University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Student Protest Reunion Oral History Project
Interviewee: Bob Outis
Interviewer: Katie Nichols
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Katie Nichols: Okay. This is Katie Nichols, and we are at the Archives Research Center in the conference room, and I'm here with Bob Otis.

Bob Outis: Outis.

KN: Outis. And let's get started. Okay, so can you state for the record your name and the years that you were at the University.

BO: Okay. My full name is Robert R. Outis. O-U-T-I-S. And I started here as a freshman in the fall of 1963. I graduated in 1967 and I stayed on. I was a graduate student for two years thereafter, and I had a, I have a master's degree in, from the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, which I think now has a somewhat different name. The first year I was on—of that, I was on campus, the '67-'68 year, the '68-'69 year I was in the institute. I was, I'm sorry, a legislative staff intern in Springfield through the Institute of Government Public Affairs, but I finished up the coursework in the ILIR program that year. So.

KN: Okay.

BO: I was really last on the campus in June of 1968—

KN: Okay.

BO: —except for occasional visits.

KN: Mhm. So that puts you maybe a year or two ahead of most of the other people that we've interviewed who were here, you know, '69, '70. So how, how did you really come to be a part of the student activism that was happening at that time?

BO: Well, that may be using the term very loosely. I was president of the student government in 1966-67. And I was involved in the W.E.B. DuBois Club incident, which—you've read Michael Metz's book?

KN: I've read most of it, parts of it, yeah.

BO: So my—I have kind of a bit part in that book, because it's kind of the portion of the book that predates the the primary focus, which is the anti-war movement, which really started actively in '68, '69. But I was involved in some squabbles with the University administration over the decision about the admission of the DuBois club or the—their backtracking on that decision. That's a result of the Board of Trustees action, decision to do that.

KN: Okay. And can you expand on that just a little for the—

BO: Oh, sure, that's probably all I can really talk about. The, well, I'm not sure I could say a lot more than what's in Michael Metz's book, but the DuBois Club—and I, even though I always think that should be pronounced Dubois, I think it's actually DuBois.

Um, that became an issue during the year. The initial, as I recall, it was treated sort of perfunctorily at the, in the first instance, because, oh, recognition of a student organization just means you can have a use of a room to have a meeting. So what's the big deal? And then it became a hot button issue with the legislature, the Board of Trustees, and a Champaign Republican legislator who was quite conservative, who was Charles Clabaugh, who was the author of the Clabaugh Act. So there was a lot of pressure on the University administration to overturn that initial sort of ministerial decision. And ultimately, the Board did do that.

KN: Yeah.

BO: My involvement in the issue, other than trying to, you know, persuade administrators I had some dealings with, and I was on, by virtue of being the president of Student Government, I was on a committee called the CSA, and I think stood for a Committee on Student Affairs, the Dean of Students, Dean of Men, Dean of Women, and various student organization officers were on the group in the, in that committee. And so we had lots of meetings about that. The—and ultimately, as I'm sure you know, the Board of Trustees, under pressure, held a meeting at which they decided to direct the administration to withdraw, or at least, or at that point, to deny, I guess it was kind of an uncertain status at that point. So the decision was that they should not be recognized as a student organization.

Um, my sort of notorious involvement of that, if I could use the term, was that I had pushed a resolution through the Student Senate to authorize the DuBois club to use our offices if they were denied recognition. And there was a rally in the back of the Illini Union the day the Board was meeting upstairs in the Illini Union, I think that's where they met. And, you know, that was a somewhat, it was a controversial thing. Chicago press was there, and after the word came down that the Board had denied them recognition, we—we meaning some of the Student Senate officers and I— went up to, and there was a fairly large rally on the campus, on the quad. I don't remember what the numbers were, that even had a good sense of that.

But then we marched upstairs to the Student Senate offices, which were then a very discrete set of offices. I think now they're kind of student—part of a broader student activity floor, as I recall having seen it a couple of years ago. And we had our meeting and, or they had their meeting, and the Chicago press had come, were there for this event, for this decision. So that was much publicized. So it was kind of a, if I may, sort of a petulant slap in the face to the University administration, to which they did not take kindly.

And, um, it—the incident kind of blew over, at least, it seemed to, in my mind. There was an election for the next set of student—well, I guess it was a student body president election, and a woman named Patsy Parker became the next—my successor. And I was out of office, and on May 20, 1967—and I happen to have looked through my old papers. I was sitting in the apartment that I lived in with a woman to whom I was married for 40 years before she died.

