University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Student Protest Reunion Oral History Project
Interviewee: Michael Mertz
Interviewer: Katie Nichols
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Michael Metz: It's quite a device you got there.

Katie Nichols: Oh, yeah.

MM: A lot better than my iPhone.

KN: [Laughs.] Serious business. Okay, so can you go ahead and just state your name and the years you were at University of Illinois.

MM: I'm Michael Metz, and I was at the University of Illinois from the fall of 1965 to, graduated in January 1970.

KN: Okay, so you just did undergrad here?

MM: Yes.

KN: And what did you study?

MM: I graduated with a major in English and a minor in history.

KN: Okay.

MM: Had about half a dozen different majors in between, but that's what I ended up in.

KN: Okay, so how did you come to be involved in the student demonstrations?

MM: Boy, that's a really good question. Someone asked that question recently, and frankly, I had a hard time answering. I grew up in Springfield, a Catholic, Irish, Italian, working class family with very traditional values. Came over here to—and was a Barry Goldwater supporter in my senior year in high school, right-wing conservative—came over here, and over the first three semesters of my college career, became exposed to lots of different ways of thinking about things that made me question much of what I had grown up with and been taught in the schools that I'd attended.

Specifically, I think that there was the Free Speech Movement going on on campus. So occasionally you would see people handing out leaflets, making a speech to a thin crowd on the back of the Illinois Union. And there were discussions in the *Daily Illini* about the Free Speech Movement that I was vaguely aware of, and heard some about it in late night dormitory discussions. So I think the conversations in the dormitory and the general and gradual exposure on campus to the free speech issues began that process.

And then sometime in '65, '66, by my sophomore year, it was clear how the Vietnam War was escalating. And it was escalating to the point where one really had to choose a side how you felt about it. And I think as I worked through my feelings about that, I became more and more radicalized about the war, about the free speech, about *in loco parentis*, the attitude of the University towards students and generally, became more progressively liberal in my outlook on life. That help?

KN: Yeah. And how specifically did you find a group to, or, you know, a way in which to become involved?

MM: I attended an SDS meeting, which I thought was pretty inefficient and interesting, but really a bit much. SDS meetings were such where everybody got to speak as long as they wanted to, and ideally a vote was taken after topics were run into the ground, but often it would take hours and hours for everyone to have a say and any sort of conclusive vote be drawn up. But I attended at least a couple SDS meetings.

I, by my sophomore year, I had a roommate who I was just speaking to, who I haven't seen in many years, who's here for the symposium, Lester Wall, who helped open my eyes to to alternative ways of thinking of things. I had a girlfriend by my sophomore year who did more of the same. And the war, I think issues about the war and around the war became hotter, so that there were there were regular demonstrations, rallies, protest efforts that became—that, whether you wanted to or not, intruded on your day-to-day life.

So Vic Berkey, who now goes by the name Berkey Mohino, who you'll be speaking to soon, was was a rabble-rousing, influential leader in the protest movement. Vern Fein, who you may or may not be speaking to, also had a lot of influence on me. And you know, you sit down and have a cup of coffee or lunch in the Illini Union and learn from these guys. Phil Durrett, who I think you're also speaking to, led a group of us to the Student Services Building one day to try to get access to some quote, unquote, secretive files that the security officers were holding on anybody who attended rallies.

Probably wasn't anything to it at all, but while we were mingling in his office, Phil Durrett started talking to me about United Fruit Company, which was an early corporate presence in Latin America that toppled governments with the aid of the State Department and the CIA, and put in friendly governments to their interests. And I remember clearly having conversations with Phil about United Fruit Company

and Howard Zinn wrote a book. He was a professor, I want to say, at Brandeis, who became quite well known at that time, wrote a book entitled *The Logic of Withdrawal*, which essentially made an argument for the US pulling out of Vietnam as quickly as possible. But took a lot longer to say that than I just said it, but it was very well reasoned and logical argument that Phil introduced me to in that same day. So that's something that I remember clearly, is Durrett talking about United Fruit Company and how it's—I'm not sure it's Howard Zinn. I'd have to check on it, but I might be mistaken in who wrote the book. Howard Zinn was another historian of the time. But the book, *Logic of Withdrawal*, remember today, yellow cover, thin, maybe 120 pages, was very influential in my thinking, also. You had things like *The Nation* that were floating around in the dorms, and a few other publications like that. Does that help? You want more?

