University of Illinois Student Life and Culture Archives
Student Protest Reunion Oral History Project
Interviewee: Phil Durrett
Interviewer: Jessica Ballard
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Jessica Ballard: So, today is October 3, and we are at the Student Life and Culture Archives. My name is Jessica Ballard, and I am here with Phil Durrett talking about student protests and activism in the 1960s. So thank you very much for joining us and agreeing to do an interview.

Phil Durrett: Thanks for the invitation.

JB: Can you please give me your name and years that you attended UIUC?

PD: I started in the summer of 1965 when I got out of the Air Force, and lasted until the end of 1967, when I was expelled and then readmitted, but left of my choice.

JB: Okay, and how did you become involved in student protests?

PD: From 1963 to 1965 while I was in the Air Force, I was stationed in Atlanta, Georgia, and with all of the civil rights activities going on there, it was sort of impossible to ignore or not be involved in some of what was happening in Atlanta at the time. And I think it—just at some point you have to make a choice. Are you going to remain silent, or are you going to take a side? And I took a side. So that wasn't really student protest, but when I got to the—got out of the Air Force and came to the University, that's what was going on. So I got involved, and that started with foreign policy and evolved into other things.

JB: Can you talk a little bit more about maybe some of the events that were happening at UIUC that encouraged you to become involved?

PD: When I got here [laughs]. There weren't a whole lot of things happening when I got here. It was very nascent. There was, I think SDS started, I believe in '64 here at the University. The chapter was formed in 1964. My wife was friends of Paul Buell, who was the president of SDS when it started in '64. I met him, got involved with him and his wife. There were very few activities that—the war was gearing up. We had a couple of informal protest—small, 20 to 50 people at most were participating. They were—there was stuff going on with civil rights, of raising funds for the civil rights workers in various places. I think quite a few students from the University of Illinois, at one point or another, went south to be involved in voter registration. But that was after, obviously, before my time here.

JB: Okay, and can you describe why students were protesting the Dow Chemical recruitment on campus?

PD: The war was really increasing and increasing. Johnson was sending more and more troops to Vietnam. There was a famous picture of a little girl, I think she's five or six years old, naked, running down the road who had been burned by napalm. And Dow Chemical, it's, if you don't know what it is, it's jelly gasoline. It sticks to your skin. You can't just brush it off. It stays. And Dow Chemical made that, and Dow Chemical sent recruiters to all college campuses to interview potential Dow Chemical employees for their their business. And we just said you can't have, have recruiters coming on campus for a company that makes napalm.

JB: So can you describe the day? What did the sit-in look and feel like?

PD: There—we gathered on the, I think it's the Student Union, outside the Student Union, we gathered out there. There were between 200 and 250 of us, and the University knew we were coming, and we went to where the recruiter was supposed to be. He, he was there, or he arrived shortly thereafter. We invited him to be our guest for the day. We said you're free to go to the bathroom, do whatever you want. You can go but you aren't going to interview any potential employees. What we didn't know is that he had already been there the previous day and had recruited, had the interviews with potential employees previous to that. So it was sort of a setup that we were allowed to protest, and we were nice. We talked to him. No, there was no violence. We just sat in. A few other students sort of came in to see what was going on. A couple of arguments with guys who didn't agree with us, who came in to argue with us. But on the, on the whole, it was all very peaceful. And we sat, sat down, talked, studied, yes, very calm. And then at some point, when the recruiter left, we dispersed and went away.

JB: Okay, so earlier, you mentioned that you were, that you, that you—there was an expulsion, and can you give—and what did the school give as grounds for your expulsion?

PD: We were, there were four graduate students and seven undergraduates who were charged. The four graduate students wouldn't be—they had a separate disciplinary committee. They went, they had professors on—it was all professors and maybe grad students on their committee, and they got a letter of what would you call, put into their file that they had done this and they shouldn't be bad boys and do that again, or anything.

We went, there were two undergraduate subcommittees, A and B on student discipline. The subcommittee A was the more serious one, and as far as I can remember, it was three students and six professors. And they interviewed us. The seven undergraduates were given a time to appear, and it was one by one, they took us in for the interview. We had a member of the law faculty, I think his name was Herb Semel, who assisted us in the, in the legal proceedings. But we did not really want to do anything legal about it.

But when we walked in, the first thing I was told was, 'We are not here to find you guilty or incident innocent. You're guilty or you wouldn't have been charged.'t And I forget what the grounds were. We, we prevented the recruiter from interviewing potential employees. We, I don't know if at that point, they tried to get us, they tried to get us indicted, but gave up on that, on holding him prisoner or kidnapping or something. But that went by the wayside, so they just did the committee.

