EPISODE 3: "Disruption Or Destruction: The Black Student Strike" TRANSCRIPT [FINAL] w/ Citations

ALLIE MORRIS: Hey! It's Allie. If you're just starting with this episode, go back and listen to episode 1. Things will make more sense.

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ALLIE MORRIS: So, do you know that quote from Robin Williams about the 1960s?

KACIE LUCCHINI BUTCHER: You mean from the *Dead Poets Society*: "No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world"?

[Robin Williams: "No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world"][1]

AM: Very inspiring, but not the one I was thinking of.

KLB: Ok, so we're playing a little guessing game. I like it… Is it, "Goooooooood morning Vietnam"?

[Robin Wiliams: "Good Morning, Vietnam!"][2]

AM: I mean, I guess that technically is set in the 60s… but Vietnam isn't until Episode 4. No, I'm thinking of the quote that's like "If you can remember the sixties, you weren't really there."[3]

KLB: Oh. Yikes. LSD is a hell of a drug.

AM: But since our thing is more *history* than hallucinogens or free love, I thought we could kinda repurpose it, like: "if you *don't* remember the Black Student Strikes of the 60s, you weren't really at UW-Madison or many other universities across the country during an era of intense activism for racial equity."

KLB: Well that doesn't quite have the same ring to it, but it does get us there…

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[1] *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir (Burbank, CA: Touchstone Pictures, 1989).
[2] *Good Morning, Vietnam,* directed by Barry Levinson (Burbank, CA: Touchstone Pictures, 1987).
[3] This quote is widely attributed to Robin Williams.

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 history of student protest at UW-Madison. And today we're looking at the 1969 Black Student Strike. It's one of the most well-known – and most successful – protests in UW history. These days the university celebrates it as an important chapter in our legacy of activism.

KLB: But there's more to the story than just a few weeks of civil disobedience. The success of the strike came after years of organizing and experimenting with different protest tactics as Black students fought to make a place for themselves on an overwhelmingly white campus.

[MUSIC]

[Oral history quotes from Harvey Clay, Donna Jones, and John Felder]

HARVEY CLAY: There was no Black barbershop, there was no Black music on the radio.[4]

DONNA JONES: Wisconsin always had a lot of African students and so when I came they were touting that they had 1,000 African American students. We all knew that that was not the case.[5]

JOHN FELDER: We also were very aware that there were very few African American faculty members or administrators.[6]

HC: it was actually pretty segregated once I got there.[7]

DJ: Wisconsin always had a lot of African students. We figured that most of them were African when they were touting 1,000.[8]

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[4] Harvey Clay, "Interview with Harvey Clay," interview by Ned Frame, *UW–Madison Oral History Program*, Public History Project, University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries, Madison, WI, March 24, 2020.
[5] Donna Jones, "Oral History Interview: Donna Jones (0464)," interview by Stephen Casanova, *UW-Madison Oral History Program*, University of Wisconsin Archives, University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries, Madison, WI., June 10, 1994.
[6] John Felder, "Interview with John Felder," interview by Ned Frame, *UW–Madison Oral History Program,* Public History Project, University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries, Madison, WI, March 26, 2020.
[7] Clay, interview.
[8] Jones, interview.

JF: We had a history in this country, of our history being dismissed and denigrated, not even thought out.[9]

KLB: Those are the voices of Harvey Clay, Donna Jones and John Felder from oral histories they gave. They were all involved in the organizing that led up to the strike. And what they're saying gets to the heart of what the protest was about: as Black students in the 60s, they went to UW but they weren't a *part* of UW.

AM: For one thing they were a tiny minority at a *very* white school. To put it in context: in 2025 white students were about 60 percent of UW-Madison's total enrollment. African American students were just under *three* percent.[10] The university didn't even start formally tracking race until 1974, (which says a lot). But we know that in the 60s, campus was even whiter than it is today.

STUART LEVITAN: one, you have to remember that in 1965, 1966, there are 120 Black students on campus, and 10% of them are from Nigeria…. I mean, lit–literally. We're talking about 100 or 120 students on a campus of 23, 24,000 students.[11]

KLB: You might recognize the voice of Stu Levitan from back in Episode 1. He's a historian that writes on all things Madison. More from Stu in a minute. But let that sink in. Black students were less than half of one percent of the student body. It makes total sense for them to ask 'why can't there be more students here who look like me?'