KN: Yeah, absolutely. Oh, I mean, we always want more. As much as you want to tell us. [Laughs.]

MM: Are you going to edit this? I assume you're going to edit this.

KN: Mmm, probably not. Maybe. So were there, was there any major opposition on campus? Who did you feel most strongly [crosstalk].

MM: Well, there was certainly opposition on my home front, with my family. My dad was a World War II veteran, a paratrooper, 82nd Airborne, very much a supporter of the Vietnam War. And fundamentally a believer in "my country, right or wrong," and did not have any patience for Vietnam War protesters, questioning the government, questioning the draft, questioning the war, and saw us pretty much as treasonous and traitorous in our protests. I remember the first, first time I went home with long hair. Big, big confrontation with my father. And fortunately, unfortunately, he passed away before we could circle around and become friends and get past all that, but there was that.

Opposition on campus, yes, but not, not so much as you would expect. There was a Young Republicans group. There was a Young Americans—YAF, Young Americans for Freedom on campus. They would counterprotest if we had a picket line behind the Union or in front of the administration building, but they never really generated a whole lot of excitement or interest among the students.

You know, you have to be clear in remembering that all the folks, all the students involved in the anti-war protests at its peak, was no more than maybe two or three percent of the entire student population. I think one of the largest demonstrations ever was toward the end, '69, '70, well during the student strike of 1970. Even though the majority of students stopped going to classes during the strike, they didn't come out and demonstrate or protest or come to mass rallies. I remember, as I was writing the book that the largest rally that I ever came across was maybe 3,000, 4,000 people on the on the on the quad, filling the quad, obviously. But assuming, which isn't an accurate assumption, but if you assume, for sake of discussion, those were all students, in 30,000 student population at the time, you know. Well, that's ten

percent, isn't it? [Laughs.] That was rare. You never, you never saw rallies of more than a few hundred people. It was, it was very rare.

The Dow sit-in protest had a couple hundred people and maybe another hundred people outside demonstrating. Hundred people, couple, 150 people sitting in and maybe 100 people outside. But Jack Peltason, the Chancellor at the time, used to make a point of saying to the Board of Trustees, whenever he met with them—and they were always up in arms about the student protesters—Peltason would always say, 'this is a tiny, tiny minority.' And he was right. It was a tiny, tiny minority, but it was a minority that mattered. It was a minority with some heft and some sufficient size and energy behind it that it had impact.

So to answer your question directly, yes, there was opposition. But the opposition, even if the University of Illinois—where you would expect opposition—never seemed that significant. Now, there was probably latent opposition. Opposition that did not show itself. Certainly there was a strong ROTC program, if you might be too young to know what ROTC was. You know what, Reserve Officer Training Commission, I guess ROTC that was housed over at the Armory. It was, maybe up until the 19—the early 1960s, it was a required program that all males have one ROTC course. By the time I got here, it was a voluntary program. And—but still, there were hundreds and hundreds of young men, young male students, that were, would don uniforms and dummy rifles and march around in the Armory, doing drills, preparing for potential defense of their country. So you got to assume that those guys were very much opposed to what was going on.

For a long time, most of the fraternities and the athletes, the football players, were [coughs] were opposed to it, but I think over time, by '69, '70, they'd come over to seeing the wisdom of our arguments. And so you have to ask, when are you talking about? In 1965 the great majority of students were in opposition to the protesters. By 1970 probably the great majority were in favor. So you have to ask yourself, when are you talking about, to measure the level of opposition.

KN: Right. And were there faculty or administration, even, that you felt were allies?

MM: Yeah. Yes. There was a faculty committee to end the war in Vietnam. There were two separate committees to end the war in Vietnam. One was a strictly faculty organization. One was a student faculty administrator, more loosely organized. And you could ask Vern Fein about both of these. I think he, I think, as a fac—as a junior faculty person, he was a rhetoric instructor, he's probably, his memory is probably better on both of them than mine.

