

Black Power at *The South End*

Chris Singer

1968

“Art just pushed the shit through.”

It was with that calmly uttered statement that John Watson summed up how it was that he came to be elected the editor-in chief of the Wayne State University student newspaper, *The South End*.

He was referring to Art Johnston, the out-going editor, who maneuvered Watson's election to the post. The two of them talked of their plans for the paper in a conversation with the *Fifth Estate*.

“I first met John in the fall,” Johnston related, “He's got leadership qualities and his political thinking is very sound.” “I thought if the *South End* was going to live up to its opening editorial, it should have a black editor,” he said.

In its first editorial the *South End*, in explaining its name, made the identification with the powerless ghetto south of the General Motors Building, a symbol of power in America.

Watson, who is the editor of the *Inner City Voice* newspaper, was elected by the *South End* staff with a margin of more than two to one. The soft-spoken 24- year old is a junior in Wayne's Monteith College.

“There are a lot of things that can be done With the campus newspaper in relation to the movement,” Watson said, “the *South End* can be used to strengthen the movement.”

The *Inner City Voice* is a radical newspaper aimed at the black community. It calls itself the “Voice of Revolution.” Watson's reply to a question about whether the *South End* would mirror the “Voice” was: “You have to wait and see.” The response came with an easy smile.

He was asked if a newspaper under his editorship would be able to serve most of Wayne's 32,000 students. “During my tenure I hope to serve a lot more people than just 32,000 students,” he said. Need anyone fear him or the paper, he was asked. “It's my intention to see to it that there is a change,” he replied, “and those elements that presently make decisions need to have a fear of change.”

“Identical rumors went around about me, all the same kind of rumors,” Johnston added. He recalled that when he was selected to be the editor, there was fear in some circles that he would “take over” the student newspaper and staff it with radicals and hippies.

Watson discussed his plans for the paper. “I think the paper should be viewed as a living, organic entity that is capable of doing more than just producing a newspaper,” he said. “The *South End* should become a vehicle for not only the expression of ideas,” he explained, “but a vehicle for education and the general betterment of the community.”

He continued by explaining that the staff of the paper should be able to apply their “skills, abilities and knowledge” to other projects besides merely reporting the news. Watson wants to see the paper help teach others how to run publications of their own; such as high school students.

“The staff can set up classes both on campus and off campus,” he said.

Watson said the paper will place “great emphasis on community and revolutionary activities.” He was asked if this might alienate many students who may not be interested in revolution. He said: “For years the *Daily Collegian* (the former student newspaper) was alienated from the students and from 600,000 blacks in Detroit.”

Watson doesn't think he'll have easy going from the administration of University President Dr. William R. Keast. "I expect there are going to be some serious confrontations between students and the administration next year," he said.

His predictions may be already coming true. Dean of Students Duncan Sells has opposed Watson's election, and Watson learned that all of his academic records were missing from the University's files. Sells is claiming that Watson is not a Wayne student and therefore ineligible for the post.

Watson's election was ratified by the Student Publications Committee of the Student Faculty Council, by a vote of eight to two over Sell's objections. In commenting on the vote, Johnston said: "It's typical that one of the two faculty members who voted against John was Jake Highton (a Journalism instructor) and he said, 'I don't think someone with political interests should be editor.'"

Johnston said he felt that if the candidate had been a Republican, Highton might not have been so apprehensive. Highton told the *Fifth Estate*: "I'm still old fashioned enough to believe in objectivity in journalism."

There are indications that the journalism department may sever its connections with the *South End* in canceling its traditional course credit for students who work on the paper.

On the subject of alienation, Johnston commented: "I think the paper has a choice to be alienated from the students or from social reality."

Watson is concerned with divorcing the *South End* from the firm that has printed the student newspaper for the past 20 years. The contract is granted by the University, but the cost is high and the printer recently censored a page one story that was about, ironically, the censorship of the Voice, Fifth Estate, and the *Sun*, Trans Love's paper.

Fireside Printing, the firm that prints the South End, is owned by a member of the Michigan State Legislature.

"We feel that the method of allocating the contract for the printing is wholly inadequate," Watson said, "We're also concerned about a state university, supposedly owned by the people, giving its contract to people who discriminate against black people and engage in censorship."

"A committee of students and faculty should be able to determine who gets the contract every year, on the basis of efficiency and service to the community," he continued.

Johnston added: "John asked the Publications Committee to forestall the contract. A lot of times all you have to do in dealing with institutions is to take the initiative."

Watson wants to free the student newspaper from administration apron strings by amending the rules to permit the student paper to retain its advertising revenues. Presently the University gets all advertising money.

The South End has been a financial success. For the first time in Wayne's history the student newspaper is now supporting itself with advertising.

The continuing saga of the controversial South End has been made all the more interesting by the election of John Watson.

The good old Daily Collegian was never like this.



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