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1960's African American Civil Rights and Education in West Chester, PA.

The city of West Chester, Pennsylvania is an old city, and with age comes, too, much history. During the 1960's there had been extensive involvement with African American Civil rights throughout the United States, and West Chester is no exception. The promotion of awareness of matters involving African American civil rights were found, with no shortage of supply, at (then called) West Chester State College (now West Chester University of Pennsylvania), as well as in the community. This report will examine the city of West Chester's involvement with civil rights during the 1960's and how it relates to the points brought up by some notable activists of the time period, specifically with regards to education and academic institutions. West Chester's history is rich with conscientious students spreading awareness of civil rights, as well as high standing members of the community who've sought to improve upon African American education.

In terms of West Chester State College's involvement with civil rights the main strategy was to raise awareness as well as give students the opportunity to learn about African American history in greater depth than ever before. Giving students an opportunity to study African American history is most prevalent with Dr. Marvin L. Kay, Mr. Charles H. Stuart and Mr. Mathews' successful will to add African American based courses into the curriculum of the college. Student Pat Curi wrote about the addition of these classes in the college's news paper, *The Quad*. Curi wrote that, "Many student groups have felt that the lack of courses dealing with black history sociology, and literature was

downplaying an important facet of the nation's culture" (Curi). It is clear that the drive to become better educated in matters involving African American history had weighed heavily in the minds of some students belonging to the college. The urge to have the college provide more classes to explore black history with greater depth shows not only that students who had already been previously interested in the topic have a strong desire to know more, but also that the college, as a whole, has taken an interest in the topic as well. Furthermore, with more classes being integrated into the curriculum, there is also an opportunity for students who had previously been completely oblivious to black history and literature to then explore a relatively neglected (in a mainstream academic sense) realm of culture. The article briefly explores why the sudden interest, and successful integration, of African American studies had come over the college. It is suggested that the Black Power movement had helped influence students and faculty to study the topic in greater depth. In one way of thinking, the new courses were thought to be helpful in understanding "modern times" through a historical lense.

The ideals of Black Power had a relatively powerful, and lasting, influence over those affiliated with West Chester State College. There had been notable speakers invited to West Chester to give speeches with regard to Black Power. One speaker being the civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael. Staff writer Alisa Black, of *The Quad*, had written an article on Carmichael's impending speech to inform students of the college of the event with hopes of providing a larger audience. Black states within her article that Carmichael "defined 'Black Power' as a philosophy and a strategy of self-perception and self-help designed to Black American choices for action and the opportunity to live with dignity in an inter-racial society" (Black on Carmichael). Black's decision to not just promote Carmichael's speech, but also to share some notions that would later be expressed in that speech shows

a level of determination and devotion to spreading awareness in more ways than one. Firstly, as previously stated, the article was made to promote the speech and hopefully provide a larger turnout. Secondly, even if students who have read the article do not attend the speech, they were still exposed to a very common yet powerful notion involving Black Power. Through Carmichael's speech, the college, and also the city as a whole, becomes connected to African American civil rights on a larger scale. West Chester becomes connected to the cause on a national level through understanding the ideology of those who were heavily involved.

A very iconic civil rights activist was Malcolm X, and although he has very little to do directly with West Chester, much of the values that he stressed have made their way into the city one way or another. In Malcolm X's famous speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" he touches on black nationalism, its importance and what it means. His notions regarding black nationalism are very similar to how Carmichael had defined Black Power. Malcolm X had said that, "[b]lack nationalism is a self-help philosophy... [t]his is a philosophy that eliminates that necessity for division and argument" (X). Although the notions expressed by Carmichael and Malcolm X are not completely similar they are indeed related to some extent; therefore, West Chester State College, as well as the city, by becoming involved with African American civil rights, became involved with the movement, indirectly, on a national level.

