World's Largest Circulation Magazine

April 24, 2008
Search Entire Site
Search

Money
Health
Travel
Family
Caregiving
People
Entertainment
Movies for Grownups®
Lifestyle
Relationships
Food
Recipe Database
Books
Games
Daily Diversions
Message Boards
Reader Services
Deals & Happenings
eNewsletter
Home

ADVERTISEMENT

People

1968: The Year That Rocked Our World

Interviews by Ed Dwyer, Vern Smith, and Larkin Warren, May & June 2008

Print Email Page 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 »

Courage

KATHLEEN NEAL CLEAVER, 63 *Former wife of Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver*

Kathleen Cleaver *01:38*

Four months after I get married, here's my husband charged with three counts of attempted murder. It's two days after King's assassination, the height of the war. It's madness, off-the-hook—you never knew what was going to happen. But you make a decision when you join a revolutionary movement: What's most important in the world—your private existence or the collective transformation of the community? This tremendous legacy of fighting against slavery is what we were keying in on. We were young, and we were trying new things, but we knew we had inherited a struggle. One of the problems for today's youth is that they don't know how to handle this inheritance, and don't really understand in some sense what they've inherited. There are many people who think the hip-hop culture activities are a political movement! I think the commercialization and the failure of public education, and the collapse of solid, working-class black communities because of changes in the economy, are all taking a huge hit on the community of people who would be furthering that legacy. [In 1968] we were taking something that was already there and making it sound and look different and cooler. We didn't invent political rallies, we didn't invent protests, but we did something with political rallies and protests that nobody else was doing. We were reformulating how black people thought about participating in the political process, because politics was kind of strange to black people, particularly ghetto teenagers. You know, "What's politics?" So we were trying to break it down, like Bobby Seale would say: "Break it down to the real nitty-gritty." *—Kathleen Neal Cleaver's transformation from daughter of a college professor to a "stomp-down revolutionary" battling "domestic imperialism" was complete by 1968. She'd dropped out of Barnard College to join the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and in 1967 moved to San Francisco and married Black Panther leader and Soul on Ice author Eldridge Cleaver. The next year Eldridge would be involved in a shootout with Oakland police, and eventually Kathleen would emerge as the public face of the Black Panthers. A committed activist still—she divorced the now-deceased Eldridge in 1987—the Yale University graduate teaches law at Emory University in Atlanta.*

Traveling out of Florida?

"We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our black community"

From the Black Panther Party pamphlet "What We Want, What We Believe"

TOMMIE SMITH, 63 *Olympic gold medalist who did the Black Power salute on the victory stand*

Tommie Smith *02:04*

The act of the glove was about a need to be heard. The thought bloomed after a meeting of black athletes in Denver, where we decided not to boycott the Olympics, but represent ourselves according to how each of us felt about a system that did not represent us. I called my wife right after the meeting and asked her to bring me some gloves to Mexico. And she said, "Gloves? It's not cold." I said, "No, it's not, but I need gloves. I don't know what I'm going to do with them."

After I won, I thought many minutes about wearing both gloves as the national anthem started playing, or when I received my gold medal I'd throw both hands up in the air the way athletes do now, or just wear them and do nothing. Then it hit me: just use one hand, voice it to God, and pray while it's there.

On the victory stand I turned right to the flag, and then turned back, left, to the crowd. Those are military moves—very, very committed moves—because what I was doing was an American thing, freedom of expression.

A lot of black people used that victory stand as a platform from which to speak out. They saw strength, social understanding, and I think it gave athletes a power base to speak more freely than they had before. Still, after I got back to San Jose, I was an outcast. My hometown in the San Joaquin Valley really turned against my family because of what I did. That hurt me more than anything. Dead animals were put in the mailbox at our home. It really tormented my mother to the point that I believe it contributed to her death in 1970. Little did I know that that victory stand was going to be my life. And it is still evolving. *—Sprinter Tommie Smith, who won the gold medal in the 200-meter dash at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, melded sports and social protest when he and his Olympic teammate, bronze medalist John Carlos, raised their black-gloved fists on the victory stand. It was an indelible image that transfixed the world and transformed Smith and Carlos into iconic figures. Smith is now an educator and coach. His website is www.tommiesmith.com.*

CARLOS HARO, 61 *Created UCLA's first organization for Latino students*

Carlos Haro *01:47*

I was an undergraduate at UCLA when high-school students in L.A. were getting frustrated by educational disparities and were talking about a walkout. They needed help in organizing it. We had César Chávez's farm workers' movement in the rural sector, but we had never had a mobilization in the city in such large numbers by people of Mexican descent, and it was dramatic and historic. In the end what was significant was the change in the people. Looking at yourself as somebody who could actually deal with the powerful—the police, a school board member, a principal—was very, very important. *—Carlos Haro has dedicated much of his life to improving the quality of education for Mexican American youth. As an undergraduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles in the mid-1960s, Haro helped organize the campus's first organization for Latino students—United Mexican American Students (UMAS). Later he worked with Mexican American high-school students who staged a walkout of Los Angeles schools in 1968 to protest inequitable conditions. After earning a bachelor of arts in political science, a master of arts in curriculum and instruction, and a doctorate in comparative and international education, all from UCLA, Haro joined the staff at the college. He served as assistant dean of International Studies and Overseas Program, and he was the assistant director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center until retiring in 2007.*

KATHIE SARACHILD, 64 *A pioneer of the women's liberation movement*
in January there was an antiwar parade in Washington, D.C.; as part of the protest, we held a torch-light "funeral" for the Burial of Traditional Womanhood, with a female dummy and a casket. I wrote a eulogy. And then, the weekend after Labor Day, comes the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City. Until then, we'd been talking primarily to movement women; now, we were trying to get the attention of everybody else. It's so ironic that we got called bra burners afterward. Yes, we threw all kinds of things into the Freedom Trash Can—high heels, curlers, girdles, bras—but the police wouldn't let us light it up on that wooden boardwalk.

