quote on it. This is the plaque we were just reading.[2]

KLB: Ugh god**,** I love a good plaque.

AM: Yeah, well the regents didn't. They were like, 'how dare you remind us of our own inspiring words?!' They thought the students might be trying to embarrass them, or that they were being influenced by radicals. So they did what we all do when we get a gift we don't like: they hid the plaque in the basement.[3]

KLB: Jeeze, and I thought university administrators nowadays were thin-skinned…

[RIM SHOT]

AM: The students didn't take this lying down though. They brought the story to local newspapers, who published op-eds questioning the regents. And they even bought ads on the side of Madison streetcars calling out the university.

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[1] Kari Knutson, "Sifting and winnowing turns 125: The tumultuous story of three little words," UW News, September 17, 2019, https://news.wisc.edu/sifting-and-winnowing-turns-125/
[2] "Sifting and winnowing turns 125: The tumultuous story of three little words," UW News, September 17, 2019.
[3] "Sifting and winnowing turns 125: The tumultuous story of three little words," UW News, September 17, 2019.

Eventually the public pressure paid off. In 1915, the university took the plaque out of the basement and hung it on Bascom, where it still sits today.

Now, you might be thinking that all of this seems a little silly…

KLB: I mean…

AM: But this is an early example of a protest tactic you still see today: When official channels stall, students find *other* ways to get the word out about their cause.

[MUSIC]

KLB: There are plenty of other examples from this era where students honed these basic organizing skills.

In 1914 students working in campus dining halls formed a union after the university announced plans for layoffs. The students threatened to strike and administrators responded by closing the dining halls and firing everyone. The union went public with their grievances and after a few weeks, the university caved and rehired them.[4]

AM: In 1919, the UW Suffrage Association held weekly protests and educational meetings about women getting the vote. They grew to more than 300 members and helped push Wisconsin to become the first state to ratify the 19th Amendment.[5]

KLB: And by the 1930s, protesting had evolved into something a little bigger. Maybe not Blastoise yet, but like a solid Wartortle.

On the eve of Armistice Day 1934, several hundred students held an anti-ROTC, anti-war parade where they marched from the Union to the Capitol and back. The next year, more than 800 students walked out of their 11:00 AM classes for an anti-war rally in Music Hall.[6]

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[4] "Protests & Social Action at UW-Madison during the 20th Century," University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, 1910-1929, https://www.library.wisc.edu/archives/exhibits/campus-history-projects/protests-social-action-at-uw-madison-during-the-20th-century/

[5] "Protests & Social Action at UW-Madison during the 20th Century," University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries

[6] "Protests & Social Action at UW-Madison during the 20th Century," University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, 1930-1939, https://www.library.wisc.edu/archives/exhibits/campus-history-projects/protests-social-action-at-uw-madison-during-the-20th-century/

AM: Okay, so what I'm hearing is that just like Pokemon gain experience points to learn new attacks, UW students spent decades developing a protest skillset: public pressure, media attention, walkouts, strikes, coalitions, demonstrations…

KLB: Yes! See, I knew you'd get it! And they'd go on to use those skills in one of the first big ongoing protest battles at UW: the fight against housing discrimination.

[MUSIC]

AM: Okay, pausing here for a shameless plug. We did a whole season of the podcast on the history of housing at UW—housing discrimination … all the reasons housing is so expensive and competitive … the time the university bought a whole neighborhood and bulldozed it… if you're interested, you can find it on our website and all the normal podcast places…

But here's a quick breakdown of what you need to know for this episode.

KLB: Basically, it wasn't until the 1960s that the university started building the big dorms we know today. Before then, they relied on private accommodations to house their students: Apartments… rooming houses… etc.

The university kept a list of approved landlords to hand out to students, but the only criteria they really cared about was that the buildings were up to code, and that men and women weren't living together.

AM: [GASP] God forbid!!

KLB: One of the things the university seemed much less concerned about was if the landlords were bigots. And this being well before the Fair Housing Act of 1968, landlords were free to discriminate based on race… and they did.

AM: Yeah. The uncomfortable fact is that housing discrimination in Madison was rampant in the early 20th century. But we also shouldn't fall into the trap of thinking, 'well everybody was racist.' Because there are plenty of cases when discrimination got people's attention.

