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Erik Brady: Steve Stoute made history at Canisius College, 54 years after a group of students changed it's course

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Left to right, Arthur O. Eve, Tarabu B Kirkland, Carl Stokes, Leroy C. Johnson, Robert Maaloney

A half-dozen or so African American students at Canisius College staged a sit-in in 1968. They occupied the office of the college president and demanded that he do more for the few Black students there at the time.

Today that office is occupied by Steve K. Stoute, who is in his first week as the college's first president of color. It is a development that LeRoi Johnson and Tarabu Betserei Kirkland did not see coming when they mounted their protest a lifetime ago at the mostly White college in the mostly Black neighborhood.

"We didn't dream there would be a Black president at Canisius one day," Johnson says. "We had other things on our minds."

All this came at a pivotal moment in the history of American higher education known as the Black Campus Movement, circa mid-1960s to early 1970s. African-American students at colleges across the country staged protests to demand more campus inclusivity. They wanted Black-studies programs, Black faculty and staff, and the formation of Black student unions.

Those were among the things that the Canisius protesters wanted from Rev. James M. Demske, who was in his second year of a 27-year run as Canisius president. Crucially, the activists also asked that the college recruit more Black students.

“That was the disconnect for us,” Kirkland says. “How can this school exist in this community without this community being a part of the school?”

This is the story of the sit-in that changed the Catholic college on Main Street where it meets Jefferson Avenue. Canisius had only a dozen or so Black students at the time, as Johnson recalls. Today about one-third of the college’s enrollment is students of color, including 14% African American.



Most of the Canisius protesters were freshmen — 18-year-olds who had formed a connection in the fall semester of 1967. “There were not many others who reflected our complexion,” Kirkland says.

One day, near the start of their second semester, they arrived at the president’s office only to find that Demske wasn’t in. They sat and waited in his outer office.

“And when he got back, he looked at us and said something like, ‘Well, what are you guys doing?’ ” Johnson says. “And we told him we were protesting and we wanted to make some changes. And I think it was a real shock to him.”

“We made some pretty heavy demands,” Kirkland says. “Heavy but entirely legitimate demands.”

Kirkland says Demske was well aware of the unrest at colleges around the country in that era — mostly from protests over the war in Vietnam but also, increasingly, over Black representation on campuses. Soon a dean would be taken hostage at Columbia, and armed Black students would occupy buildings at Cornell.

“Father Demske invited us into his conference room,” Johnson says. “And I remember him pulling out some cigars and saying something to the effect of, ‘Well, you guys want to be big-time, this is how we do it.’ And then he asked us what we wanted. And so we began to tell him.”

“It was an intense session,” Kirkland says. “We were amped up on the ’60s political rhetoric. We had a very earnest desire to change the culture of the school. I’m not sure how long we stayed, but several hours anyway. And he actually listened.”

The protesters wanted official status for the Afro-American Society, which they had recently founded. This way it could get funding from the school. And the club quickly put that money to use by assembling what remains one of the most astonishing weeks in Canisius history, in mid-March 1968. They called it Black Experience Week.

Muhammad Ali, the once and future heavyweight champ, came to speak. Dick Gregory, the comedian and activist, came to perform. So did The Main Ingredient, a top rhythm-and-blues band. Carl Stokes from Cleveland, the first Black mayor of a major American city, also spoke.

“Carl was the Obama of his time,” Johnson says. “And I could get him because he was my cousin.” But how did the fledgling Afro-American Society get Ali, Gregory, and The Main Ingredient? The answer, Johnson says, was simply by asking.

“We had a lot of naysayers who said you will never get people like that,” he says. “But we had a lot of likeminded guys who said it wasn’t why we can’t, but how we can. We had the courage to ask. And everybody said yes.”

Ali’s appearance [made national news](#) when he advocated for separation of the races and was challenged by Sharon Tolbert, an ex-nun who would later be the first African American woman to graduate from Canisius, which had only recently begun to admit women.

African-Americans were fools to believe “this airport is mine, this bus terminal is mine, this college is mine,” Ali said. Tolbert rose from her aisle seat, several rows from the stage. “It is my airport. It is my bus terminal. It is my college,” she responded. The exchange was reported by the Associated Press and picked up by Sports Illustrated.

Walter Sharrow, a White history professor, developed the first Black history course at Canisius. Sociology professor Jesse E. Nash Jr., then the college’s only Black faculty member, developed several courses in Black studies.



But there was still the matter of attracting more students of color.

“We told Father Demske we wanted 100 or 125, and he didn’t balk at that,” Johnson says. “He said, ‘If you can bring us 125 qualified students, we will admit them.’ But he put that on us. So we had to go about thinking about kids we could talk to about coming.

“It wasn’t as easy as we thought. Canisius’s reputation was all-white and private. We didn’t get 100, but we did get 30. These were students from Buffalo who we knew could make it academically.”

Johnson says Demske could have said yes to the demands of the protesters and then slow-rolled it. “But he didn’t do that. He said he would give us what we needed, to do what we wanted to do. And he kept his promise.”

The founding members of the Afro-American Society fulfilled their promise, too. Their achievements, academic and otherwise, are notable:

- Kirkland, the society’s first president, is a documentary filmmaker in Hollywood. His mother was Buffalo’s oldest citizen when she died at 111, in 2019. His documentary on her, [“100 Years from Mississippi.”](#) won awards at film festivals across North America last year, including in Buffalo. Plans are afoot for it to air this fall on WNED-TV.



Tarabu Betsera Kirkland

- Johnson got his law degree at Georgetown. He is a lawyer downtown who was once manager for the music career of his late brother, Rick James. He is also a world-renowned artist who calls his oil-and-acrylic paintings “electric primitive.” Some hang in the first-floor hallway of Old Main, the college’s signature building, and elsewhere around campus.

- Bob Maloney got his law degree at Harvard. He is a policy adviser with the Government Affairs & Public Policy Group, in Washington, where he focuses on government relations.

- Frank Barbee got his law degree at Notre Dame. He is chief assistant corporation counsel for the city of Detroit.

- Arnold Daniels earned a master’s degree in anthropology at Columbia. He is a former State Department public liaison who lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



Leroi C. Johnson

Tolbert, who died in 2018, was several years older and not a founding member of the Afro-American Society, but she, too, excelled academically. She earned a doctorate at Stanford and spent her life in higher education, including at historically Black colleges and universities.

Kirkland had been accepted at Morehouse College, in Atlanta — among the best-known HBCUs, and alma mater of Martin Luther King Jr. — but chose to stay home and go to Canisius.

“It would have been a different context at Morehouse,” he says. “I would have learned a lot and grown a lot there, but we had a chance to be a vanguard force at Canisius. And that was very powerful for me.”

Black Experience Week remains indelible, but Kirkland says bringing in 30 African American students from Buffalo was a bigger deal than bringing in Ali for one night.

“I think of all the things we did, that was the most significant action,” he says. “That’s the one, I think, that we can hang our hats on.”

Johnson says it is important to remember that it wasn’t a matter of doing all this for themselves. They did it for their college. Here is the 1968 preamble to the constitution of the Afro-American Society:

“We, the undergraduate Afro-American students of Canisius College, recognizing the integral role black culture plays in today’s society, feel that we are obligated to acclimate the Canisius College community to black culture and society, and seek cultural rapport between all people. We hope to accomplish this by unselfishly making available to the Canisius College population any resources we may have.”

The sit-in, all those years ago, wasn’t really about making demands after all. Let history show that in the end it was much more about giving than taking.