

Lonnie Brandon & the North Hall 27

In 1970, a group of Black students risked their college careers to help Wagner become a more equitable place for all of us

BY LEE MANCHESTER

Our story starts with a T-shirt. It was January 2019, and a Wagner College group had flown to Kenya for an Alternative Winter Break, a tradition involving community service activities in an interesting location.

A Wagner alumnus, Lonnie Brandon '78, had gone along with the mostly student group. Though the group had spent 17 hours together on the flight from Newark through Dubai to Nairobi, it wasn't until they were checking in to their hotel that Brandon noticed a photo printed on the T-shirt worn by one of the students.

“Winona walks by, and she’s got on this T-shirt,” Lonnie recalled, “and I see the scene on the back, and I’m like, ‘Whoa, come back here! Do you know anything about this picture on your back?’ ”



The photo showed a group standing on the roof of the front porch of Wagner College’s Cunard Hall on April 17, 1970, during the building’s occupation by

Black Concern, a student group hoping to pressure the college to become a more welcoming and diverse institution.

The student wearing the T-shirt, Student Government Association President Winona Scheff, who is White, did know *something* about the photo — but only a little.

“I said, ‘Well, that’s me, right here,’ and I pointed to myself in the photo,” Lonnie said. “I was floored!”

Right there, in the hotel lobby, the group settled down, and Lonnie told them his story.

Alonzo Brandon Jr. was born in early 1950 in Montclair, N.J. “My mom was born in the same hospital I was born in, 22 years later,” Lonnie said. “My family had deep roots in Montclair.”

Lonnie’s maternal grandmother, Mary Reese, came to Montclair with her twin sister from the tiny, agricultural village of Kenbridge, Va., in the mid-1920s “for the employment opportunities — they were both domestics.” The rest of their family followed a couple of years later.

Lonnie’s father’s family also came from Virginia, moving north as part of the Great Migration of African Americans out of the South, settling in Philadelphia.

“My dad had an aunt who moved from Virginia to Newark, and she was going to the same church that my mother’s family attended,” Lonnie said. “My dad had just gotten out of the Army after World War II, and someone told him he should come up to New Jersey because there were lots of factories there. Dad ended up getting a union job at Singer Sewing Machine in Elizabeth [N.J.], and he worked there for 40 years.”

Lonnie, the eldest of the four children born to Alonzo and Naomi Brandon, went to the same public schools his mother had attended as a child.

On his seventh birthday, Lonnie’s grandmother gave him a guitar and, being a Chuck Berry fan, he practiced and practiced, wanting to be like his idol. But when he turned 10, Lonnie discovered Little League baseball.

“My guitar teacher could sense that I wasn’t practicing,” Lonnie said, “and he’s getting real perturbed. He says, ‘You need to make a choice: baseball, or the guitar.’ So I went home and told my parents, ‘I’m playing baseball!’ ”

Baseball — and later, football — gave Lonnie his entrée into the world of Montclair High School sports, which is a kind of secular religion in his home town.

“Montclair High School has a very deep tradition in football,” Lonnie said. “They’ve won more games than any other high school in the state of New Jersey. Back when I was in high school, we were winning state championships just about every year.”

While sports gave Lonnie Brandon a platform upon which he could excel in high school, it did not completely insulate him from Montclair’s legacy of segregation. “The schools were not segregated,” Lonnie said, “but the neighborhoods were — and you had to go to your neighborhood school.”

Montclair township is divided into four wards. In the 1950s and ’60s, most Black residents lived in the Fourth Ward, on the southeast side of town. And that’s where most of Montclair’s African American youth went to elementary and middle school.

And the schools were not the only civic institutions that were segregated in Montclair. Hospitals were not integrated until the 1950s. Even the YMCA maintained separate branches for Black and White residents until 1964. But it was the segregation of Montclair’s public schools that had the most direct impact on lives of young Black Montclair residents.

In 1961, a few years before Lonnie Brandon entered Montclair High School, another young Black student enrolled there and was faced with the inequality of opportunity her previous schooling had imposed upon her. That student, Lydia Davis, later recalled her situation:

I graduated first in my class, or so I thought, from Glenfield [Middle School in Montclair], and then I got to high school and I was getting Ds. I didn’t understand it, and my father was mad. He tried to find out what was going on. Was I messing up? Were the teachers racist? And then he discovered that I was first in my class, at least first among the colored children, but we were given a “colored” curriculum at Glenfield. We weren’t getting the same rigor, the same courses as the White children, so of course when I got to high school I was way behind.¹

Lonnie Brandon recalled his own experience of just one aspect of Montclair’s segregated school system.

“Whenever the school district got new books, they put them in the north end of town, in those schools,” he said, “and then after they were used for a year or two they started to filter their way down into the Black schools.

“It was funny, because when we got to high school, we started to meet a lot of the students who had the books we got; their names were written in the front. There’s

¹ From the book, "Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations: Re-Imagining Schools," by Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (Teachers College, 2003), in the chapter, "Revisiting the Struggle for Integration" (pp. 170-71)

one guy in particular, his name was Garvie Crow, who was a great football player for the University of Michigan [from 1967 to 1969]. ... He was a couple of years ahead of me in school, but I remember always seeing his name in my books; it stuck in my mind because it was an unusual name.”