AM: But it was more than just the *number* of Black students. By 1968 and '69, the Civil Rights Movement had made an impact on the issue. UW and other schools were making *some* effort to better integrate their campuses. By this point, though, many Black student activists were looking beyond the goals of Civil Rights. They wanted to change the way the university – and American society – related to them.

KLB: Some very brief historical context: In what historians call the Long Black Freedom Struggle, there were basically two phases during the mid 20th century: There's the Civil Rights Movement in the 50s through the mid 60s. Think Rosa Parks, MLK, the Little Rock Nine, 6-year-old Ruby Bridges being escorted by national guardsmen into the whites-only school.

AM: The second phase was the Black Power Movement.

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[9] Felder, interview.
[10] Data, Academic Planning, and Institutional Research, Office of the Provost, "2025-2026 Data Digest," University of Wisconsin–Madison (March, 2026), 6-9; Devi Shastri, "Generational Burden Weighs on Wisconsin– Data Shows UW–Madison Failing to Make Significant Gains in Black Enrollment," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (June 5, 2022).
[11] To read more, see Stuart D. Levitan, *Madison in the Sixties* (Wisconsin Historical Society, 2018).

MARTHA BIONDI: What's crucial to know is that the Black Power movement broke in its understanding of America.

AM: That's Martha Biondi…

MB: My name is Martha Biondi, and I'm a professor of Black studies and history at Northwestern University.

AM: Biondi says part of what separated Black Power from the earlier Civil Rights Movement was how activists thought about race and racism in America.

MB: Racism was not an Achilles' heel that, you know, was a deviation from the vision of the Founding Fathers. But in fact, Black Power activists, you know, kind of emphasized and reminded us, racism was deeply rooted in the nation's founding. So Black Power was not opposed, though, to full inclusion in American life. It was not opposed to sort of desegregation and equal rights. But it chose different pathways and approaches to that goal. It emphasized all Black rather than interracial organizing and fought to call out anti-Blackness in US culture.

KLB: These ideas took hold on college campuses like UW. Black students were no longer just asking for integration… to be *tolerated* on campus. They wanted UW to be a place *for* them, just like it was for white students.

AM: They were asking to be taught by Black faculty. They were asking to take classes in a department that taught their history and culture. And when asking wasn't enough, they started demanding.

[MUSIC]

KLB: Okay, that's all important context. But let's get to the Strike itself. Strike! Strike! Strike!

AM: Hollllddd on. We're almost there. But we need to make a detour to Oshkosh first.

KLB: ugh, fineeee!

AM: See, UW-Madison students weren't the only ones organizing around the ideas of Black Power on campuses. It was happening all over the country, including up along the

Fox River at UW-Oshkosh. And they actually beat us to the civil disobedience punch on that one.

In November 1968, a group of Black UW-Oshkosh students occupied their president's office to demand a more racially diverse campus. University leaders responded by having everyone arrested and expelling 94 students.

Getting justice for the Oshkosh students would be a key demand that led to the Madison Strike just three months later.

KLB: On February 7, 1969, a group of Black students went to the UW–Madison Chancellor's office and handed him a list of 13 demands.[12]

[TYPE-WRITER SOUNDS; LISTING OF SOME STRIKE DEMANDS]

"Autonomous Black Studies department controlled and organized by black students and faculty, which would enable students to receive a B.A. in Black Studies"

"That at least 500 Black students be admitted to UW for the semester of September 1969"

"That it be established that control of the Black Cultural Center be in the hands of Black students."

"That all expelled Oshkosh students who wish to attend UW be admitted immediately."[13]

KLB: We're not gonna do all 13 here, but those are the major ones.

The administration's first reaction was basically, we're already doing that… They pointed to a handful of Afro-American Studies courses … like, hey, we've offered one… ONE seminar on Black history the last couple semesters… And don't forget that ONE English course on Black literature.[14]

AM: [sarcastically] yeah that really shoulda made everyone happy…

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[12] "The Black Student Strike of 1969," *UW–Madison*,https://news.wisc.edu/black-student-strike/
[13] Thirteen Demands: "Thirteen Needs Explained," Box 13, Folder 1, Afro-American & Race Relations Files, *UW–Madison Archives*, UW–Madison Libraries, https://campushistory.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/550/2022/08/1969-13-Demands.docx.
[14] "The Black Student Strike of 1969," *UW–Madison*,https://news.wisc.edu/black-student-strike/

KLB: So, the students told the Chancellor that if their demands were not met, they were prepared to strike and keep the university closed by "disruption or destruction."[15]

The Chancellor did nothing. So three days later, in frigid February weather, Black students went on strike.