In a more direct sense, West Chester State College had been involved with matters of African American civil rights on a local level as well. An article within *The Quad*, written by several students, reported on a protest that had taken place on a neighboring college campus of Cheyney University, which is the nation's oldest historically black college. The article states that, "[m]embers of the Black Student League, Black Power-oriented students led the demonstration." This is an account of local

students harnessing some notions of Black Power to potential make their school better. They had forced the college to close for six days, and over the course of those six day, roughly one hundred state policemen had visited the campus. This was a major disruption to the status quo of the campus, but the list of complaints made by those leading the protest was rather short, if not fair and easy to accommodate. One of the complaints had been that there are “no textbooks for courses in human growth and development and black history.” This whole incident is relevant to West Chester State College because the students of the college had taken it upon themselves to write about it and inform the masses of the event. The apparent inadequacy of the learning materials of Cheyney University with regard to text books involving human growth and development and black history was a pressing matter for those of West Chester. This relates heavily with the theme of providing awareness of African American civil rights.

West Chester State College, too, had its moments of providing support for their African American brethren. During the 1960's, the college participated in a “freedom fast,” which was documented by another article in *The Quad*, written by several students. The article explains that during the fast “students voluntarily gave up their evening meals in a coordinated fast so that impoverished negroes in the South may eat.” Through the fast, money is saved and then distributed to an organization that provides meals for negro families in the South who struggle to provide for themselves. In this way, the college is not only providing awareness through their paper, but also acting in such a way that uplifts the African American community.

In terms of uplifting the African American community on a local level, and going back to the importance of prominent speakers discussing such matters on the West Chester State College campus, some speakers were invited to give presentations in the Lawrence center. These presentations were

covered by student John Branson of *The Quad*. Although the article written by Branson was in retrospect of the event, and was not written so much with the thought in mind to raise awareness on campus, however, details included in the article had much to do with the community of West Chester as well as the college. According to the article one speaker, Luke Gothard from the Congress of African People, had some compelling things to say with regards to politics and education. In terms of politics, Gothard discussed the importance of disruption. The article states that Gothard urged “the black community must be able to recognize when an area is ripe for change” and that “disruption does not necessarily mean violent action, it can also mean the threat of violent action” (Branson). This could fall in line with the protest that had taken place at Cheyney University, and shows that through the similarities found in the notions of civil activists there is a strong connection between different communities.

More importantly, with regard to education and the steps taken in order to uplift the community of West Chester, Gothard touched on the problems that the nation faces in terms of education and how the community of West Chester could improve upon their educational system. According to the article: “Gothard stated that the present day American school was instituted for the purpose of educating the white middle class, and it offers nothing for the black student” (Branson). Gothard also stated that several other (unnamed cities) have set up programs to train black teachers to teach in black schools, and he also stressed that black communities ought to become and remain organized, but the overall message was clear: he had a problem with how the American education system had been treating black students. Gothard was not the only one who had problems with the American education system. The West Chester branch of the NAACP had, in March of 1963, taken it upon themselves to take action and request improvements.

The West Chester NAACP's Human Relations Council asked the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission to make a survey of black students who attended schools in West Chester. After some time the PHRC obliged to their request. The survey was conducted, and after looking at the findings that were made, the NAACP found some clear issues and created an organized list of the problems they had identified. Some of the problems included graduates not being specifically trained in any useful skills, a twenty percent drop out rate of black high school students (twice as much as white students) and a lack of participation in extracurricular activities. To this, the document containing the list of problems states afterwards that, "We are confident that Negro students have as much basic ability and aptitude for all subjects as white students." This is to say that although black and white students have the same academic potential it is odd and alarming that the potential of these students are not being met equally. The document then goes on to state problems that black students face, such as: a lack of acceptance in clubs and other extracurricular activities, having little trust in school authorities, and that "they need clearer understanding of tracks and where they land." Of course, the document also lists possible solutions that could allow black students to reach their maximum potential. Some suggestions include: students who need counseling the most get the most counseling, all guidance counselors attend human relations seminars and workshops, to make changes in the schools' policies and practices to make schools more effective in training students of average and lower ability, use disciplinary methods other than suspensions from school, and to encourage clubs to be inclusive rather than exclusive. The possible solutions could be useful not only for black students, but also for students of all ethnicities, which is infinitely useful when endeavouring to uplift one's community, however, this document was meant to, but not limited to, uplifting the black community specifically. The theme of uplifting the community is prevalent across differing civil rights mediums,

from the conservative, like the NAACP, to the more radical, like views that are in line with that of Malcolm X.