It wasn't until Lydia Davis's father, Harris Davis, founded the Parents' Emergency Committee that the situation in Montclair public schools began to change. The committee, with the help of the NAACP, documented the situation and, in 1966, filed a lawsuit, *Rice v. Montclair Board of Education*, that resulted in Montclair being put under a desegregation order.

The order, however, came too late to significantly improve the educational experience of Lonnie Brandon. In one case, Lonnie discovered that he and other Black student-athletes were being subjected to the “tracking” that was common in Montclair public schools, where it was assumed that students of color were suited only for vocational training, not college careers.

The discovery was made only by accident.

The strength of the Montclair High School football program drew lots of college football scouts — and, naturally, lots of scholarship offers for Montclair football players. In many cases, colleges sent their recruiting letters directly to Montclair head football coach Clary Anderson, assuming that he would proudly pass them along to his student-athletes — but, in the case of Black students, that was not the case. Lonnie found this out only when he bumped into a sophomore student manager for the football team, who took the mail each day from the high school office to the coach.

“He asked me if I had seen this letter from Southern Illinois University,” Lonnie said. “I said, ‘No, what letter?’ He said, ‘Oh, Clary has it.’ So I go to Clary. He tells me, ‘Yeah, you got a letter, but you can't get into that school, so you really don't need a letter.’ He was making decisions like that for a lot of African American students.

“There were 2,500 students at Montclair High School then [which was about 30% Black], but there were only 4 African American teachers, and one of them was a female phys ed teacher, Jeanne Heningburg.² We were talking one day and we mentioned that Clary was keeping our letters — well, she went ballistic. She went and got hold of one of our history teachers who she knew she could confide in and told her, and they marched down to the boys' gym and demanded that Clary give up every letter that he had.

² When she was hired in 1956, Jeanne Wade Heningburg was the first Black teacher at Montclair High School. In 1968 she was faculty adviser to Montclair High School's Black Student Union. Her husband was locally renowned community and civil rights leader [Gustav “Gus” Heningburg](#).

“That was another catalyst for starting the Black Student Union at Montclair High School,” Lonnie said. In addition to having been elected captain of the football team during his senior year in high school, Lonnie was a leader in Montclair High School’s new BSU.

“By the time I got to Wagner in September 1968, I was well on my way to becoming fairly radical,” he said.

In addition to Clary Anderson, another football coach entered Lonnie Brandon’s life during his senior year at Montclair High School: Ralph Ferrara from Wagner College, who had been scouting Lonnie from nearby Staten Island.

“I had never even heard of Wagner, and it was only 20 miles away,” Lonnie said. “I had been recruited by Rutgers and the University of Dayton, but Wagner was offering a full ride. . . . I went over for a visit, and when we got to the dining hall, they told me you could eat as much as you want — and that sealed the deal.”

Lonnie Brandon would not find out what being a Black student at Wagner College was really like, however, until classes began in the Fall 1968 semester.

As most Wagnerians know, Wagner was founded in 1883 in Rochester, N.Y. as a combination high school and junior college to prepare young German Lutheran men for the seminary. In a 1929 study commissioned by the United Lutheran Church in America of the growth potential of Lutheran colleges,³ one of the key factors considered was the size of the White population living within a certain radius of a given school, because Lutheran churches were ethnically based institutions, as were their colleges.⁴

Michael R. Kelly ’66 M’72, a lifetime Wagner trustee whose college career predated Lonnie Brandon’s by just a few years, said that “there were no more than three minority students on the football team at any time when I was a student, and only 10 to 15 minority students enrolled in the whole college.”

But federal legislation passed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” agenda started transforming the complexion of American higher education by providing money for disadvantaged young people to go to college.

³ “Survey of Higher Education for the United Lutheran Church in America,” by R.J. Leonard, E.S. Evenden and F.B. O’Rear (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1929, 3 vol.s)

⁴ The same situation persists today. According to [the Religious Landscape Study](#), conducted in 2014 by the Pew Research Center, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the denomination with which Wagner College is historically affiliated) is the second whitest denomination in the United States; about 96 percent of its members are White.

“To use that money,” Mike Kelly said, “colleges had to go out and find minority students who qualified.”

Within a year after Mike’s graduation, the number of Black students attending Wagner College rose to about 20 — and a year after that, in 1968 (when Lonnie Brandon enrolled), the number nearly quadrupled.

“All of the 20 or so African American upperclassmen at Wagner were dancing in the streets because there were 50, 55 African American students in my class,” Lonnie Brandon said. “For them, that was like heaven.”

But the increasing numbers of Black students at Wagner were still overwhelmed in a student body of around 2,400 mostly White undergraduates.⁵

“There was quite a bit of backlash, socially,” Lonnie recalled. “A lot of the students that were here felt they were being invaded, and we never really felt a part of the campus.”