[MUSIC]

AM: So what does a student strike actually involve?

SL: It ranged from going to, going to class by class saying, "We would like to address the class. May we explain what our protest is? … oh sure you can. And then … it would be elevated. You know, … people come pouring down the hill, you know, on strike, shut it down, and trying to exert a little more forcefulness.

AM: That's Madison historian Stu Levitan again.

SL: Uh, it got to the point of blocking University Avenue. It got to the point of you know, actually forcibly preventing students from getting into classrooms. And they kept escalating the disturbances … And one of the things that Willie Edwards who… **[FADES OUT]**

AM: He's talking about strike organizer Willie Edwards who later went by Wahid Rashad.

SL: One of the things that, that he said was, "The only power we have is to disrupt, and we will disrupt until, until you pay attention to us."

KLB: These confrontational tactics definitely got students and faculty to pay attention. Including *white* students and faculty. Thousands of them joined the protest to support their Black classmates.

But it also got the attention of state officials. At the university's request, the governor called in the national guard to campus. They were successful in keeping campus open…

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[15] "Student Activism," *Sifting and Reckoning: The UW–Madison Public History Project*, University of Wisconsin–Madison, https://reckoning.wisc.edu/student-activism/index.html

SL: But it provokes a defensive reaction by the students, where all of a sudden it's like, "Oh, my God, the National Guard's here. This must be important. And you get 7,000, 8,000 students. And I mean, think about this. We've got 8,000 students in the streets blocking University Avenue, marching up State Street.

This is, oh, my gosh. And that is a direct result of the arrival of the National Guard. It's remarkable that for all you, you s- there are some photos of these scared young men from somewhere in Wisconsin with their bayonets. I mean, we got drawn bayonets, you know, at chest level. And it's like, how did we avoid a tragedy? How, how did, how did somebody not accidentally run into a bayonet?"

AM: This brings up an important point. There wasn't a tragedy. For such a huge protest it was mostly nonviolent.

At least 24 students, both Black and white, were arrested during the strike. But most of the violence came at the hands of the police. One of those arrested was strike leader Harvey Clay. When he stood in front of a group of girls at the protest to protect them from police, he was beaten so badly, he still has scars.[16]

KLB: This might seem kinda at odds with the popular image of Black Power. People think of Civil Rights as peaceful. While Black Power was violent. But Martha Biondi says that's just kinda not true.

MB: The vast majority of student activists who were operating under the banner or slogan of Black Power were non-violent. They pursued confrontational tactics for sure, such as taking over buildings or going on strike, but only a very tiny, tiny small minority resorted to actual violent means. Both phases of the long Black Freedom Struggle used confrontational tactics. The Black Power movement on campus used many of the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement, including petitions, sit-ins, demonstrations, marches, picket lines, and so on. But I think it was the rhetoric, goals, and styles of Black Power that were different. They seemed more defiant and confrontational. So that maybe in some ways raised the feeling of violence? But I wanna just be sure to caution us and recall that the vast majority of students who may have seen themselves as Black Power activists or operating in this era, you know, did use non-violent means.

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[16] University Arrest Records 1969–1970: "Madison Campus Student Suspension & Expulsion Cases — Jan. 1969 to Feb. 1970," Box 4, "Committee on Student Conduct Appeals & Student Conduct Hearings, 1968–1969" Folder, Chancellor's Office Records — 1964–1971 — Edwin Young Files, *UW–Madison Archives*, UW–Madison Libraries; Harvey Clay, "Interview with Harvey Clay," interview by Ned Frame, UW–Madison Campus Voices, *Public History Project*, University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries, Madison, WI, March 24, 2020.

KLB: Just because the Black Student Strike wasn't violent doesn't mean it wasn't a big deal. It was definitely intense and disruptive. Thousands of students were trying to *shut down a university*. But it's important to understand that it didn't just come out of nowhere. The strike didn't really start with the 13 demands, or the expulsion of 94 students at Oshkosh.