Back to the speech, “The Ballot or the Bullet” Malcolm X briefly mentions the NAACP. Of course, he may not completely agree with all the methods used by the NAACP, or use those methods to the fullest extent himself, but there are some overlap of ideas. During his speech, Malcolm X states, “If you see where the NAACP is preaching and practicing that which is designed to make black nationalism materialized, join the NAACP. Join any kind of organization... that’s based on lifting the black man up and making him master of his own community” (Malcolm X). There is a strong emphasis on being active in one’s community. This emphasis is expressed on a national level, and, in terms of the West Chester branch, the NAACP is certainly endeavouring to become the “masters of [their] own community.”

Moreover, the NAACP continued their struggle to uplift the black community during the 1960’s when the West Chester board hired a new principal for a local elementary school. The new hire caused an uproar in the black community, and local news journalist Taylor Buckley wrote an article on the event. The board hired a white principal and the decision was met by great disapproval of the NAACP, considering that this was the first major move made by the board since the address regarding the survey conducted by the PHRC. Members of the West Chester board met and discussed with members of the NAACP. Buckley’s article states that vice chairman Carl Brown said that ““when the Negro community hears this (the board’s decision on the principal hiring) they will feel that the school board is not interested in the segment of the community”” (Buckley). During the meeting, however, Buckley reports that board president Dr. Elwood M. Spellman stated, “he was sorry Brown has voiced such an attitude. The board president added that to call the action a demonstration of the board’s lack

of interest was irresponsible” (Buckley). There is a clear struggle within the black community to not only have their voices be heard, but have what they are saying be taken seriously and acted on. After the meeting it would seem that some progress had been made, although education is not the only area which could be improved upon. Matters of inequality plague the black community on a much more personal level, which very well could be attributed to the mediocre education that had previously been provided by American institutions regarding black students.

There are times when the struggle to provide equal opportunities for members of the black community can become too great, and members of that community suffer. This is most obvious, specifically, in a letter sent by NAACP member Benjamin O. Bowser to the Daily Local News, in which he informs that:

Word has just come to me of a most regrettable suicide in the Thornbury developments of our community. There is good reason to suspect that here, again, is the effect of racial discrimination and its attendant evils (1) sub-standard housing (2) poor attitudes towards one's neighbors. Our hearts bled for those bereaved. May the day soon come when social injustices such as caused this tragedy, will no longer exist. Progress must be made even if, well, some violence, is involved.

(Bowser). When the loss of a human life is involved it is a reminder that the matter of uplifting one's community is all too important and a very real need. Through this letter, of course, there is no explicit evidence showing the thoughts that the victim had leading up to their demise, but one can not help but think that Bowser may be onto something when he mentions that “[t]here is good reason to suspect... racial discrimination.” The wellbeing of our fellow man is what gives purpose and meaning

to those living within the West Chester community who, with relation to the college, spread awareness of events and ideologies, and who, with relation to the community in general, make their voices be heard for the sake of attaining equal opportunities to all students, especially those who are in need of it most, attending local schools.

To attain equality and freedom in the black community starts on the local level. African American civil rights movements are often viewed on a national level, and studied through the efforts of iconic leaders, however, the civil rights movement would not exist if it was not for the involvement of the common man in his common community. The necessary involvement can certainly be found in the city of West Chester, Pennsylvania during the 1960's.

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