Lonnie remembers that those Black students faced great challenges at Wagner, from fights on campus to low expectations from faculty. Those challenges forced the Black students to band together as a community. They called their organization Black Concern.

“It was formed during the 1967-68 year, the year before I enrolled,” Lonnie said. “Bill Venable [’69] was the president, and Nick Taylor [’69] was the spiritual leader. He was the guy who had the vision and thought there were some positive things that we could do to make a difference on campus.”

Early in the Spring 1969 semester, two joint meetings of the (mostly White) Students for a Democratic Society with Black Concern served to emphasize the distinct goals of the two activist organizations.

“The problem [of racism] is purely a black problem which affects only blacks,” said Black Concern spokesman Bob Coles, according to the Wagnerian student newspaper. “We want to handle the situation ourselves, it’s something we have to do by ourselves. If we want support from any whites, we’ll ask for it.”

Shortly after these meetings, a spark touched off a political brush fire that roared across campus: The trustees voted for a 20 percent tuition increase, leading to a weeks-long student strike and the occupation of the Sutter Gymnasium, North Hall (including the office of Dean Harold Haas) and a portion of Cunard Hall. (The strike was directed by a group of mostly White students; Black Concern members,

⁵ Lonnie Brandon’s estimate of total undergraduate enrollment at Wagner College during the Fall 1968 semester. This is not inconsistent with enrollment documented for just 2 years later. In 1970, Wagner College had 2,689 undergraduates enrolled, according to “The Emerging Identity of Wagner College,” a 1972 Teachers College doctoral dissertation by the Rev. William Albert Rowen, assistant dean of academic affairs at Wagner College.

per se, were not a part of the strike’s leadership.) A list of 53 student demands was generated for presentation to the administration. And when it was all over, life at Wagner College returned to normal.

“That kind of set the stage for the following year,” Lonnie Brandon recalled.

Black Concern’s first step in the 1969-70 school year, with Lonnie Brandon as its chairman, was a test of its ability to organize and execute a plan. The goal: to get a Black woman elected Homecoming queen that fall. It would be a cultural first at the predominantly White college — and, strategically, very difficult to pull off.

“There were 83 black students out of a student body of 2,400,” Lonnie said. “We couldn’t win with just the black students’ votes. We enlisted a group of white students who otherwise wouldn’t have voted for anyone. You’d probably call them ‘hippies.’ ”



1969 Homecoming Queen Sharon Richie and her escort, basketball star Ray Hodge, both members of Black Concern

Black Concern’s winning candidate was Sharon Richie, a junior nursing student from the projects of South Philly. Her Wagner education was being underwritten by the U.S. Army, which commissioned her as an officer upon graduation. She later became a White House Fellow, chief nurse for the Army Recruiting Command, the youngest full colonel in the Army (at age 36), and the director of the School of Nursing at Norwich University, a private military college in Vermont, before her death in 2018. (You can read more about the remarkable Sharon Richie in [“Compassionate Command,”](#) the cover story for Wagner Magazine’s Fall 2009 issue.)

With that victory under their belt, the members of Black Concern began considering their next move.

“We started to look at our lives and the things that we felt would be more relevant for us and to make the campus more inclusive,” Lonnie Brandon said. “We developed a list of demands and presented them to the administration. Basically, what we were looking for was increased minority enrollment, minority representation on the faculty and in administration.”

The biggest “ask” among their demands, issued at the beginning of April, was to increase the number of Black students at Wagner from the current 83 to more than 500. Doing so would require additional scholarship money, an adjustment of admissions requirements, and specialized recruiting staff familiar with the Black community — and to support Black students after enrollment, the college would need more Black faculty members, administrative staff dedicated to creating programming that was relevant to Black students, and adaptations to the curriculum encompassing Black and African studies.

Less than a week later, the administration issued its response, much of which was, generally, quite positive. The basic problem the college had with the demands of Black Concern, it seemed, was financial.

“As has been stated before, there is no impediment to minority group students attending Wagner College, if they have the financial means,” the college said in its reply. “The crucial question is how many without adequate means can be accepted by the college.”

Black Concern found the college’s response unsatisfactory.

“That’s when we decided we were going to occupy Cunard Hall,” Lonnie Brandon said. “It was the heartbeat of the campus; all the academic records were there, the business office was there, so we felt that if we occupied that building, we could get their attention.”

Thinking strategically, Lonnie knew that timing was critical.

College Day was scheduled for Saturday, April 18. It was the biggest event of the year for Wagner’s Admissions Office, when the coming year’s admitted students and their families would be welcomed onto campus for events designed to encourage them to commit to attending the school.

“We scheduled [the Cunard occupation] for the week before College Day,” Lonnie said, “and we knew they would want to resolve this before that.”

On the afternoon of Wednesday, April 15, a couple of Black Concern members went in to a ground-floor men’s bathroom in Cunard Hall to unlock a window.