In 1929, a Jewish student named Mildred Gordon arrived at a private dorm near campus known as Langdon Hall. (If you need a landmark, it's where the KK is now.)

KLB: Classy!

AM: Well, evidently back then it was. Gordon even ordered custom personal stationery with the building's address on it. But when she tried to move in, the landlord told her the room had been given to another student because Gordon was Jewish. The case made the local newspapers, and while the discrimination wasn't against the law, Gordon was able to sue the landlord for breach of contract.[7]

KLB: Fast forward a decade and housing discrimination was becoming harder to treat as a private inconvenience. In 1940, a Black grad student named Tremetria Birth was evicted from her rooming house. Her landlord explained, "I don't believe that colored and white people should mix, especially on State Street."[8]

Again, the eviction made the local news and Birth didn't hold back. She had this banger quote where she said, "The US sits back smugly and condemns fascism but practices the worst kind of discrimination at home."[9]

AM: We should point out here that these discrimination cases were getting public attention. And the victims were pushing back in the ways that they could. But it wasn't quite organized protest yet. That would start with Arthur Burke.

Burke was a Black man who came to UW in 1944 on a grad student fellowship to teach English. He moved into a room at the University Club, but the next day he was told to leave because of "strong sentiment among club members against negro residents."[10]

KLB: Burke was offered a room at the YMCA, but he rejected it. Instead, he brought the issue to History Professor Merle Curti, who started organizing on Burke's behalf.

Curti partnered with fellow professors and student groups, and a coalition of 185 students lobbied the University Club to end its discriminatory policy. The pressure got the Club to hold a referendum of its members, who voted to change the rules.

AM: So you can definitely call this first attempt at fighting housing discrimination a success, right? Burke and the professors and the students organized, and they won. But discrimination was baked into the whole university housing system. And this was

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[7] "Jewess, Denied Room, Sues." *Capital Times* (Madison, WI), Jan. 10, 1930; Pollack, Jonathan Z.S. Wisconsin, *The New Home of the Jew 150 Years of Jewish Life at the University of Wisconsin–Madison* (PDF), Self-published, 2019.
[8] "Negro Co-Ed Says Other Tenants Caused Ouster." *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 26, 1940.
[9] "Negro Co-Ed Says Other Tenants Caused Ouster." *Wisconsin State Journal*, Apr. 26, 1940.
[10] "University Club Ousts Colored Grad Student," *Daily Cardinal* (Madison, WI), Oct. 24, 1944, UW–Madison Archives.

just the first battle in a war that would go on for decades. It became a central cause for generations of student protesters.

KLB: Students pushed the university to remove racist landlords from the approved list. They posed as Black renters over the phone and published exposees in student papers. In 1961, civil rights activists and UW faculty teamed up on an undercover documentary catching landlords denying Black people housing *on film*…

The audio is kinda sketchy but the discrimination is very clear:

[BARBEE FILM BITE]

KLB: Side note: University administrators buried that film in the archives for like 60 years, but that's a different, longer story.[11]

AM: So all of this is to say that the fight against housing discrimination was really where UW students took some big steps forward in learning how to protest. A lot of the time, they weren't all that successful — racism has a way of hanging on — But if you're asking what changed from when students were writing letters about that plaque, and when students were getting tear gassed on Bascom Hill, this is a good place to look.

KLB: You mean this is where you'll see student protest *evolve*? You know, *evolve*… like Pokemon?

AM: [EXASPERATED] Yeah, this is where students evolved like Pokemon. Vulpix becomes Ninetales, Cubone becomes Marowak, and a niche cause amongst peaceniks becomes a protest movement that defines a generation…

SL: … You know, sex, drugs, rock and roll, and protest? I mean, come on, that's a hell of a story.

AM: That's on the next episode of *Reorientation.*

[MUSIC]

LM: You can find a full teaching guide for this episode on our website at campushistory.wisc.edu. That includes links to more info on housing discrimination at UW and efforts to fight it.

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[11] For more on the story of the undercover film, see "Sifting, Winnowing, and Film Burning," PBS, April 20, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/video/sifting-and-winnowing-and-film-burning-jbcveq/

Reorientation is written by Kacie Lucchini Butcher, Allie Morris, Lauren Munda, and John K. Wilson. He also produced and edited this episode. Additional help from Taylor Bailey and Dan Berman.

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