KN: Sorry.

BO: Uh, and I was—the campus security officers showed up, which with what was essentially a subpoena to appear at a disciplinary committee meeting on, I think, the next Saturday, which was the Saturday before my last set of finals. So I—and I, you know, I as a student politician, I had gone to lots of meetings and skipped a lot of classes, so getting through finals was, you know, a cram process during the last week of school. So it really put me in a bind, and I, and I was out of office at that time. The same document was served on the three or four other Student Senate officers, because—and, so we had this disciplinary committee meeting this that following Saturday, and a law professor named David Baum, B-A-U-M, represented us and did a wonderful job. I think I sent it, something in an email about that, and he was quite wonderful.

And it was, you know, there was a letter that was issued after I had graduated, I think it came in the middle of June, or late June, saying that, 'Oh gosh, you shouldn't have done what you did. But, you know, don't do it again.' [Nichols laughs.] Well, at that point I was out of school.

KN: Right.

BO: So [laughs] I viewed it as a really spineless act by the University administration. There had been lots of campus demonstrations over the DuBois Club incident, and from my perspective, they didn't have the spine to take that action until they knew everybody was hunkered down for final week, for finals. So I thought it was pretty spineless on their part, and pretty nasty. But I suppose, looking at from their perspective, they thought it was probably an appropriate response to our petulism and inviting the DuBois Club up to use the Student Senate offices when the Board of Trustees had made this decision, and the Chicago press was in town, so.

KN: How did they even find out that you had extended that invitation?

BO: Oh, well, that's interesting because, well, first of all, it was adopted at a resolution of the Student Senate a couple of weeks before, so it would have been public knowledge. But, um, they would have known about it, because—let me back up, if I may.

KN: Absolutely.

BO: The year got off to a bad start from a Student Senate perspective, and—unrelated to the DuBois Club incident. I mean, they were always sort of the, the usual issues of expanding women's hours, which were, you know, always very limited during those days, and other things that students felt they were not being treated as well as they should. But the thing that got the year off to a bad start was the appointment of a new Dean of Students.

Stanton Millet was a member of the English faculty. I don't think he had any administrative experience. The Dean of Men and the Dean of Women were long tenured deans of in those respective positions. Dean Carl Knox was a very gentle, paternalistic, kind man who really was a wonderful Dean of Men and every—and he was the faculty or the administrative advisor, I suppose it was to the Student Senate. So he interacted a lot with those of us who were on the Student Senate. We all loved him. And for whatever reason, he was—and the Dean of Students, Fred Turner, who had been in that position for, I, recalling 32 years, but who knows? It was a long time.

And everybody thought, well, this is an obvious position for him to fill. And it was announced that the, this fellow that nobody knew anything about was going to be the Dean of Students. And we, there were a number of us who were quite upset about that, and I was thinking about that in the last couple of days, and I suspect that if a Dean of Students position were being filled today, a University President or a Chancellor might have a committee that would have some student participation. Maybe not, but I would hope there might be. And in any event, the it was simply a *fait accompli*, it's announced and, and that really, I was really upset about that, and I thought this guy did a very poor job. And he, if you in Michael Metz's book that describes, sort of how he goes back and forth on the issue. And I, I had little respect for him. Maybe that was really unfair, but that was my perspective. And I, you know, I thought Dean Carl Knox was the guy who should be in this position.

So I was, you know, I was 20 years old at the time. Turned 21 in December of that year. You know, I knew everything at that age, of course, and it was obviously a huge mistake, and I was upset about it. So things got off to a bad start, and then the DuBois Club issue developed, and I felt that Millet was handling it badly, and basically being a, you know, errand boy for the President. Him, David Dodd Henry, who was sort of this milquetoast kind of guy who tried to balance legislative pressures and Board of Trustees pressures and so forth.

So, getting back to your question of how they might have known that this was coming or might they have—other than the fact that it was, in fact, a public action at that point, not that they probably paid that much attention to what the Student Senate did on a day-to-day basis. But this is one issue they would have—that would have been in *The Daily Illini* and they would have been aware of it.

