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This past year I participated in a history conference at which the theme was “hearing silences” in records at archives, libraries, and museums. This theme implies an awareness of missing voices, perspectives, and experiences at recordkeeping organizations. But it is not enough to acknowledge that silences exist; a response is required to address the absences. This is where I take pride in the origins of my position as archivist for the black experience at Northwestern University—established by way of student protest and a collaborative initiative between the university and black alumni. In 2015, a decision was made to move administrative offices into the Black House, a community space and refuge for black students at Northwestern. Not just any campus building, it has great historic significance as it was established as a direct result of an earlier student protest, the 1968 Bursar’s Office Takeover.

Fifty years ago, black students at Northwestern presented a list of demands to the administration protesting discriminatory campus policies and pushing for an improved social climate. When the administration did not meet their demands, more than 100 black students occupied the Bursar’s Office. The 38-hour protest led to lasting changes at Northwestern, such as the creation of the Department of African American Studies and the Black House. Therefore, the decision to move offices into the Black House in 2015 without regard for its origins represented to concerned students and alumni alike the erasure of black history and the vulnerability of safe spaces on campus. Therefore, one of the many settlements was to establish my position: to designate someone to document and preserve the history and presence of black students, faculty, staff, and alumni at Northwestern University.

I began working at Northwestern University Libraries in July 2017, making the transition from the museum field. I had previously worked as the librarian/archivist for the Kumeyaay-Diegueño People of San Diego at Barona Cultural Center & Museum and as the library, archive,
and museum collections manager at the Women’s Museum of California.

The Black House at 1914 Sheridan Road, Evanston, Illinois

I feel particularly honored for the opportunity to work with African American collections as someone originally from San Diego where they are sparse. My interest in archival work peaked when I did graduate research on the San Diego Young Women’s Christian Association’s (YWCA) segregated Clay Avenue facility for African American women and girls from the 1920s to 1950s. It is a fascinating story of black women who transformed a traditionally recreational organization at the local level into a body that served the larger black community. It was the first and only social services agency for African Americans that provided employment opportunities and housing, and functioned as a space to mobilize for civil rights in the city. Still, the local collections do not reflect a wide array of additional stories about the black experience in San Diego. Realizing that histories of African Americans in San Diego had possibly been hidden and forgotten motivated me to build a career around safeguarding accounts of African American history in archives. Therefore, I recognize how special and important my responsibilities are at Northwestern University.

My main focus in my first year at Northwestern was to work on projects to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Bursar’s Office Takeover and to honor those who risked personal safety, enrollment status, and financial aid on behalf of all students. A campuswide effort emerged to plan and develop a series of programs to celebrate the student protestors and educate the community about this history and legacy. Even in my brief time at the university, I was responsible for advising university units and external groups about the history of the takeover, providing archival materials for social media campaigns, contributing to a video and documentary about the takeover, and speaking about this history to the media.
Overall, it was most gratifying to meet and interview Bursar’s Office Takeover student activists. Each person I spoke with offered a different perspective on the event, based largely on year of enrollment, gender, and involvement in campus activities. This led to an interesting discovery regarding the historiography of the Bursar’s Office Takeover: archival sources, especially press coverage and administrative records, overlooked the contributions of women to the protest. However, black women organized and offered unique perspectives regarding housing discrimination and harassment. Kathryn Ogletree played a key role as the leader of the black student organization, For Members Only (FMO). She was an advocate for black undergraduates, an editor of their demands, and a negotiator. We “heard the silence” and realized that her story needed greater attention. Therefore, University Archives partnered with the university’s Women’s Center to invite Ogletree to campus to talk about her activism, to speak to the role of women in the protest, and to offer advice to current activists. It was also important for us to critically address historical memory and the role of archives in documenting these moments in history. We also understood the significance of recording the event to preserve a lasting record of Ogletree literally speaking in her own voice and telling her story. Last, we enthusiastically awarded Ogletree the Women Center’s Gender Equity in Action Award.

In an effort to further acquaint the Northwestern community with the history and legacy of the takeover, I curated an online exhibit and a physical display at Deering Library (May 1–July 31, 2018) based on interviews and archival materials both titled, They Demanded Courageously, http://bursars1968.northwestern.edu. It features key documents, a timeline, participant biographies, photographs, and bibliographic resources. This gave us a great opportunity to bring attention to existing archival materials, such as audio recordings of James Turner, a student leader of the takeover. We also made more accessible photographs and a 30-minute documentary called One Generation Ago, a story about the 1968 protest created by several takeover participants, by digitizing them and storing them in the library’s digital repository.

The exhibit also features newly acquired and processed materials from takeover participants and alums Daphne Maxwell Reid and Eva Jefferson Paterson. In 1967, Daphne Maxwell Reid became the first black homecoming queen at Northwestern. The responses she received from the campus community reveal the very acts of racism that black students were addressing. Maxwell Reid has gone on to successful careers as model, fashion designer, photographer, and actress (most recognized for her role as “Aunt Viv” on the TV show, The Fresh Prince of Bel Air). Eva Jefferson Paterson was the first black Northwestern student body president. She is credited for leading Northwestern students in a peaceful protest in the aftermath of the May 1970 Kent State and Jackson State shootings. Paterson received attention in the local news and the national press. In September 1970, she represented the views of student activists, criticizing the Nixon administration’s response to the war in Vietnam in a debate with then–US vice president Spiro Agnew on The David Frost Show. She was also a witness before the Scranton Commission on “student unrest.”
My first year at Northwestern culminated with the 50th anniversary remembrance of the Bursar’s Office Takeover, May 3–5, 2018. About 40 takeover participants returned to campus for yet another historic moment in Northwestern’s history. Many brought their families and friends. And alumni from post-1968 years also took part in the reunion. The weekend was filled with laughter as well as opportunities to hear firsthand from the protestors. Also, beloved deans of the Department of African American Student Affairs returned to campus to participate in a panel discussion. Finally, the Northwestern Community Ensemble—the university’s gospel choir—offered a musical tribute, and Department of African American Studies graduate students presented a theatrical performance.

I feel privileged to do this work, which I recognize as a unique opportunity. I have yet to find another archivist at a university that is not a Historically Black College and University who shares this mission. I look forward to doing future projects and educating the community about other aspects of the black experience at Northwestern University.