

Rick Cole Interview  
February 16, 2018, Santa Monica, CA

PHS went out, and Muir went out like the next day.

Q: So they have tryouts, and they choose all White song girls?

A: Which had happened before, it wasn't the first time. It was like, really? Really? Again? I wasn't there, but the students left school. It was a walkout and they went off and they hammered out a set of demands, it was like 8 demands. They said things like, "We want more Black teachers."

They walked out and they said, "We're on strike, we're not coming back until we get our demands, and we're going to the next school board meeting and we're going to present these demands. "

And then, this set off quite a reverberation in the City. Muir joined either the next day or probably sometime during that day. So, Muir went out, but in both cases, it was just the Black and Brown students. The White students did not go out at Muir, I mean maybe a handful but it was a Black and Brown walkout. And they endorsed the PHS demands. Again, I wasn't there, I was at Blair and I was still a tenth grader.

I think a day or two passed. PHS Kids went out, Muir kids went out, so Blair kids were like: *we need to go out*. And so, unlike at the other two schools, there were people who had lines of communication between whites and students of color, and they persuaded Black and Brown kids at Blair that there would be more power in taking the whole school out. So they said, "Look, Tuesday night there's a school board meeting, the PHS kids are presenting their demands, so let's go to the school board meeting and let's be in solidarity and let's make clear that if the school board doesn't agree to these demands, enough that people are happy, that we'll take the whole school down, every kid -- White, Black, Brown." Blair was viewed as really cohesive, that was a credible threat.

This was a school where we believed in *Black, Brown and White together*. My memory is, we all went to that school board meeting. Right before that meeting there was some kind of mediation or some kind of agreement with the school board that some changes would have to be made.

It had seemed so beautiful. Particularly we were proud of our role of bringing together successfully our school, not around racial lines but around solidarity for student rights and a commitment to integration. We'd succeeded. We felt particularly, frankly, a little smug. We'd played our cards really well. This "*Blair Pride*" thing—it was real! It wasn't so much that we were patting ourselves on the back for being brilliant strategists. This solidarity thing, even though it was sort of evanescent, it held. The Black and Brown kids did not walk out, and the

White kids stood up for them. We were like, *OK, this is for real now*. And we passed this new (student government constitution) and we were going to usher in this new era of integration at Blair...

So later when there was more trouble at PHS, we were kind of shocked and appalled that this seemingly happy ending had gone so badly, but we understood in general that it was just this explosion of frustration.

But would have been consistent with our view of Pasadena High School, again that smugness of feeling like *our school is different*, there would have been this sense of, well it's not surprising that the face beneath the benign mask would slip off, and that they would revert to their racist approach at PHS. Now we would say, *White Supremacy*...It was a conservative, White, exclusive school with our stereotypes like the girls wore makeup and it was this bastion of racism...politics in those days were also polarized in a way that they haven't been until now.

And it was a mutual demonization. Blair students were all scruffy hippies and radicals from their standpoint at PHS. There was a disdain of us, and we had an equal disdain of them. In some ways not unlike traditional high school rivalries, but there was a political cast to the high school rivalry. This was the sort of Nixon, Reagan, even George Wallace kind of identification...because there was a strong reactionary strain in Pasadena politics, which was what I cut my teeth on in the subsequent years, when I was a junior and a senior. There was an ultra-right wing in town—you have to remember that the John Birch Society was headquartered in San Marino.

So we had created this image of them as not just frat boys but really the face of right wing conservative bigoted segregation. And again, that wasn't entirely fair, but we had kind of magnified that image.

So, this whole song girl, flag girl, cheerleader bullshit seemed to go on forever. It kept blowing up. Because no matter what, it was wrong to not have fair representation. Because the athletes were mainly African American and Latino, including mostly black stars. The hippies sort of thought football was lame, but everybody else was like, you know, *that's our school*. And this Blair Pride—when we beat Pasadena High School, that was a political act, in effect. We beat the segregated school. We're way smaller, way poorer, and we whipped their ass, so what does that say? So there was a political dimension to all this.

Later, after the court decision to desegregate, there was this school board recall of those who voted to integrate Pasadena schools. That's when we began to get more involved. My junior year, I was student vice president, and fall semester was when the court order had come down. The next year they were going to have to redraw the districts, and Ray Cortines had come up with this plan that he took from Evanston, Illinois, to consolidate all three high schools at the Pasadena High School campus on the land that was behind it. Muir and Blair would both move...but you could offer Russian and Chinese and calculus classes, so he thought this was fabulous.

The idea of a giant factory of education was viewed by many as fantastic. It was in the zeitgeist. So, I thought this was appalling, it would take the individuality out. Plus we would take this liberal experiment of Blair Pride, which I was still sort of ambivalent about, I mean I believed in the idea but I was conscious of how far we fell from that. So I went down to the school board in, it would have been September or October of '69, and I remember I had 2 sheets I used to write out on regular notebook paper, my speeches, and I had these two sheets, and I had 3 minutes, I knew that.