But there were some faculty who spoke out and were leaders in the anti-war movement. There was a fellow named Lou Gold in political science. There was Brandenburg [ph.] on the English faculty, who was, who was a strong opponent of the war. There was Michael Parenti, again, on the political science faculty. He was a visiting professor, and he was a strong opponent of the war and eventually a leader in

the in the protest movement. There was a friend of mine, David Ransel, who was starting his first full position here as an assistant professor. He just graduated from some—maybe Princeton—and had been offered a position in history, Russian history specialist. And in his first or second semester, volunteered to be the faculty sponsor for Students for Democratic Society, the SDS meetings. Which, God bless him, he must have had a lot of patience to put up with that, but every student organization had to have a faculty sponsor in order to be a University sanctioned group with access to facilities and some level of funding and that sort of thing. So Ransel was kind of a quiet leader from the faculty perspective.

But yeah, there were, there were definitely faculty who—I suspect that many of the faculty were supportive of the anti-war movement, but there were a handful that I recall who were active in the anti-war movement. Ransel, in fact—you can read my book for references on this, he was quite open with me—he was involved in helping draft resisters at the Rantoul Air Force Base. Draft—not draft resisters, but deserters. Servicemen who decided to leave the service and head for Canada, and he was actually involved in driving service deserters to Canada.

KN: Oh, wow.

MM: Object—there's probably a more politically correct way to say deserter. I can't think of it right now.

KN: Right, well, conscientious objector?

MM: No, conscientious objectors were a little different. Those were, those were guys who went in front of the draft board and said, 'I'm a pacifist. I don't believe in war.' And they were allowed to work in a hospital or do some sort of alternative service. But we're talking about people who were enrolled in the US Army or the armed services, Army, Navy, or Air Force, and decided that they couldn't participate in what was going on. And God bless them, lots of them did that, and some of them left the country, never to return.

KN: Probably could never come back.

MM: Yeah.

KN: Wow. Well, my next question was, how did your family and friends feel about your activities? But you kind of already touched on that.

MM: Yeah, not well. Even friends. I remember wrote a comment in the book about my high school drinking buddies—guys that I would drink beer with on Friday and Saturday nights while in high school, totally illegally, of course, that I was good friends with—were kind of not sure what the heck I was doing, and thinking it was kind of crazy and some sort of betrayal of who they were and who we

were together. And I think at that time, I was moving away from my high school friends to my college friends, but there was a tension there.

My grandmother, my little, little old Italian grandmother, would look at me out of the side of her eyes and say, 'What is this [in accent] hippie business? Are you a hippie?' 'No, no, no, no, no, Mama. No, hippie here.' [They laugh.] But she didn't know what it was, but she didn't like it. She didn't understand it well, any better than my high school drinking friends understood it.

But I had two friends within three blocks of my home, who died in Vietnam, the catcher on my—the all-star catcher on my little league team, Mike Calandrino, who lived down the street, who I played baseball with and basketball and was friends with. He was a sergeant, and he died over there. And I had a paper route in my neighborhood, and the fella who was a couple years older than me, who passed his paper route down to me, died in Vietnam, Bill Hillier, William Hillier.

So there was a lot of tension between—although my dad died when I was a junior, and I think my mother became much more liberal after that. She probably had more liberal feelings before my dad died that she wasn't able to express. But Richard Nixon came to came to Springfield one day, and my younger brother, sister, brothers and sisters told me the story of my mom making them carry this big sign, a big bed sheet, that, which she spray painted, "End the war!" And they stood out on 6th Street in Springfield, in front of my grandmother's house with his big bed sheet, and my brothers and sisters were embarrassed to death. They were too young to know what was going on, but I was always proud of my mom for that.

KN: Yeah, that's amazing.

MM: That was pretty cool.

KN: You must have been an inspiration to her.

MM: Maybe, maybe. Maybe she was going that way herself.

KN: So do you feel that there were any lasting repercussions that came out of your time as a student protester?

MM: Personal repercussions?

KN: Yes.

