

The Women's Center: Feminist Campus Tour Northwestern University

The Bursar's Office

Tour Guide: The building before you is the Office of Treasury Operations, site of the 1968 student-led civil rights sit-in known as the Bursar's Takeover. The dedicatory plaque from the Northwestern University Black Alumni Association (NUBAA) on the south face of the building reads: "In honor of the more than 100 black students who occupied the Bursar's Office for 38 hours on May 3rd and 4th, 1968. The university's first ever sit-in led to an agreement that resulted in a better existence for Blacks on campus and a better Northwestern."

The placement of this dedication on May 3rd, 2018 was part of university events marking the 50th anniversary of the Bursar's Takeover. Another such event was a speech by former president of FMO (For Members Only) and one of the takeover leaders, **Kathryn Ogletree**. The talk was organized by the Women's Center and the University Archivist for the Black Experience, **Charla Wilson**.

Here's **Kathryn Ogletree**, reflecting on being asked to speak at the intersection of Black and female experience.

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Ogletree: “And actually it started when Charla called me. She said, ‘We would like you to come and talk to us about the female perspective of the Takeover,’ and it’s, like, she said that and I said, ‘Okay, I’ll call you back on that.’ It was like I had to get off the phone, okay? Because it was like she had opened up a wound. I wasn’t ready to even talk.”

Tour Guide: As you can hear, Kathryn employed wit and grace to address the role that sex and gender played within the struggle for racial equality on campus. And she did so without denying the complexity of the issue or the harm it caused.

Ogletree: “The experience of the Takeover, where I was the only Black woman that was part of the negotiating team, and that was because I *had* to be there. I was the president (*laughs*) of FMO, but, it’s interesting, I did always feel that I had the support and backing of the guys, the men in the Black community.

“However, we knew that the culture at the time was that the woman was supposed to be behind the Black man, you know, and push him forward. I was the elected leader of FMO, but I did a lot of secretarial-type things.

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So if I was not, and the people who worked with me were not the people chronicling everything, I'm not sure what would, you know, how the demands would have advanced to the state that we would have had something for Jim Turner to articulate. Now, I'm not trying to put down Jim Turner. He was the best speaker I had ever heard, and he gave form and everything to our demands. We had a good system of camaraderie where whatever your talents were, that's what was used at the time."

Tour Guide: In subsequent months, FMO was restructured and Kathryn was encouraged to resign. Here she describes looking back on that moment with her friend and fellow NU and takeover alumna, **Harvette Nelson**.

Ogletree: "I was celebrated in, I actually couldn't remember the whole thing. Harvette helped me remember, she said there was some sort of fair that we had, and she said, 'Everybody was giving you all these flowers and everything, and telling you what a great job you had done.' And she said, 'But you know, you didn't look happy.' (*Laughs*) And I said, 'Well, I wasn't happy.' I actually felt it as a funeral. And I honestly, you know, it was like a part of me had died, I had never really talked

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about that. And even though the intentions were good on some level though, because of the context in which it occurred, like I said, it was to move me out of the forefront, and then the guys took over.

“And even when they took over, they still included me in things, but they wanted to make sure that I was not in the head of anything. And like I said, I didn't always, I never really completely processed. I'm processing it now.”

Tour Guide: Kathryn Ogletree reminds us that the gender politics of student organizing did not exist in a vacuum. In fact, they necessarily and strategically reflected the expectations these students needed to appeal to in order to bring lasting change.

Ogletree: “Now, I was not a speaker like Jim Turner. And aside from that – when you'd look at that eighteen-year-old picture, this was before I had my afro, okay, even - that, I would not carry the authority for the white male administrators to listen to anything I had to say. I mean, this was just being real. I knew it. We don't, we didn't have to sit down and discuss any of that. It's just that that's the way of the world, okay? The white man's

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world, which we were living in at that time, they would not have given me any credibility whatsoever.”

Tour Guide: Today, we celebrate the legacy of all the students from the Bursar's Takeover who moved this university forward. Among the gains the takeover achieved are the creation of the Black student union known as Black House, the addition of Black studies courses, and the inclusion of Black student input into admissions and financial aid.

For timeline, full history, photographs, and more please visit the “They Demanded Courageously: The 1968 Northwestern Bursar's Takeover” exhibit via Northwestern libraries.

Link: <https://sites.northwestern.edu/bursars1968/>.