And I spoke at my very first school board meeting and I said, this is a bad idea. And Ray Cortines was the assistant superintendent, he was sitting right there. I was on the superintendent's advisory council, and he was a liaison, he was in charge of High Schools. He was in charge of secondary education. And that was why he came up with his plan, and so he knew me from the year before and I was again on the Superintendent's Advisory Council.

And I gave this talk about how I thought this was a really bad idea and that Blair, we were about to become the state football champions, and *leave us alone*. His idea had some momentum behind it, he was pushing it, and the school board hadn't voted yet. So I came down and I gave this little talk, and when I sat down, one of the school board members, an elderly dentist, who was probably my age (now) but he seemed to me like he was older than Moses— I'm 64 and he was probably...64, right? He looks at me and he says, "You impudent young punk, you don't know what you're talking about," because he had been the father of Blair High School when all this swirling of *how are we going to deal with overcrowding, how are we going to deal with integration* was happening...so he was like, "You ingrate, we've given you this school, who the hell are you and what do you know?"

So I was just stunned. I had never given a speech to adults before. This was a month after I'd been thrown out for my speech to the sophomores. So, *I flee*. I probably thought I was walking out but I was just basically embarrassed and angry and confused and resentful. And this guy chases me down the hall and I turn around and it's Ray Cortines. And I think, *now I'm really in trouble. I had just been suspended the month before. Now I'm going to be expelled*. Which was not implausible in those days, that I could have been expelled for that. At least they could have tried.

And he grabbed me and we happened to be right in front of his office, and he opens the door and pushes me in and he sticks his finger in my chest and he says, "I don't have to agree with you. They don't have to agree with you. But the reason we're here is for you. You're the voice of the future. They have to listen to you. So you come down here to the next school board meeting, and you give that same speech until they listen to you respectfully."

Now if he hadn't chased me down, I would have said, like everyone else in America, *you can't fight City Hall, politics is bullshit, oh I did that and never got anywhere*. That's what I would have said because it would have been true, right? But Cortines made me believe that your voice counts.

So, we came up with our own plan and we presented it to the Pasadena Star News, it was the first time I was in the Star News, some columnist wrote about these kids that had come up with their own plan of how to do integration, I think there were about two or 3 of us.

So that's how I got into the adult world. Out of the mass of students... I had suddenly shown up, and we sort of got scooped up and some of the community and education leaders said, *come and knock on doors, and fold flyers and stick them in envelopes*, and there was a whole upswell of community activism among the liberals who saved the school board from getting recalled by these other guys. Other kids were involved it wasn't just me.

The day they voted not to appeal the judge's order, one of the conservative school board members threw down his papers and resigned on the spot and said, "My seat has been taken by a federal judge," or something to that effect, "and I have no power so I am resigning. "A liberal was appointed in his place, and there was going to be this dawning. Pasadena was going to come to terms with its segregated past and they were going to integrate the schools.

Meanwhile this huge movement against it was getting steam, they were collecting signatures for the recall, they were having house meetings, and all of that converged at these incredibly emotional school board meetings in which 50 people would talk at every meeting, and it went on for about four years.

Fast forward to my favorite moment. After the recall failed, these guys get elected at the regular election, the *bad guys*. They defeated the liberal incumbents who'd voted for integration. I got caught up in the adult side, I was sort of the token kid. When you get put in that kind of role, suddenly you get more sophisticated. You're dealing with adults and they're listening to you: *what do the students think?* You've got to come up with some coherent answer. You have to sort of rise to the occasion.

Anyway, the right wing slate got elected. I had graduated, Cortines hired me to work for the school district. They had been having these meetings, the meetings were so full of people that whenever they had a really controversial topic, they had to move the meeting from the Education Center, which was on Hudson, across the street to the McKinley Auditorium. That was routine. They would realize while they were in closed session before the meeting, oh my God there's 500 people. They would have a closed session, they were always being sued and we were often protesting.

It was the week after the election, the old school board were lame ducks. This would have been spring of '73. I had a fantastic network of students that were connected. And they organized. There were 800 high school students who turned out that night. McKinley seats about 700 and it was standing room only.

One after the other after the other after the other, students spoke about what integration had meant to them. Little White kids, little Black kids, little Brown kids, little Asian kids. It went on

and on and on. I spoke, and I was kind of a lightning rod, but the night belonged to the students. There were some adults who spoke, and they were thanking the school board that led integration, and we were not going to go quietly. A lot of the White kids, our parents don't understand it, what we built, our parents don't understand our lifestyle, but we're the students, and we're the future, and this is wrong.

This went on for a long time, it was 10:00, on a Tuesday night, it's a school night. And there was a woman named Ruby Williams, she was a longtime president of the Pasadena NAACP, they called her name and she was, if not the last speaker, she was the climax. And she went to the microphone, this is an emotional incredibly cathartic moment, here's 800 kids and if all 800 of them hadn't been politically aware at the beginning, after a 2 hour seminar, there was an electricity a sense of real camaraderie and a sense of, we're in this together. She got up and she said "Let's sing a song that brought the South together: We Shall Overcome" and 800 kids locked arms and sang and the school board members got up and locked arms and sang.