

Aroused Community Fights Wayne State

PCAUR Closes Matthaei, Occupies Community Arts

Fifth Estate Collective

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from Community Reporter and Fifth Estate sources

For as long as most of them can remember, Larry Johns, Ernie Elswick, Van Johnson, Jimmy Brown, and their friends have been pushed around by Wayne State University.

They've seen their families forced to move because Wayne State "needed" the land their homes were on "for the good of the Community."

They've watched as their homes and streets have changed from a neighborhood into a slum, because the only way Wayne State can get land is by turning decent communities into slums and then getting the city to Urban Renew them out of existence.

They're harassed for a long time by Wayne State police for "trespassing" when they "dare" to set foot on Wayne State—BUT THEY'RE NOT GOING TO BE PUSHED AROUND ANY MORE.

Braving near zero degree weather these young men, and other members of PCAUR (People Concerned About Urban Renewal) confronted Wayne State on its own doorstep. Joined by their parents, neighbors, members of St. Patrick's Youth Center and other supporters from as far south as Charlotte Street, sympathetic Wayne professors, Warren-Forest freeks and students, they marched up to the Matthaei Physical Education Building on February 3rd & 14th, and demanded that Wayne recognize their right to use the pool, gym, and other facilities built on land which was once the site of THEIR homes, with funds from taxes THEY and THEIR parents pay.

PCAUR's decision to demonstrate came after weeks and weeks of meetings and appeals to Wayne State officials to live up to Wayne's promise that Matthaei would be open to the community. Time and time again Wayne refused to open Matthaei or else told PCAUR that "technical" problems made such a request on the part of the community very "difficult" to put into action.

"They talk pretty sweet," said Jimmy Brown, "but all they want is to string us along until the community gets tired of fighting and gives up. This demonstration will show Wayne that our community isn't gonna give up."

After a half hour of frostbitten picketing on Feb. 3 the group began to shout "We want in" and moved toward the doors. But before anyone could get inside, helmeted University police barred the door. A tug of war between the police and the community began but ended soon after, when a Wayne State vice-president tied the doors closed.

PCAUR then decided to take their demands directly to William Keast, Wayne State's president, the man responsible for the doors being locked. Crossing Matthaei's wind swept athletic field they headed toward Mackenzie Hall on Cass Ave.

But when they reached the building, they found the elevators locked, by order of Wayne officials in an attempt to stop the demonstrators from reaching Keast. (Locking an elevator-in a public building is against Fire Department regulations. It seems that it's alright to break the law—if you're Wayne State University.)

But PCAUR and its friends weren't going to be stopped. They found the stairway and climbed all 11 flights up to Keast's office. Among the marchers was a mother carrying her small baby and a young woman more than eight months pregnant.

In the narrow hallway outside Keast's office the marchers packed together like sardines were told that Keast wasn't in. WSU police in "riot" gear guarded both ends of the hallway. Rather than wait there forever the group voted to give Wayne State two weeks to begin to take action on PCAUR's demands.

Then, as the protestors were about to leave, Duncan Sells, a University official asked them to join him in a 12th floor conference room "so that we can try to Understand each other." The marchers agreed to listen to what he had to say.

Someone asked Sells if Wayne State was now prepared to agree to the PCAUR demands. Sells replied, "No." Then another Wayne executive Vice-President George Gullen arrived. He gave the same answer: "No."

Sells asked the crowd where they expected Wayne to get the money that would be needed to hire additional lifeguards, etc. Several people shouted back, "Fire some of your damn police and then you'd have money to hire the lifeguards."

Gullen added, "Our policy is that the students come first. The money that built the pool came from student fees and state funds."

"Where does the state get its money?" asked Betsy Johns, a mother of five. Gullen didn't answer.

Gullen then went on to say that he couldn't understand why the community was so angry. — "We've run numerous summer programs at Matthaei for the neighborhood children. Not one person was turned away," said Gullen.

"Bullshit," responded Van Johnson, "I was turned away."

Gullen, noticeably angered, shouted back, "That's not bullshit. You don't know and I do. You people have a lot of misinformation."

"That's because you lie a lot," one girl replied.

Ken Ford of TV-2 attempted to interview Gullen, but was drowned out by chants of "BULLSHIT, BULLSHIT". Gullen and Sells made a hurried exit.

After a short discussion the group voted to return to Matthaei on Feb. 14 and left to organize for the next demonstration.

When the demonstrators reached the doors of the gym that Saturday morning they found a hand written sign stating that the building would be closed on Saturday and Sunday and all sporting events cancelled.

According to Paul Pentecost, WSU University Relations, "Use of Matthaei was cancelled because of concern about the safety of faculty, staff and students who would normally be using its facilities during the protest march."

When pushed to show reasons for these unfounded fears Pentecost simply said, "The President (of WSU) is ultimately responsible for the decision to close the building."

"This is all right with us," said one marcher, "Either they open up the building for all of us or they can keep it closed."

The group of about 75 demonstrators continued to picket the entrance to the locked building for approximately half an hour, observed all the while by a handful of plainclothes police from the University's Dept. of Public Safety.

The people then decided to take their protest to the posh home of University President William R. Keast, located on the second floor of Community Arts Auditorium.

Upon reaching Hernando's Hideaway they found it as locked and deserted as Matthaei. Undaunted, the group entered Community Arts and declared it a liberated zone.

"If they won't let us play at Matthaei," one fourteen year old blond girl said, "Then we'll play right here."

"Let's have a people's festival," shouted a freck.

"We'll get some films to show," Rene from Detroit Newsreel suggested and went off to get them.

"We'll get a record player," some neighborhood kids offered and they were off too.

"Let's have an old fashioned square dance," said Bessie Johns.

Within 20 minutes the halls of Community Arts had changed from a quiet art gallery to a jumping, stomping, dancing, drum beating festival.

The building staff freaked and began closing the building and locking the doors. It looked like the group was going to be able to shut down the entire University by only its presence as a weapon.

Enter Gullen.

Dressed in a suit and tie just like it was any business day old George began telling folks that the building was closed and that they had to leave or he was going to call in the campus goon squad.

When he walked into the middle of the throng dancing to some heavy Stone's music, cries of "Dance with us George" greeted him. Old George said he didn't know how to do the dances, so Bessie Johns, who is about his age physically, although 30 head years younger, grabbed him and began waltzing him around the room like he was at his junior prom back in 1940.

Fresh from his promenade George told folks to split by 4:00 pm or face arrest and sure enough outside was the entire WSU Toy Police force in a rickety old school bus wearing all their brand new riot gear and just itching to use it.

Come four o'clock people decided that the best tactic for the moment was to leave, although many of the younger community guys wanted to stay and fight it out with the invading hoards.

This is not the end. The community people and others who support the cause of community control of Matthaei are planning to continue demonstrating until the University is forced to give in.

Said Kae Halonen, president of PCAUR, "WSU has never given us anything and they never will. But we are not asking for anything anymore. We are demanding what is rightfully ours."

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