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At Columbia, Remembering a Revolution

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NEW YORK, Forty years ago, they launched a student protest at Columbia University that involved the occupation of five campus buildings, the hostage-taking of a dean, 712 arrests and injuries to scores of students, faculty members and police officers.

Now, they are lawyers, judges, playwrights, poets, professors and ministers. They gathered this weekend back on campus with former classmates to hear memories of those events and occasionally raise a revolutionary fist for old times' sake.

"Strangest reunion I ever saw," said Victoria Benitez, a spokeswoman for the university, which did not sponsor the event.

Some of the most radical are no longer fomenting revolution. Mark Rudd, the student leader who later helped start the Weather Underground and spent seven years as a fugitive, is now retired from a community college in Albuquerque.

The idea for the reunion developed at the prestigious World Economic Forum in Switzerland, where Robert Friedman, editor of the student newspaper in 1968 and now an editor at Bloomberg News, ran into the current Columbia University president.

But many of the student protesters of 1968 see their effort as part of a series of upheavals in American society that prompted deep change. They say the events also shaped their personal and professional decisions, and the people they became.

"It crystallized the emotion that struggle was necessary, and that you could win, and it marked us the rest of our lives," said Raymond Brown, then a student spokesman, now a criminal defense attorney.

In 1968, the students sought to end Columbia's affiliation with a think tank involved in Pentagon weapons research. They also wanted to halt construction of a gym in Morningside Park they thought would be segregated because of its separate entrances for Columbia students and Harlem residents.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated over spring break, and students returned to campus to see smoke from the fires in Harlem. Meanwhile, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam had been playing out for months at home on television.

On April 23, the Columbia rebellion began. Three hundred students barricaded a dean in his office in Hamilton Hall and seized the building without any real plan, they recalled at a forum Friday night in which dozens of alumni took turns at the microphone, telling bits of the story.

Soon students controlled five buildings. After a week of meetings with faculty and student negotiators shuttling among the parties, the administration opened the campus gates to 1,000 New York police officers, who rushed into the buildings with riot clubs and nightsticks.

Sid Davidoff, Mayor John V. Lindsay's assistant, was sent to the scene. "The elite police were chewing on their sticks, just waiting . . . for seven days to get a shot at you," Davidoff said at the forum Friday.

When police arrived, black students holding Hamilton Hall gave up and were arrested without violence. But whites in the other four buildings resisted -- some passively, others by hurling chairs at police. In all, 136 students and faculty members and 12 police officers were injured in the melee. Dean Henry S. Coleman was released unharmed.

From the beginning, the students formed an awkward coalition of white antiwar activists and black students of all political persuasions.

"Other people said, 'Stop the war.' I just talked about the gym," said Brown, then an officer of the Student African American Society. "There was a growing sense among the black students that while some of our fellow students thought this was a revolution, we knew it was a demonstration."

In fact, the Class of 1968 was the first at Columbia with a sizable number of black students -- about 20, said Brown, speaking at Friday's forum. They entered college 10 years after the landmark *Brown v.* Board of Education Supreme Court decision outlawed school segregation.

On campus, security guards would stop black students to ask for identification, black alumni said. White students used racial insults, and many of the African American students identified more with Harlem than with the campus overlooking it.

Soon after the students took Hamilton, the black students asked white students to leave and occupy other buildings. They took over four. Columbia officials did not move in right away, fearing that Harlem residents would turn their anger on the institution.

Once the students were barricaded inside Columbia's buildings, they became the focus of outside activists. Stokely Carmichael of the Black Panthers visited. Juan Gonzalez, now a journalist at the New York Daily News, recalled finding rifles, smuggled in by outside agitators, lined up against a bathroom wall.

Nancy Biberman, who was a member of the radical campus group Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS, was a courier who ran back and forth among the strikers' meetings. "It was exhilarating," she said.

But at the same time, Biberman said, she began to realize that as a woman, her role was limited: "I was typing up what was discussed at meetings to which women were not invited. . . . It's what propelled me into law school. I wanted to have a professional title."

In the end, Columbia abandoned plans for the gym and cut ties with the think tank. "Ordinary folks faced with superior power don't need to lose," Brown said.

But not all were able to seamlessly incorporate the experience of the protest into their lives.

Rudd was leader of the campus SDS chapter, and the protest made him a media star. Afterward, he said, the spotlight pushed him to be ever more radical.

"My friends and I took the success at Columbia and felt it could be replicated, not only on university campuses, but in the society as a whole," he said.

He helped form the Weather Underground, but after three comrades died when a bomb they were making exploded, Rudd became a fugitive. "I went too far," he said. "I've spent the past 25 years trying not to be Mark Rudd."

Reunited Friday on campus were some of Columbia's 1968 radicals turned professionals. Shown at "Columbia 1968 + 40" are from left, Raymond Brown, Nancy Biberman, Robert Friedman and Mark Rudd. (By Helayne Seidman For The Washington Post)