That night they returned, ready to seal the building's entrances and wait until the administration reacted. About 90 students were inside the building, some (about 13, by one count) from the Puerto Rican student group called Alma, the rest from Black Concern.

Young civil rights activist Julian Bond, an early leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee who was, at that time, a member of the Georgia House of Representatives, was the only person from outside the group of occupiers allowed in to Cunard Hall during the sit-in. Bond had been speaking at nearby Notre Dame College, a Catholic women's school (now the Staten Island campus of St. John's University), when he heard about the occupation and walked over to the Wagner College campus. His visit buoyed the spirits of the students in Cunard.⁶

"It showed that we didn't stand alone," said Ray Hodge, one of the occupiers.

Over the next day and a half, the students and the administration went through round after round of telephone negotiations.

"Finally, Thursday night, the administration made a commitment to meet with us the following week and to recognize our concerns and to address them," Lonnie Brandon said. "We decided that was good enough — and so, in good faith, we left the building on Friday."

Most of the Black and Latinx participants in the Cunard occupation went home or elsewhere off-campus for the weekend as soon as the matter was, as far as they knew, resolved.

What they did not know was that a group of about 200 White student activists who considered themselves allies but did not coordinate their actions with Black Concern had planned their own demonstration for Saturday, disrupting Wagner's College Day event and forcing the school to send its guests home.

"The administration assumed we had instigated that demonstration," Lonnie said. "On Monday morning, they informed us that they were renegeing on all of the commitments they had made to get us out of [Cunard Hall]."

The students tried several times to contact Wagner College President Arthur Ole Davidson to negotiate directly with him, but Davidson was unavailable; he had just returned from an extended visit to Wagner's study-abroad center in Bregenz, Austria, and was resting.

⁶ Thirty-four years later, [Julian Bond returned to the Wagner College campus as the featured speaker for our 2014 commencement program.](#)

On Thursday, April 23, a group of about 30 members of Black Concern “went to see Dean [Harold] Haas; he was second in command to President Davidson,” Lonnie recalled. “We ended up sitting in his office for about 8 hours.”

The Black Concern members referred to the confrontation as “a meeting.”

Dean of Students Bill Maher, however, interpreted it differently. When he came to Dean Haas’s North Hall office, located in what is now the library of Reynolds House, to see what was going on, he saw a large group of Black students who appeared, to him, to be holding Haas hostage.

“Dean Harold Haas was not permitted to leave his office,” said a statement issued the next day by President Davidson’s office. “He was permitted to use the telephone only at the direction of the students.”

Black Concern, however, issued a counterstatement claiming that “at no time did anyone in the conference physically abuse and/or physically restrict Dean Haas from leaving if he wanted to.”

At 12:50 p.m., Dean Maher gave the students 10 minutes to vacate Haas’s office; two or three students complied, but the majority did not. Maher then suspended the remaining 27 students for the rest of the academic year — and told them that “if Dean Haas is not freed ... in one hour, all students in the room will be expelled,” according to a news report. By 2 p.m., nobody had budged, and Maher’s expulsion order went into effect.

Dean Haas — the Rev. Dr. Harold Haas — may have been the last person anyone would expect to crack down harshly on a group of Black students seeking to advance the cause of racial equity. A 1939 graduate of Wagner College, Haas had marched in civil rights demonstrations in the South. He spent nearly a quarter century as the chief of the United Lutheran Church’s Board of Social Missions (from 1942 to 1966) before becoming the dean of Wagner College. He left the college a year after his encounter with Black Concern, serving as executive of the Lutheran Church Council of the USA’s Division of Mission and Ministry (1971-77) and president and CEO of Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries (1977-82). He died in 2016.

Eric Devlin, a Wagner College senior working as a reporter for the weekly Staten Island Register, had an inside track with many in the Wagner community when writing about the Haas incident. In a May 6 recap of the situation, Devlin wrote:

In the wake of the alleged April 23rd capture of Dean Harold Haas of Wagner College by 30 Black students ... members of the College community have overwhelmingly voiced support for the demands of the Black students and have expressed doubt over the administration’s official interpretation of the incident. ...

Many students expressed affection for Dean Haas and regret that the incident occurred. Many feel that Dean Haas' true stand is not being expressed, but that the incident, in the words of one faculty member, "is a convenient tool for some reactionary administrators who have trapped Haas, as a fellow administrator, into supporting their point of view. The students involved have never lied to me, and neither has Dean Haas, but some administrators have." ...

Only rarely was support for the expulsion order expressed. When it was, it was phrased in words similar to those of a freshman co-ed from Brooklyn: "If the College had started doing something to keep these n-----s [spelled out] in their place four years ago, this never would have happened. They ought to kick every one of them out and never let another one into the College."

An NAACP lawyer sought a federal court order to have the expulsion overturned, but the wheels of justice moved slowly — too slowly to have any impact on the events unfolding on Grymes Hill.

On May 13, about 120 White students began a new occupation of President Davidson's office, demanding that the college reinstate the 27 expelled Black students. The occupation continued for a full week, breaking up only after the college board of trustees met on May 20 without taking action on the case of the North Hall 27. No penalties were imposed on the White organizers of that occupation.