There was also that year, something called a "slush fund scandal" over payments made to athletes. And the Big Ten had issued some punishments. I think they had disqualified the University from participating in certain—I don't remember what the, quite, what the punishments were, but there were certain—it was probably, I mean, compared to the kind of stuff that goes on in this day and age with college football teams, it's probably really peanuts. And, you know, I did over the, over time, hear some stories about it. And it wasn't that these kids were getting paid large sums of money, but they were getting a little money shoveled their way on the side. And as one faculty member who was on a committee that I was on related the story about this one kid who was a prominent basketball player, and he said, you know, he had come here on a bus from, I think, Alabama, and had nothing except a shirt on his back and a bag of clothes.

KN: Right.

BO: That's really all he had to his name. And so some alumni probably gave him a few hundred bucks to, you know, so was that a horrible thing? Probably not. But nevertheless, the political blow up over that incident was that the legislature and alumni took great offense. How could the Big Ten take this action and, gosh, this sort of stuff must go, must go on everywhere, and this is horrible, nasty, unfair treatment of the University. There was a legislative committee that was set up by the state legislature—investigative committee to investigate the Big Ten's attempt to punish the University of Illinois and so forth and so on.

And I thought balancing those two incidents, or looking at those two incidents, really showed how out of whack the priorities were for an academic institution, of course. And I wasn't a great student. I was a frat boy who had had gotten into student government and had somehow got elected as student government. [Nichols laughs.] But you know, there was also, that was the late '60s, there was a beginning of a lot of ferment over the war in Vietnam and Civil Rights Movements, which I, frankly, I'm sorry to say that I didn't have much awareness or involvement in, although I wasn't, I certainly wasn't negative about it. But it just wasn't part of me or who I was at the time. I guess I thought I was too important or whatever.

But in any event, I thought that the University administration was stumbling all over itself to please the legislature and alumni over the football and basketball scandal, and there were two or three coaches who actually, I think, were forced out or resigned as a result of this. So it wasn't a totally insignificant incident. And apparently it was—while it didn't involve large dollars, there was an awareness of it being done by some of these coaches, so and they were forced out, I think, ultimately, or maybe because of the Big Ten rulings they essentially had to leave.

And then you had the W.E.B. DuBois Club, where the University was scrambling all over itself, once again, in my perspective, to, to please alumni, the Board of Trustees, conservative legislators in Champaign—Charles Clabaugh being the primary guy—and the state legislature. And there was, there was at least rumblings of threats from the legislature to cut the University's budget if they didn't, if they didn't tell the DuBois Club to get lost.

KN: Oh, wow.

BO: Whether that would have come about, I don't know. And I've heard that some people defended Henry and that he actually did a very good job of balancing legislative pressures under the circumstances in which he found himself. But I saw it differently, as you know, what, you know, you're just responding to the wrong pressures, and you should be forthright about this. So one reason that they would have known that this was happening was that I asked for a meeting with—I might have asked for the meeting with the president himself, but more likely just asked to meet with his sort of assistant, who was a guy named George Bargh. I think that was spelled B-A-R-G-H.

And so I tried to play, you know, tough guy, leveraging my position. And I said before the Student Senate had adopted this resolution that either the University president, as I recall, essentially said, if you don't, if you don't, I can't—I'm not sure quite how I tied the two issues together, but my recollection was today is that if you don't take public a public position, if the University president won't take public position, that the University recognizes that the Big Ten penalties are appropriate given what happened, then I will push this resolution through the Student Senate and the DuBois club will be able to use our offices if you deny the recognition. Which I suspect coming from a, you know, 21-year-old kid at that point was like, 'Who the hell do you think you are?' So, that probably—I, you know, I don't necessarily sit here today and think I was a hero or that I did a wonderful thing. That's just kind of what I—that was, in the pressure of the day and doing what I thought was the right thing to do. That's what I did.

So I, I thought that—and there were, there were, there was another incident between me and David Dodds Henry that is interesting in terms of the fact that I was, that I was regarded, I suppose, as a bit of a troublemaker, shall we say. The next year, I went to graduate school at the Institute of Labor Industrial Relations, and I was supposed to do some sort of a paper on some issue, and I—that worked with a faculty member—and I had made this proposal to the faculty at the Institute that I do a study of employment of African Americans at the University. Because I thought, you know, here we are in the middle of Champaign-Urbana, and we ought to be doing a better job of supporting that community than the University sometimes does. And the head of the Institute was a wonderful guy named Martin Wagner. Looked at the proposal, he thought it was a good idea, and he said, 'You know, I think maybe we could get a, we maybe could get a small grant from the University to do this as a, you know, an independent study or whatever.' Some weeks later, he came back to me and said that he had tested the water on that issue with the administration, and they said they thought it sounded like a good idea, and

they would fund the project as long as I was not involved in it, or that they would not fund it if I was involved in it.