These were real women, decent ones, but part of a system that I believed turned them into meat. And it's still happening—the beauty standards for women have gotten worse. What do little girls think, seeing size-two actresses jeered for putting on a couple of pounds?

But here's something we weren't even trying to do—after that pageant demonstration, and after the movement caught on, we won the right to wear pants to work, and to restaurants. We made pantsuits possible! *—Kathie Sarachild is a feminist activist and cofounder of the radical grass-roots feminist group Redstockings.* Read more of this interview >>

"I Am a Woman—
Not a Toy, a Pet, a Mascot"
Sign at a Miss America Pagent protest

JUDI FORD NASH, 58 *Miss America, 1969*
Judi Ford Nash *02:05*
I never liked the idea that just because I was in a pageant, I was somehow not smart or that I was being exploited. I was paid for every appearance I made as Miss America, and my entire college education was paid for; I'm an elementary-school fitness instructor now, thanks to that scholarship. But looking back, I understand why they targeted the pageant. Women didn't get paid as well as men, and they were objectified. When I was 18 I didn't realize it. I was a kid. My mother had always worked. Yet when I got divorced at 37, I couldn't get a credit card in my own name, despite having a good job. I thought, "That's just not right." *—Judi Ford Nash was crowned Miss America 1969 at the end of the long summer of 1968, while a women's movement protest took place on the Atlantic City boardwalk a few hundred feet away. In the 40 years since, she has managed a career as an elementary-grades gym teacher and coach—her dream job—as well as a stint as a working single mother. These days Nash says she looks back at her reign, and at that demonstration, with a mixture of nostalgia and wisdom.*

ANNE JASPER, 58 *reader from Newport, North Carolina*
In 1968 I graduated from high school. According to my father, girls didn't need college. No sense asking my parents to add to the small scholarship I'd won. I consoled myself knowing I was the only one of nine siblings who'd made it through high school.

I took my first full-time job in a shoe factory and moved into my own apartment. I learned to juggle the money and make it last until the end of the month. On $1.60 an hour, I learned to save a little, too. I enrolled in night computer courses but was too tired after ten-hour workdays to comprehend what was going on. I dropped out and got a new job as a keypunch operator. My father was angry when he found out I was getting $3.74 an hour, more than his hourly pay after 40 years on the same job as a truck driver. I bought my first car, a 1954 DeSoto, and stopped walking to work. I learned about car insurance and vehicle registration. Although I was definitely not ignorant of the political events that were changing the world, it all seemed far removed from me as a woman struggling to make my own way.
Share your own memories of 1968 >>

BENNY STEWART, 63 *Fought to establish the first Black Studies Department in the U.S.*
Benny Stewart *02:10*
I didn't have any clear-cut idea how long the strike would take, or that we were about to make history. But I knew the struggle to establish a Black Studies Department would be protracted.

Tactically, the inspiration came from this book called *The War of the Flea.* Although a dog is much bigger than a flea, as long as a flea never confronts the dog head-on, but uses his size and mobility to hit and move, then most dogs can't deal with a flea. So that was our strategy—not to do it in one day but to keep coming back, day after day.

I had mixed emotions at the end. The strike ended on March 20, and my first child, my daughter, Rhayeka, was born at 10:15 a.m. the next day. Many of us were still facing jail time. There had been injuries, but overall we had come a long way from where we started. And it had a hell of an influence on me. I got a B.A. degree in history. But the experience that really made me different was learning to organize. That I have used ever since to bring people together. *—Benny Stewart served as chairman of the Black Students Union at San Francisco State College (now University) in 1968, and he was one of the major organizers of a 120-day student strike—from November 6, 1968 to March 20, 1969—that was the longest in American history. The strike led to the establishment of the country's first Black Studies Department and School of Ethnic Studies in 1969. Today, Stewart is staff consultant to the Marin City Community Land Corporation in Marin City, California.*

BARBARA GRIER, 74 *Writer, editor, publisher, lesbian activist*
When I became editor of *The Ladder* in 1968, after writing for it for years (often under a male pseudonym), I was at the place where everything that mattered to me—being a lesbian, being a feminist, and loving the printed word—intersected. The world at large was in such ferment, and often in great sorrow. After the assassinations, you had to weep at the loss. You had to ask, "What can I do in this world?" If I accomplished anything, it was moving lesbian writers out of the shadows into greater acceptance, ultimately earning literary criticism from "real" critics. But I'm not naive about reality. Homosexuals are still the fear of the world. It's acceptable to oppress us; we're the last group it's okay to hate. Read more of this interview >>

REVELATION>>

ADVERTISEMENT

Copyright 1995-2008, AARP. All rights reserved. AARP Privacy Policy