Finally, on May 21, the nine-member Faculty Council began a two-day meeting to consider an appeal of the expelled students. A news story in the Staten Island Advance reported on some key testimony provided by Dorothe Dow, head of the special nursing program at Wagner and faculty adviser to Black Concern.

The article said that "Mrs. Dow testified that she was notified of the situation in North Hall at 2 p.m. April 23, about two hours after the students had arrived and an hour after they had been suspended. She said she went to the door of Dean Haas' office and was allowed to enter without incident. She explained that she was there for most of the time until 7 p.m., when Haas left, but 'could not recall what happened' when Dean Maher informed the students they had been expelled at about 4 p.m." Mrs. Dow testified that Dean Haas "never asked to leave while she was there, and that she thought nothing was wrong so did not ask the students to leave."

The same article reported on the testimony of Philip Straniere '69 M'73, a student (and, later, a Staten Island Civil Court judge) who had participated in the Spring 1969 campus strike. Straniere said that, during the 1969 actions, "he was one of a group of 200 students who occupied all three floors of North Hall. He said that a group of 30 or 40 students held a conference with Dean Haas [in 1969] that lasted more than an hour. Straniere said that the people filled the office, doorway and hall

in an atmosphere of ‘polite hostility’ on that occasion, in effect preventing Haas from leaving. He further indicated that no disciplinary action was taken at that time and that no one in the administration tried to ‘free Haas or contended that he was a hostage.’ ”

In his summary, NAACP attorney Jonathan Shapiro said “that he felt there had been a misunderstanding between Haas and the students April 23 and that he actually was not held hostage ... [but] that the dean was fearful because he was confronted with a roomful of blacks, whereas he didn’t interpret similar action [the previous] year in the same way.”

Despite the testimony of Dorothe Dow and Philip Straniere, and attorney Jonathan Shapiro’s summation, the Faculty Council ruled against most of the students.

Two of the students were exonerated, the council determining that they had left Dean Haas’s office before the expulsion order took effect.

One student, senior basketball player Ray Hodge, was granted clemency due to his particular circumstances. Positioned to graduate in June, Hodge had been drafted by the New York Knicks. Recognizing that an expulsion could endanger his career, the Faculty Council exempted him from the penalties that might have been imposed, allowing him to graduate.

The remaining 24 students had their expulsion converted into a suspension at the recommendations of deans Haas and Maher, resulting in the loss of all the college credits they had earned during the Spring 1970 semester but permitting them to continue with their college careers at Wagner if they so chose. According to Lonnie Brandon, about half of them never returned to Wagner, although he did.

Ironically, over the following summer and fall, Wagner College fulfilled every one of the pledges it had made to the minority students to end the Cunard Hall occupation. Black administrators were hired; Admissions recruiting incorporated a new focus on bringing minority students to Grymes Hill; new Black scholars joined the faculty, and new courses were added to the curriculum that examined the experience and history of minority communities in America.

To be sure, none of these changes were true game changers; they were only first steps on a long path toward greater equity at Wagner College that would benefit everyone involved. But they were indicators of change and hints that better things were possible in the future for the college on the hill.

After hearing this account, many have asked former Black Concern members how, at 19 or 20 years of age, they could have risked so much, and if they had weighed the possible cost of their actions beforehand.

For the small, incremental changes Black Concern's actions provoked, it probably seemed like too high a cost for too little benefit for many who were involved.

Toni King Whitlock, one of the suspended students, said, "It was a lofty idea, trying to turn Wagner around, but the cost was just too high and no one seemed to care."

Sharon Richie, a member of Black Concern who had not participated in the meeting with Dean Haas, said, "We had just enough light for the step that we were on ... and it was one step at a time."

Asked if Black Concern members had thought, ahead of time, that there might be serious consequences for what they were planning to do, Lonnie Brandon said, "No, at 19, 20 years old, we weren't projecting that far ahead. ... We had absolutely no idea that it would lead to what happened. We just figured we would go through the process and, at the end, they would say yes or no, and then we would have to reassess where we were, based on those responses — but we never anticipated that part of the consequences could have been so life-changing."

In the aftermath of the Cunard occupation and the Haas incident, how did the parents of Black Concern members react?

Lonnie Brandon said that, for the most part, the parents weren't really aware of what was going on at the time.

"My dad was socially conscious," Lonnie said. "He was on the March on Washington [for Freedom and Jobs] in 1963, and he was a member of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality," a leading civil rights organization.

"When I talked to him about it, my dad just looked at me and said, 'Well, you know you have to live with the consequences of your actions. You've got to do whatever you can do to make it right, or move on someplace else and complete your education.'"

Lonnie felt a particular urgency about the steps he would take after the Faculty Council hearing and the restoration of his student standing and football scholarship. During his freshman year, Lonnie's girlfriend back home, Janice Martin, had gotten pregnant; they married during the summer break — they were wed for 13 years — and Janice delivered their first child, Yolanda Nicole, that summer.