So, you know, I, I had ruffled some feathers, and maybe I was a bad guy. Maybe I was in politic, but at any event, that's sort of who I was back in those days. And again, I thought the—pulling this trick with the, calling us before the student disciplinary committee the week, the last Saturday before my last set of finals, was really a spineless act. And David Baum, who represented us—and I later went to law school, and not here, but elsewhere, and I am a lawyer. Have been for 45 years. But I didn't know anything about the law at the time. I thought he was wonderful. He did a fantastic job of sort of pushing back on some hostile faculty members who were on the disciplinary committee. I mean, they were on the disciplinary committee to deal with problem students, and they didn't tend to—I don't know that they necessarily had the most charitable views of students who were called before them. Certainly, the committee chair was very hostile to us. I remember that we began the meeting with Professor Baum saying, 'Well, what are they charged with?' Because the letter to us had been very general. And the chair of the committee held up the student handbook and said, 'They are charged with any violation of this book.' [Slamming sound.] He didn't know either. [They laugh.] Well, he knew why he was there. But anyway, so that's kind of my story.

KN: Okay, well, that covered like five of the questions I had here. So that was great. [They laugh.] Did your—how did your family and friends feel about about all of this? Or did they know?

BO: Oh, well, there is a wonderful story in Michael Metz's book about my parents. Oh, I have to—if you've got a few minutes I've got to pull this up.

KN: Yeah, absolutely.

BO: [Sound of paper unfolding.] There was a letter that was—and it's discussed in Michael's book—that was sent around to various people, or various parents. This is the letter that—a copy of the letter, well, I actually have the original right here.

KN: Oh my goodness. Oh, wow.

BO: And this was written about all the terrible things that were going on at the campus these days. And I'm referred to somewhere in here as, um—it was mostly about the DuBois Club incident. Um. Where does it say—? Um.

KN: You are mentioned in item seven.

BO: Somewhere in here says—I see that, and I think maybe there's some reference to my legitimized—oh, but on this supplemental page: "Bob Outis, president of the Student Senate, using his position to

dignify the protests. He stated he approves of civil disobedience to pressure the University." So anyway, this letter went to my parents, and apparently it went to a number of other parents. And I don't know if it was widely spread out or not, or how widely it was distributed. And Michael discusses it a bit in his book, but then he tells the story, which I related to him in an interview, at the end of—can I just read this paragraph?

KN: Sure.

BO: "It is unclear how many such letters were actually sent, but a version was— was delivered to the parents of student president Robert Outis in the tiny farming community of Ramsey, Illinois, paren, 1960 population 815 close paren. Causing not insignificant apprehension in that household.' Um, it talks about, well, whatever. 'His mother, a staunch Roosevelt, New Deal Democrat, proud of her son's achievements was—at the University—was however, sufficiently concerned by the letter to take it to her Methodist minister for guidance. The cleric reassured her, advising Bob knows what he's doing. Mrs. Outis, apparently comforted by this advice, chose not to mention the letter to her son.'

KN: So you never even knew that she got it.

BO: Until my dad died.

KN: Oh, wow.

BO: About 30 years later. [Sniffles.]

KN: Oh, my goodness. I might have some—

BO: I'm sorry.

KN: No, no, no. It's fine.

BO: But you know, I—uh. And I thought it was interesting that—well, I mean, it was very, I was very proud of my parents for not calling up and saying, 'What the hell are you doing?'

KN: Right.

BO: And, you know, my mother was a 70-year church pianist and organist, and she was a rather timid person, and she was really upset about this, but didn't know what to do about it. And my—I don't guess my father did, either. And my father probably—well, I don't know—but in any event, they decided never to tell me about it. And my mother showed me the letter.

KN: Wow.

BO: That letter was dated in probably '67 sometime, or spring of '67, and my dad, I think, died in '96 or something like that. So it was probably almost, it was almost 30 years later that I heard about [crosstalk.]