This was years of Black students going through the *proper channels* for change… and *nothing* was changing. So they turned to more confrontational actions, knowing that they could face violence in return.

MOU BANERJEE: Nonviolence is not the absence of violence. But the counter to violence. It is essentially coming to terms with a world that is full of violence and meeting it with compassion and harm reduction, if you will, in as potent a manner as possible.

AM: That's Mou Banerjee.

MB: I'm Mou Banerjee…

AM: She teaches South Asian history here at UW-Madison, and she also directs the university's Nonviolence Project.

She says that in a situation like the Black Student Strike, for the people in power, it almost doesn't matter if it's violent or not.

MB: Even if there is a non-violent protest, the very idea that the state can essentially have martial law in place, for example, can have a curfew in place and say, even if you're completely non-violent and you're just marching and holding up placards, that is an act of violence against the state that the state has put an end to. What do you do in such a situation?

KLB: The students knew their confrontational tactics *could* put them in harm's way — think about Harvey Clay, the guy we mentioned earlier who got beaten up by the cops protecting his classmates.

But the students also knew that repression can often backfire. The efforts by the university and the state government to put down the Strike just got more people to side with the strikers.

SL: You had students, you had white students in the dorms who were participating in the strike. This has never happened before. I mean, we're talking about freshman and sophomore in the southeast dorms. These are apolitical students, and they're participating in the strike. They're supporting the strike.

AM: Over the course of a few weeks, the strike went from talking to classes and blocking doorways to marches with 10,000 people. By the first week of March, the university started taking steps to meet the Black students' 13 demands… or at least some of them.

SL: The most important one was an autonomous, what they called the Black Studies Department. It became the Afro-American Studies Department.

AM: This was no longer a few token classes on Black literature and history in existing departments. This was a full-on, independent department with a Black-oriented curriculum.

The university also agreed to expand financial aid and scholarships for Black students. And they started the process of creating a Black Cultural Center.[17]

KLB: For those of you keeping score at home, that's three out of their thirteen demands. Meanwhile, many of the protestors faced expulsion, loss of scholarships, and even jail time. So how successful was the Black Student Strike really?

SL: The Black study strike was the single most successful protest of the era because it accomplished its primary objective.

AM: Well, okay then..

SL: and it did so in a relatively short period of time. From beginning to end it was about a month. It started in February, by March it had a faculty endorsement of an Afro-American studies department because it was localized and it affected the people who had the power to make the decision. I mean, rule number one of a successful protest is you can only target the people who have the power to make the decision to do what you want. And then you have to, you have to present a workable solution along with, "Here's what, here's what we're upset about. Here's why we're upset. Here's how we're gonna make your life difficult until you fix it, and here's how you can fix it." If, if it's

[17] "The Black Student Strike of 1969," *UW–Madison*,https://news.wisc.edu/black-student-strike/

just, "I'm so pissed off that I'm gonna heckle, I'm gonna sit in, I'm gonna firebomb, I'm gonna blow **[BLEEP]** up," it's not gonna be successful.

KLB: So, what have we learned? The 1969 Black Student Strike drew on years of organizing and activism from Black students who wanted to take this *very* white school and make it a place that also worked for them.

AM: The Black Power Movement informed the strike's goals, and also its tactics: nonviolent but definitely disruptive and confrontational.

KLB: And relatively speaking, those tactics worked. A small group of activists mobilized thousands of their peers and they achieved some of their goals.

AM: At the time, university leaders and politicians condemned the strike and tried to squash it. Decades later, it's celebrated as an example of UW students exercising their rights to protest for a just cause.

KLB: But what happens when a student protest movement has goals that are less clear? When resistance spirals into violence, and success is much harder to pin down.

In the same years that Black students were organizing at UW, another protest movement was raging on campus… one with just as much righteous fervor but more tear gas and more firebombing.

That's on the next episode of *Reorientation*…

[MUSIC]

LAUREN MUNDA: You can find a full teaching guide for this episode on our website at campushistory.wisc.edu. That includes a copy of all thirteen demands from the Black Student Strike and oral histories from students who took part. 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. You can subscribe for more episodes wherever you get your podcasts.