"We call her Nikki," Lonnie said, explaining that she was "kind of named for Nick Taylor," the Black Concern leader who died in a car crash shortly before Nikki's birth.

What did Lonnie take away from the Cunard occupation, the Haas incident and his leadership role in all of it?

“I tell people that I got my best education at Wagner *outside* of Wagner,” he said, “negotiation, conflict resolution, dealing with the administration.”

And what message should today’s Wagner students take from the events of 50 years ago on our campus?

“If you believe in something, follow your gut,” Lonnie said, “follow your heart and do whatever you feel is necessary to accomplish your goals. You need to be able to think it through, and be willing to deal with the consequences — because there are going to be consequences for any action you take. ...

“It’s something I would have done all over again; I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Lonnie’s football scholarship carried him through two more years of full-time student life at Wagner — close to completing his degree requirements but, due to his loss of credits from the Spring 1970 semester, not quite enough for his B.A. He would not earn his degree until the summer of 1978, when he took the pair of courses he needed to finish.

But in the meantime, Lonnie and Janice Brandon had a growing, young family to raise; daughter Nikki was followed by Alonzo III and, in 1975, by youngest daughter Kendra — and Lonnie had to find a job.

In 1973, Lonnie started working for the municipal government of his home town of Montclair, N.J.

“I was an activities director in the Recreation Department,” Lonnie said. “Because of my athletic background, they thought I would be a good fit there. I was running a lot of the programs that I had participated in as a youth in town.”

During his 6 years as activities director, Lonnie Brandon kept his eyes open, watching what some of the other township staff did and finding out how it all worked.

When the parks superintendent left after Lonnie had been on the job for 5½ years, Lonnie asked his supervisors, “‘Look, can I get that job?’, because it paid more money and I was ready to move on.”

The township agreed, sending him to a leadership training program at Rutgers University’s Cook College to upgrade his leadership skills and technical training.

In addition to his work as parks superintendent, from 1979 to 1991, Lonnie Brandon was actively involved in other aspects of community life, always finding ways to make new contributions. In 1990, he was instrumental in starting the

Montclair African American Heritage Parade, now a fixture of the town's summer calendar.

“There were some issues going on in town, some antisocial activity, and some of the people in the Fourth Ward decided that we needed to do something positive to offer an alternative,” Lonnie said. “We decided that we would have a parade. And then, as we discussed how that would shape up, we decided that we should also have a festival, only because we were gonna attract thousands of people to leave their homes and watch a parade — we figured they should have something else to do with the remainder of the day.”

In 1999, the parade and festival spawned a “rites of passage” mentoring program for Montclair young people, male and female, with combined support from the town's Board of Education, Parks & Recreation and the African American Heritage committee. At one point, as many as 55 young people were involved. It lasted about 10 years.



Lonnie Brandon speaking at the 2019 Montclair African American Heritage Parade

In the meantime, Lonnie Brandon made his final upward move in Montclair township government: In 1991, he became director of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs.

“I had been 18 years on the job,” Lonnie said, “and I had grown up in the community. When I had to go before the town council for an interview, I told them, ‘There’s nobody in the state more qualified for this job than me. I’ve had an 18-year internship preparing for this!’

“I was the first African American department head in the township of Montclair — and it was long overdue. It kind of opened the door, because right after that we got an African American fire chief, and then an African American police chief and an African American director of public works.

“I tried to put my mark on the position and the township, and I did a lot of innovative programming,” he said. “Every recreation department runs basketball and baseball programs, but everybody’s not an athlete, so we tried to provide some alternate activities — and we found that a lot of athletes wanted to do that stuff, too.”

Among “that stuff” was a summer arts program called “Shakespeare Under the Stars.”

“Montclair High School has an outdoor amphitheater,” Lonnie said, “and we would take that over for the summer.”

His department also ran year-round youth centers housed in school facilities, negotiating a “space swap” agreement with the town school board to maximize facility usage for everyone’s benefit.

Other programs developed on Lonnie’s watch by Montclair Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs were First Night Montclair, Monday Night Jazz, Terry’s Serendipity Café, and expanded senior social and fitness programming.

Of course, all of this led to several awards being given during Lonnie Brandon’s career:

- the Black Achievers Award from the YMCA of Northern and Central New Jersey,
- community service awards from the Montclair Chapter of the NAACP, the Montclair Chamber of Commerce and the Montclair Democratic Party,
- the Image Award from the Joint Effort Community Sports Foundation, and
- the Cultural Affairs Award from the Montclair Section of the National Council of Negro Women.

During the final year of Lonnie Brandon’s career, he married again. His partner was a woman he had met while networking with other New Jersey municipal recreation professionals, Jacqueline Preston from Atlantic City. In retirement, the couple now live in a new house they built right across the street from her old one, about a mile from A.C.’s world-famous boardwalk.

Since Lonnie’s retirement in May 2004, he has won even more awards. In 2010, the youth mentoring organization Brother to Brother honored him with the first

Alonzo “Lonnie” Brandon Service Award, a prize now presented annually for outstanding community service in Montclair.

