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Rick Kean

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Black Demands at Denison

AN ALUMNI VIEW, by Rick Kean '66

Let me begin by saying that I came to the Denison campus to participate in the Alumni-in-Residence program fully committed to the justness of the content and the appropriateness of the form of the Black Student Demands.

The framers of the Constitution held certain rights to be self-evident and unalienable; they created a government which was structurally open to change in order that, as the problems of the country changed over time, forms could be created which would continue to guarantee those rights. Similarly, black students have the right to require that the forms that their environment take be so structured as to guarantee their rights.

Even the most elementary critical analysis of the historical situation at Denison would expect that, when an institution which has served a population which has been overwhelmingly white and middle class decides to change the composition of that population, changes will inevitably be needed in institutional structures and priorities. And from whom else but those new people can the pressure for those changes be expected to come?

What astonished me as I viewed the situation from the vantage point of reportage in the *Denisonian* and through the various releases from the President and the Board of Trustees, was not that the black students had made their demands, but that in a community as intimate as the Denison, a situation could be created in which those demands would have to be so strident before they would be heard.

Upon arriving on campus, I was struck by an overwhelming sense of depression. This was as true of students as of any other group. While a good majority of the students on campus had participated in expressions of sympathy for Black Student Demands, the pronouncements of both President Smith and the Board of Trustees seemed to ignore those expressions. This broke the illusion that Denison as an institution was responsive to the needs and wishes of students and contributed to an air of hopelessness, cynicism, frustration, despair, and, perhaps most distressing, self-doubt.

The students to whom I have talked are unanimous in their feeling that those pronouncements showed a definite lack of sensitivity to the urgency and complexity of the present situation. To this

was added a sense of insult that the trustees would deliberate and decide a set of issues in a matter of a few hours which have embroiled the campus in months of debate, discussion, and perhaps most important, agonizing self evaluation and learning. It seemed clear to most students that a group which is not at this point bound to represent their interests in any functional way, had also failed to represent them in spirit.

What had been created was thus a classical revolutionary situation. Students were forced to choose between their honest feelings in a situation and the authority of a group that had failed to represent their interests. Part of the self-doubt that I saw when I arrived on campus was a real agonizing as people tried to sort out the issue of authority from the issue of creating an environment in which all students—blacks particularly—could be free to educate themselves.

The sit-in was planned as a very safe expression of the discontent. Marshals were deployed, the floors were kept clean, and administration officials had been informed well in advance. Indeed, many students reported to me that they had chosen not to participate because the event seemed too controlled, too encapsulated to be effective as a device to register the extent of student outrage. As the sit-in began, it was small in numbers and quite subdued.

But then a strange kind of energy began to build. I think it was something as simple as one young woman standing up and giving the group an opportunity to engage in a common discussion. But the discussion was couched in a new context: people were already demonstrating with the placement of their bodies that they were ready to act on their words. Students were beginning to propose actions which would exert real pressure upon the administration and the trustees. Small groups circulated through buildings around campus asking permission from professors to make statements in classes and invite students to join the sit-in. They reported back to the group that only one professor refused.

A bomb scare in Doane Administration Building phoned into the Newark Police Department by an anonymous caller—added a surreal element to the afternoon. Students evacuated the building, moving the discussion *en masse* to the amphitheater in the basement of

Blair Knapp hall. The bomb turned out to be a hoax.

It was clear by mid-afternoon that students were honoring their feelings and analyses of the situation rather than the old authority relationships. A major debate developed over whether the best definition at hand was "supporting Black Student demands" or "the general issue of the lack of student power in matters which are essential to their lives." That issue has not yet been resolved, but it has been established that disagreement over it need not necessarily obfuscate the common cause.

Rejection of the old authority relationships opened some issues that had not been apparent before students began to realize that they had been laboring under some rather heavy stereotypes about "all the other students," that they all were involved in a kind of collusion in which action was ruled out as a possibility because of a (largely untested) hypothesis that no one really cared at Denison, anyway.

The meeting resulted in a commitment to further action. The 250 students vowed to bring the issues into the classrooms as the most important thing that the Denison community needed to learn about, to demand by their actions that at least the priorities of classroom discussion be changed as a demonstration of good faith. A meeting was planned, a boycott of classes, and a teach-in—to make one more attempt to inform the whole community and to give it the opportunity to take meaningful action.

It is difficult to express through straight description the feeling that the day's activities engendered. There was definitely a renewed sense of possibility among whites—but it was a sense of possibility based upon a new set of assumptions which at the same time create a new identity for white students and make communication along traditional channels more difficult. A great deal of social learning — the development of group skills, of leadership, of the ability to sustain a tension between creative disorder and deliberate action—took place, and yet one cannot help but be struck by how late the response comes. It is clear to me that the student response is becoming healthy. Students are getting themselves together at Denison. What is not clear is whether the rest of the community is healthy enough to respond with other than a cold and iron hand.