KN: Wow, amazing.

BO: So anyway, I don't know if you've—I'd be delighted to give you a copy of this letter if you want to see it.

KN: Sure. Yeah, absolutely. We would love to have this.

BO: Anyway. So.

KN: So the last thing I'll ask you then—

BO: Okay.

KN: —is, do you feel that any lasting repercussions personally came out of your time?

BO: To me, personally?

KN: Yeah.

BO: No, no. I think it was a real growth experience for me. I, you know, I wasn't one of the SDS lefties, so much. And you know, I, um, I have been very fortunate in many ways. I was—there were faculty members who thought that what I was doing was wonderful, who were very supportive. Yeah, there were some who did not think so. That's another story, I guess. And, you know, I left the campus before the kind of strong anti-war stuff went on. And I—such a, you know, the real formative event for men of my age was whether you were drafted or not, and what happened. And I actually failed a draft physical because of something in my medical history.

KN: Oh, wow.

BO: It wasn't bone spurs, I would point out, but [laughs]. And I actually want to go back—right now, Steve Schmidt and Rick Soderstrom, who were two guys that burned their draft cards, are talking, and I want to hear the end of their talk. And I have a wonderful story about this, but it also shows you how arbitrary and lucky people can be or not be, depending on how—. I was back on the campus one—or probably in the summer between my first year of graduate school here and going off to Springfield to work in the legislative intern program. And I had decided—no, a little bit later—I had decided that I

should not accept a student deferment. At that point, I was a graduate student, and this state legislative internship was just kind of—well, it was an internship, and it wasn't really academic work, even though there was a couple of courses associated with it. And I guess I felt strongly enough about the war at that point that I felt like it was a cop out, in a way, to hide behind the deferment. And so I had declined to seek one, and I'd gotten a notice from my draft board in the county in which I grew up, a very rural county in southern Illinois.

And I ran into Steve Schmidt at the Illini Union one day, and he either was awaiting prison or had come out of prison. Do you know, Steve—well, he's in the book.

KN: Right.

BO: In any event. He—and I said, you know, 'I don't know what I'm going to do, because I really don't think I've got the spine to refuse abduction if I'm drafted, and Canada seems like a cop out.' And this fellow very calmly said to me, 'Is there anything in your medical history that would keep you out of the draft?' Hadn't even occurred to me. And when I was 17 years old,and thought of myself as a bit of a high school athlete, though I wasn't very good, but I was in pretty good physical condition. I had a severe convulsion one day, just—and it was, it was severe, or at least I was told. I'm told it was severe. And, you know, I had a—and I just mentioned that, and he said, 'Well, you better dig up the record of that.' And I called my mom, and she had the report that was done after that. And I took it to the physical, and some young army doctor who was probably really upset that he was doing what he was doing, looked at it, and I went to the draft board at St.—or the induction or whatever it was—in St. Louis from Vandalia, Illinois, which was the county seat of Ramsey or Fayette County. And I was basically with 18, 19-year-old kids who were off the farm and not going to college.

And I—he looked at that, and I sort of imagined that he also looked at the group of kids I was coming through with, and he, I felt he arbitrarily made the decision that they would be better cannon fodder than me. And he said, 'You're out of here.'

KN: Wow.

BO: So I have been incredibly lucky in so many ways, and there are so many others who—because of that life defining episode—have been very, very—I don't know if they would think of themselves as having been damaged, but in terms of career potential and being alienated, perhaps from society for a very long time, it's been a very difficult time for them. I had wonderful support from my family, from my girlfriend, who I married. [Cries.] And our kids.

KN: Mhm.

BO: And I'm sorry to be an emotional wreck.

KN: No, don't be sorry.

BO: [Laughs.]

KN: Okay, well.

BO: She died of cancer almost 10 years ago. [Cries.]

KN: Oh, I'm so sorry.

BO: Anyway. And she was wonderful. So no, I was not damaged in any way that I know of. There are probably people who don't necessarily think well of me, but so be it.

KN: Yeah.

BO: Okay.

KN: Well, thank you so very much. Really appreciate you meeting with me.

BO: It was wonderful and lots of fun, and I apologize for all the emotions, but they're part of the—it's reliving a lot of things that were very important in my, my formative years.

KN: Yes, absolutely.

BO: Right.

KN: Thank you.

BO: Okay.