And Lonnie has been honored twice by his alma mater:

- in May 2011, with an Alumni Honors citation for his work with the college’s alumni association, especially his role in organizing a 40th anniversary alumni seminar to recap and re-evaluate the events of 1970, and
- in February 2019, with Wagner College’s Martin Luther King Jr. Agent of Change citation in recognition of his lifetime service to the college and the community.



Mike Kelly & Lonnie Brandon visiting the author, Sept. 23, 2009

So, how long did it take for Lonnie Brandon to finally re-engage with Wagner College?

Just thirty-seven years after his last regular semester on campus, that’s all.

Lonnie, understandably, carried a lot of resentment — “big time” — after the treatment he and the other Black Concern members received following the Cunard occupation and the Haas incident.

“A lot of my contemporaries still hold tremendous resentment,” he said.

It took a visit from his old mentor Mike Kelly, who'd become a Wagner College trustee, to get Lonnie Brandon back on Grymes Hill.

"It was late August 2009," Lonnie recalled. "Mike was coming up from Florida, and he wanted to go over to Wagner. We've been in touch the entire time [since 1970]; he was one of my coaches, in football and in life."

Mike, a former Wagner football player, said that he "was teaching public school during the day and coming up to coach at Wagner in the evening" following his 1966 graduation.

"That's how I met Lonnie," Mike said. "I was the only Black coach and, as such, became unofficial mentor to the Black players."

While Mike hadn't known anything about the advance planning for the Cunard occupation, he was an integral part of the negotiations that resolved it.

"Lonnie called me during the occupation," Mike said. "They wanted me to be the administrator for Black student programs; that was one of the demands they were presenting to the college."

Mike Kelly started working at Wagner on July 1, 1970, and he and Lonnie Brandon have stayed in touch ever since.⁷

As a kid growing up in Harlem, Mike had gone to summer camp at Camp Treetops outside Lake Placid, in New York's Adirondack Mountains, and he continued to visit old friends up there each year. That's where he was headed in August 2009 when he stopped off in Montclair to visit Lonnie Brandon.

Seahawk football coach Walt Hameline had asked Mike if he would drop by for the team's annual Green & White Scrimmage, which ended the preseason training, and talk to the players. Mike asked Lonnie to come along and, afterward, took Lonnie across the street for lunch with his friend, Provost Devorah Lieberman.

"Mike started telling Devorah my history at Wagner," Lonnie said, "so right away she starts thinking, 'Well, next year it's gonna be the 40th anniversary [of the Cunard and Haas incidents]. We have to do something big!' "

Mike Kelly reconnected Lonnie Brandon with Brian Morris, a 1965 Wagner alumnus who had gone to work in the college's Communications Office for a few years after graduation, at the beginning of Brian's highly successful career in public relations. Brian knew several Black Concern members as a Wagner staffer

⁷ Michael Kelly has had a highly productive career since graduating from Wagner. After working for his alma mater for a few years and earning his master's degree in economics from Wagner, Mike Kelly embarked upon a career in the field variously known as industrial relations, employee relations and human resources. Today, Mike is president of Kelly, Ashe & Associates, a management consultancy focusing on H.R. and overall business performance. [He was inducted into the Wagner College Athletic Hall of Fame in 1999.](#)

— Homecoming queen Sharon Richie, for instance, had been a student worker in Communications and babysat his children from time to time.

At the time Mike Kelly reintroduced Lonnie to Brian Morris, Brian was serving on the board of Wagner’s Alumni Association. It was Brian’s idea to use the 40th anniversary as an event to catalyze the college’s alumni community to focus on what progress Wagner had made in the area of racial equity since 1970.

“We came up with a plan,” Lonnie said, “and then I went and called 20, 25 people who had been involved.”

Lonnie also spent time in the college’s archives, reading the old news clips about the events of 40 years before, looking through the mimeographed statements distributed by Black Concern and the college, and piecing together an accurate, well-documented picture of what had really happened all those years ago. Brian Morris, with his connections as a publicist, sat down with a film producer and, using interviews with key players from the 1960s and ’70s, created a 27-minute documentary, “Seeds of Change: Reflection of a Year of Student Activism, 1969-1970.” ([You can watch it on Wagner College’s YouTube channel.](#)) Participants in the documentary were alumnus Milfred Fierce ’60, Mike Kelly, Black Concern 1970 co-chair Joan Thorne Manning, Philip Straniere, Lonnie Brandon, Toni King Whitlock, Ray Hodge, Marilyn W. Jackson ’73 and Linda Dominguez ’73.

The documentary was screened at the alumni seminar Lonnie Brandon organized to bring as many of the first-hand participants in the 1970 activities back to campus.⁸ Held on April 10, 2010 in Wagner College’s Spiro Hall, the program featured:

- Milfred Fierce, Ph.D., a pioneer in the scholarly field of Africana/African American/Black studies at Vassar College and a recently retired member of Wagner College’s Board of Trustees
- Margaret Burnham, one of the two members of the NAACP legal team that defended Black Concern members in 1970
- Lonnie Brandon
- Philip Straniere and
- Sharon Richie.