And one of the other—one of the professors, when I was talking, interrupted me and said, accused me of being part of a communist conspiracy to overtake American education. Another, another—I was a veteran. The other veteran, who had been charged, started reciting or reading from the declaration of independence without identifying what he was reading from. And a professor interrupted him and said, 'That sounds like a bunch of Marxist hogwash to me.' So that was [laughs] the grounds for the suspension, and they then notified us. I think it was by—I'm sure it was by letter. And they announced it Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving break, so there wouldn't be any student protest after the expulsion.

JB: And did you fight the expulsion? And do you recall if anyone else did as well?

PD: I think we all appealed, and the other—many others, all of the other people who wanted. And there were a couple of hundred people, actually came forward and said, 'It's not fair for the seven of them to be charged without us being charged also.' So they came in and voluntarily said, 'Sign us up too, for the for the demonstration.' We appealed. We won on appeal, but we were put on probation. And my three conditions of probation were, 'You can't attend any more demonstrations. You can't have a car in Champaign County. You can't have a registered car on campus or in the county. And the third one was, I had to go see a counselor.' So I at that point, I made, made an appointment with a counselor. I hadn't decided what I was going to do. I made an appointment with the counselor. Went to it, walked in, introduced myself, he introduced himself. We sat down, and the first question, literally, the first question was, 'Why do you hate your father so much?' And [laughs] I don't remember the rest of the interview, but I do remember not really being pleased with that question, and decided—the Unitarian minister at, here on campus, it's, it's now the Unitarian Church there that has the Red Herring Coffee House was, had been a Unitarian minister in Amherst, Massachusetts. And he was very good friends with an American Studies professor at Amherst College, so he called on my behalf. I got an interview at Amherst College. I drove to—over in December, drove to Amherst College, had an interview, and they accepted me there as an undergraduate.

JB: So what lasting repercussions came out of your time as a student protester, and were there any changes in thought that also occurred?

PD: Uh, lasting repercussion—well, I went east, stayed on the East Coast, and had four very nice children there. Raised them. I changed, I guess the experience at the University of Illinois changed my

worldview. I went from being—I grew up in a moderate Republican household. My parents were— my, all of my grandparents were farmers. My uncles were farmers throughout my growing years. And they were just typical Americans. Lot of all of my uncles had been in the military in World War Two. My father had been in the Navy. I think my coming to the University of Illinois and experiencing what was going on, just, and learning more American history of you know, being at the University of Illinois, which is named after, after an Indian tribe. But, you know, we learned none of that in history in high school, none of that. And learning all of the limitations of American history. I eventually became a history—that was my major, of learning the history, more of the history of America.

It just, it made me more determined that there should be major changes. There just had to be some changes with poverty, with civil rights, with income redistribution. I eventually—well fairly quickly—became a socialist and worked with all of the campus ministers. There were, I think, 10 campus ministers who had an association. I got, I was working with them on anti-war. I actually had a dialogue sermon with, I think it was the Presbyterian minister on campus, and about when we were talking, when we were doing our sermon, about a third of the congregation walked out on us. I was surprised it was only a third.

In the rest of my life, well, it provided me a lifelong view of history, of the world, of where where we should be, and the choices we should be making, but aren't.

JB: Great. And is there any advice that you would give to students today?

PD: The first is to defeat Trump. [Laughs.] But other than that, today, read history, learn, learn more about other things besides what the presidents did and what the Republicans and Democrats are thinking about, and look more widely at society as a whole. The poverty, discrimination, Black Lives Matter to income, like I said, income redistribution, medical care for all, all of those. Be aware of those, and then find out where and how you can be helpful in solving that. Make a choice, do something.

JB: That's great advice. So is there anything else you would like to add?

PD: I, I have four daughters, and I'm very—I, at one point or another, on a panel we're going to be talking about this on Saturday morning. I'll be talking about, part of the opposition to rebellion and student rebellion was the uppity women. And I'll ask my daughters, but I think they might object to—I'm sorry, uppity feminists in American politics these days, and I'd like to think, I'll ask my daughters, do they object to being called uppity, which I think they might, but not object to being feminist. And I think one of the major changes that have happened in the past 30, 40, 50 years has been when you turn on the TV, when you hear news or other stuff, that there are so many more women who are participating in politics. Well, you can see in the Democratic nomination going on right now that there are five women candidates out of the 24 or whatever, started.

And I really am appreciative of the changes. What few changes have taken place have been over women's issues, over some obviously been improvements, some improvements in civil rights. But we see from the Black Lives Matter that nothing has really been solved, and that needs to be addressed even more. We need to learn more about institutional repression, institutional racism, institutional oppression of women, minorities. And I guess the other big change, which has been in the last 20 years is gay rights, and I also appreciate—I have a daughter who is gay and married living in Switzerland—and I appreciate the change in public's perception of that, and wish It would also take place in many other.

JB: Great, well—

PD: Sorry.

JB: Oh, no. Thank you very much. Really appreciate this.