Stanford Apartheid Divestment Campaign 1977

Seth Foldy, October 2019 in celebration of the 2019 Reunion of activists (edited 2022)

Few of my life's successes are so pleasant to remember as our 1977 victory helping galvanize the Stanford community, the academic community, and ultimately, American opinion against corporate investments propping up the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Five years after the withdrawal of most US troops from Vietnam, three years after Nixon's resignation, and three years before Ronald Reagan became president, campuses were, to put it politely, mighty quiet.(Brain dead might be a less charitable term.)

A small cadre of mixed-brand radicals (radical Christians, Maoists, euro-commies, anarchists, Trotskyites, a half dozen graduate student refugees from various dictatorships, a couple Mormons, and me, the secular Gandhian of the group) maintained a good-natured if ideologically muddled fellowship united around one goal: to help fellow students WAKE THE FU*K UP! We supported campus workers; students and faculty of color; feminists and LGBTQ+ folk (I think the term had not yet been invented). We opened a tiny lens on campus to help the Stanford community see struggles for workers' rights and against militarism, colonialism, and dictatorships. Every fall we invited left intellectuals and artists to Student Disorientation; irregularly we issued newspapers; we competed with Young Republicans to control student government. We could reliably get 150-400 to a demonstration. Press coverage of our efforts invariably included snide remarks about the '60s being dead.

Watching high school students gunned down in cold blood in Soweto was a catalytic moment – one that convinced us the time had come to cross the line to non-violent civil disobedience at Stanford. We were buoyed by a well-organized global divestment movement that combined great corporate intelligence (thanks to a combination of stakeholder activists and on-the-ground South African correspondents), church and labor activists, and people interested in ethical models of finance and investment (with which our Stanford left was particularly well-endowed).

We had a typical White Plaza rally garnering a typical 10 paragraph Stanford Daily article, but then the convergence of a Trustees meeting, a divestment resolution, and the forecast arrival of "spring fever" (the radical's truest biological weapon) offered the perfect opportunity for a dramatic showdown. I can't remember who put all the pieces together, but we had the makings of a live-on-camera struggle of wills over divestment between the Board of Trustees and a meaningful piece of the Stanford community willing to put their bodies on the line.

We released an excellent 4- or 8-page newsprint broadside detailing what was happening in South Africa, and how apartheid benefited from Stanford's investments in US corporations doing business there. We rapidly recruited long lists of faculty, staff, student, and community

endorsements. I was fortunate to land two assignments: guerrilla theatre, and game-day tactics. Others managed the well-timed dance that placed our representatives in front of the Board of Trustees at the same time we took our position (sitting down, that is) in the Old Union.

Guerrilla theatre aims to create a personal moral crisis in the observer that overcomes rationalization and apathy to spark outrage and the will to act. Our approach was simple. One night, overnight, stalls in virtually every bathroom on campus were labelled "Colored Only" or "White Only." A paragraph ideal for contemplation-during-elimination was attached inside each stall.(In today's environment, such a blatant simulation of racism might not be constructive or appropriate. Was it inappropriate or hurtful then as a consciousness-raising act? I don't recall the topic being raised.)

Because we were determined to be disciplined and non-violent, we strongly encouraged participants to pre-form affinity groups of people who knew and trusted each other that could support adherence to non-violence, aid in communication, and enable thoughtful dialog when confronted by a decision (e.g., arrest or not?). In preparation we held a multi-hour training for affinity group facilitators and peace marshals that included how to de-escalate ("talking down") hot-heads, withstand verbal and physical abuse, and engage an affinity group in discussion and consensus. Peace marshals were charged especially with placing themselves between protesters and any safety hazards, identifying and non-violently isolating possible provocateurs, and maintaining communications among the protesters, demonstration leaders and authorities.

We made it clear to authorities that we intended to peacefully occupy a campus building during the Trustees deliberation of the divestment motion. We refused to say *which* building but did engage in a little vague misdirection (some loose talk about the President's office) to try to ensure we were not blocked from our primary objective. We also had a secondary objective if it were necessary.) We chose the Old Union administration building because it had generous doorways and common space that could handle a crowd while minimizing the chance we'd break
anything valuable.

As the preliminary lunchtime rally began in White Plaza, several peace marshals devoid of political identifiers began loitering around the doors of Old Union. If an attempt were made to lock the building they were prepared to sit, blocking the doors open until removal, thus improving our odds of safely and peacefully entering the building. As the last speaker concluded on White Plaza, peace marshals and affinity group leaders gently coaxed the crowd (some 3-400 as I remember it) to walk *en masse* toward the Quad, and then executed a neat left turn into the Old Union.

There we were, occupying all available floor space, and politely letting staff secure and close their offices. The affinity group concept was explained, and new affinity groups were created as hundreds more people arrived.

How the hell we stayed in communication with our colleagues at the Trustee meeting in San Francisco (before cell phones!) I don't know. I do know they made an announcement to the trustees that we would leave Old Union when Trustees agreed vote their shares for divestment of Ford Motor Company South Africa operations. Trustees debated. We stayed. Our numbers grew and grew. If I recall correctly, the trustees voted against divestment before we were threatened with arrest.

Once police announced that we were trespassing and would face arrest after a certain hour, the affinity groups went into discussion mode to consider whether members would stay or leave. 294 stayed to be arrested (a small number twice, going back after booking and release). I have always been proud to say I helped 294 people be arrested without a scratch, but to be honest, I am leaving out the freshman who climbed the Old Union roof to watch the arrests and then fell to break his arm. What a spoiler!

After jail processing, I flopped in my bed around 4 am only to be called at 6 by NPR's Morning Edition, the New York Times, and the rest is history. Although our sit-in was not the first, it really was a shot heard around the world. Several more years of dedicated work were required before Stanford divested and Mandela was freed.) Hopefully our kids and their kids are aware we helped end apartheid, like we helped end the Vietnam war, farmworkers organize, destroy the closet, expand healthcare access, expand reproductive rights, desegregate institutions, dump a score of dictators, and so many other victories among the inevitable defeats.

I still see my ARC and SCRIP colleagues every few months in the news running national religious organizations, inventing progressive business models, leading the charge for a national health plan, reporting from Latin America, forecasting cyber-futures, organizing disaster relief, protecting the seas. What a bunch! I'm proud to have been among them.

Source: Seth Foldy's health.e.volution, Memoirs,
https://sethfoldy.com/memoirs/stanford-apartheid-divestment-campaign-1977/