

Alternative UF: Counterculture through the decades

An Exhibit at the George A. Smathers Library East Gallery, April 20 to May 31, 2009

The Legacy of the Johns Committee

By Ian Gaffney

From 1956 to 1965, the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee threatened civil liberties in the Sunshine State. Led by Senator Charley E. Johns, the committee operated in a McCarthyite manner, seeking to discover



communist connections among integrationist organizations and purge academic liberals and so-called "subversives" from educational institutions. When the committee had failed to demonstrate communist involvement within the NAACP or the academic community, a desperate Charley Johns sought to extend his committee's life by searching for a weaker enemy and "committee agents soon monitored lavatory stalls and private bedrooms rather than city busses." The University of Florida was the first academic target chosen in the search for homosexuals in 1958. At least 15 U.F. professors and more than 50 students left after being interrogated by investigators. Even though the committee's tactics violated state law, U.F. administrators did not attempt to halt the investigations and went so far as to allow university police officers to serve as investigators and tape interrogations with professors and students.

"Charley Johns didn't have anything against the University of Florida as such, he wasn't out trying to hurt the university. He was on a mission by gosh that he heard there were homosexuals on the faculty and he was going to get rid of them." ~J. Wayne Reitz (Former University of Florida President)

Demonstrations against the Viet Nam War

By Bronwyn McCarthy and Candice Ellis

Protests against the war in Viet Nam and Cambodia took place throughout the late '60s and early '70s at UF. On October 15, 1969, in conjunction with national protests held by the Vietnam Moratorium, the University of Florida Student Mobilization Committee (SMC) organized "Gentle Wednesday." Approximately 1800 UF students and faculty gathered at the Plaza of the Americas to rally against the Vietnam War. The SMC sold red and black armbands with '644,000' on them representing the estimated number of US casualties in the war.



After the shooting of college demonstrators at Kent State in May 1970, students at UF called for a suspension of classes in protest. President Stephen O'Connell declared a day of mourning to be held on May 6, 1970, but did not cancel classes. It is estimated that 3000 students went on strike over this decision. The strike ultimately forced President O'Connell to cancel classes and close the university. UF remained closed from May 6 to May 8. In 1972 a demonstration against the war spilled out into the streets as hundreds of people flooded the intersection at University Avenue and N.W. 13th Street.

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The 1971 Sit-In for Campus Civil Rights

By Bronwyn McCarthy and Candice Ellis

The University of Florida was desegregated in 1958, but by 1971 there were only 343 black students in attendance—a small proportion of the student body in comparison to the 20,000 white students enrolled. The Black Student Union organized a sit-in as an expression of discontent with university policies that did not encourage black student enrollment or the employment of black faculty members. On April 15, 1971, in what would later become known as “Black Thursday,” students gathered in protest outside Tigert Hall and attempted to meet with President Stephen O’Connell. The first delegation of students, which numbered about 50, marched into O’Connell’s office uninvited touting a petition of six demands. They were asked to leave and did so without protest. The next group to storm the office was louder and more insistent, and even after that a third, larger group arrived. President O’Connell refused to meet with them. Angered by this, demonstrators refused to disperse. The protest ended in the arrest of 66 students, 60 of whom were put on academic probation. O’Connell refused to grant the arrested students amnesty because “that would be admitting that the sit-in in my office was proper conduct now and in the future.” Outraged, 123 black students and two black faculty members left the university.



Captions: Above (left), Students protest outside Tigert Hall as part of the 1971 sit-in. Left, Fr. Michael Gannon monitors a police line during the 1970 student strike in memory of Kent State.

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