MM: Or on the on the country as a whole, or? Personally? Boy, good question. I you know, I like to think, in fact, we were just talking to the Uber driver that brought me here about—I was, I was a

humanities graduate. Obviously, I graduated with a degree in English literature and a minor in history. I switched my major from psychology to economics to history and then finally to English on a regular basis, because I was just so excited about all the different fields and what might be learned there. But what I took away from my humanities, liberal arts education, that I, that I've suggested to my daughter, is that the sort of critical thinking skills that you develop as a liberal arts major, the ability to problem solve and read between the lines and understand how to think about things, how to think about issues, that you learn as a liberal arts graduate, I think is invaluable.

And I think that there's a reason why so much—there was so much more support for the anti-war movement south of Green Street than there was north of Green Street. I don't mean to generalize. There was some anti-war people in the engineering world. There were some right-wing people in the English and history department, I'm sure. [Coughs.] But generally speaking, my sense was that people who were better at critical thinking and problem solving and understanding complex issues were able to figure out early on that there was something really wrong about this war, and they were able to surmount the criticisms and the emotional backlashes that they faced in ways that people who were trained in more mechanical skill sets were not able to to learn. And we were just talking about—the Uber driver was a history major who is now head of the IT department for the liberal arts school. He does Uber driving on his way home, he said. [Interviewer laughs.] Makes a few bucks on the side.

And we talked about the fact that fewer and fewer kids are—fewer and fewer young people are going into liberal arts and humanities on the campus. And I think that's a shame. I think that, you know, STEM programs are absolutely critical to our society, but I think some level of [coughs] of liberal arts education is pretty important too. And I think that my liberal arts education and my experience in the anti-war movement were critical to my success. I spent 25 years in Silicon Valley. I had a moderately successful career there. I worked for Apple Computer and Cisco Systems. Ended up a senior director at Cisco.

I was pretty successful because of my education, I think, and because of my experiences at the University of Illinois, where I was able to think for myself, learn to think for myself, [coughs] problem solve, figure things out, do critical thinking that's just tremendously valuable in the world of business. So I would never hesitate to hire a history major. In fact, my—of my staff, something like half of my staff—I had 150 people working for me at Cisco Systems and a dozen direct reports working for me. Of those dozen, [coughs] half of them had liberal arts degrees. This is in a company that was highly technical and in need of the kind of skills that those kind of people brought to the to the situation. So let's hear it for liberal arts and especially librarians.

KN: Yes. [They laugh.] Okay, well, we got a few minutes left. So is there anything that you would like to mention or talk about before we wrap it up?

MM: So thinking through who might be listening to this, historians or students of history, 10, 15, 20 years down the road, I would just like to stress what a dark, difficult time the '60s were. There were assassinations of public officials. There was a war going on with lots and lots of people dying every day, Vietnamese people on our side, Vietnamese people on the other side, American boys and girls, and most of them were 18, 19, 20-year-old kids at the time. There were riots in the big cities. There were tanks in the streets. We had a person who was generally thought of as a crook in the White House. Things were really, really bad.

I'm speaking today, and in 2020 when we think things are really bad today, and they are, but we've been through worse. We've been through worse, the system survived. People rose up to the challenges that they needed to rise up to. They faced up to them, and they were able to overcome the challenges that they, that they were faced with. Now, we certainly didn't solve all the problems, but we stopped a war, which is a really big deal. I personally believe that the student protest movement is primarily responsible for bringing the Vietnam War to an end. God knows what would have happened if there hadn't been a student protest movement there. You know, there were Senators and Representatives that eventually came around to it. Walter Cronkite and the and the pundits and the and the mainstream Americans eventually came around to it.

But it was the students of America in the in the 1960s, long before it was mainstream or accepted to do that. If the, if the students of America, coming out of the 1950s—which was the most conformist period in the history of the United States. If the students of America could stand up and make something happen like that, have an impact, affect history in that way, then anything could happen going forward. Things could change at any moment when enough people are willing to stand up and make a change. So that's the message that I would want to leave for the historians of the future.

KN: Great.

MM: Okay.

KN: Well, thank you so much.

MM: You're welcome.