Mike Kelly had been tapped to serve as moderator for the program, but a last-minute accident prevented him from attending.

“For many of the people who attended the program,” Lonnie said, “it was the first time they had been back on campus.”

⁸ [Watch a complete recording of the program](#) on the Wagner College YouTube channel.

For Lonnie Brandon, it was far from the last time he was to visit Grymes Hill.

Lonnie served two 3-year terms on the Alumni Association board, with the encouragement of Brian Morris, as well as offering his support to Wagner's Black students of the modern era in multiple ways.

When a promising student and football star got into some trouble, Lonnie Brandon and Mike Kelly asked the college's dean of campus life for leniency — provided Lonnie agreed to mentor him. Lonnie met regularly with the student — and his roommate — to provide the young men with ongoing guidance through the rest of their undergraduate careers. Both students graduated in good standing.

A couple of years ago (2018-19), the leaders of Wagner's Black Student Union took an interest in the story of Black Concern from the late 1960s and early 1970s, digging into the archives and watching the "Seeds of Change" documentary. Their research led to a visit with BSU from Lonnie Brandon.

"I had first met Lonnie some months prior at the annual BSU Alumni Social," said Deyja Gentile, co-president that year of BSU, "but each meeting with him is always wonderful. He is one of those people who leaves you feeling motivated and validated, and it's been a pleasure to know Lonnie over these past few years. He is one of the single most genuine, kind people you could ever meet, and I know that anyone you ask who has spent any fraction of time with him would say the same."

That visit inspired the new T-shirt designed for the Black Student Union in November 2018, which featured an April 17, 1970 photo of a group of students standing on the roof of the Cunard Hall porch — at the center of which was young Lonnie Brandon.

And that brings us back around, full circle, to the beginning of our story, when Lonnie and Jackie Brandon accompanied a group of Wagner College students on their Alternative Winter Break service trip to Nairobi, Kenya in January 2019. The Brandons had been invited because they'd been sponsors the previous summer for a group of young men and women from all over sub-Saharan Africa studying at Wagner College in the [Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders](#), a U.S. State Department program.

Winona Scheff, who wore that BSU T-shirt in Nairobi with Lonnie Brandon's picture, remembers well the impression Lonnie and his wife Jackie made on everyone during that trip.

"Lonnie and Jackie were wonderful additions to our trip," Winona said. "They had made a promise to themselves that they would travel to various countries in Africa — and, if I am not mistaken, Kenya was their first.

“They both exuded kindness in every word they spoke. They became our grandparents on that trip, providing comfort in moments of vulnerability and laughter in moments of joy. They both are inspirations; we at Wagner are lucky to have them in our family.”



During a Wagner history class held online in April 2020, half a century after the Cunard occupation, Lonnie Brandon was asked by a student if he had seen any changes at Wagner College as a result of the sacrifices he and his fellow members of Black Concern had made.

“Sometimes I’m a little disappointed that more hasn’t happened in the last 50 years,” Lonnie said, “but it’s a different place. I’m a firm believer in how organizations change when the people in them change. I think Wagner is a very different place than it was 50 years ago, primarily because the players are different.”

The composition of Wagner College’s student body has changed dramatically since 1970, when 97% of all students were White. In October 2018 (when the most

recent definitive tally was made of Wagner's enrollment breakdown), the college's student body was 68% White, 14% Latinx, 8% Black and 6% Asian.

Faculty composition has undergone a similarly dramatic shift. In the spring of 1970, all Wagner College's teaching staff were White. At the beginning of the 2020-21 academic year, the faculty was 80% White, 3% Latinx, 8% Black and 9% Asian.

And in August 2020, as this history is being written, the college has White, Black and Brown, straight and queer men and women serving and leading on its board of trustees, the board of its Alumni Association, and throughout its administrative staff, including Admissions, Campus Life and the president's cabinet.

Clearly, some important shifts in racial dynamics have occurred in Wagner College's institutional culture between 1970 and 2020. Is it enough? Is everything fixed now? Of course not. But is it better now than it was half a century ago? Did the sacrifices of the North Hall 27 make a difference? Yes — and this history is one indication of how the conversation at Wagner was changed by the stand those students took in 1970, and how it has continued to evolve in the years since.

“One of the things I try to live my life by now,” said Lonnie Brandon at the end of an interview in late June 2020, “is an idea that was presented to me at one of my professional development programs at Rutgers.

“A major part of that philosophy is that organizations are really ongoing conversations. It's not about brick and mortar, or even people — it's about conversations. Organizations change when conversations change.

“That's one of the things I tried to sell to my contemporaries in trying to get them re-engaged at Wagner — that it's a different place,” Lonnie said. “Those people that we had issues with are long gone; the institution is different. And the conversation has changed.

“Has it gone as far as we would have liked to have seen it going, 50 years ago? Probably not — but, again, there's a whole lot of different circumstances.”

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