

Barnard students, alums reflect on 1968 student-led protests, campus activism at panel



MARGARET MAGUIRE / COLUMBIA DAILY SPECTATOR

Damonique Ballou, BC '17 (right) and Elizabeth Langer, BC '68, speak on a panel hosted by BCRW about the 1968 student protests.

By Kim Banks, COLUMBIA SPECTATOR (Mar. 7, 2018)

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At a panel hosted on Tuesday by the Barnard Center for Research on Women, in cooperation with the Barnard Archives and the Barnard College Class of 1971, Barnard students and alums reflected on the 1968 protests at Columbia in commemoration of the upcoming 50th anniversary.

The panelists—Elizabeth Langer, BC '68, Nancy Biberman, BC '69, Karla Spurlock-Evans, BC '71, DaMonique Ballou, BC '17, and Krish Bhatt BC '18—discussed the impact of the 1968 protests on recent campus activism. In connection with the anniversary, a photo timeline of the protests was also unveiled in the Altschul tunnels on Barnard's campus last week.

Hundreds of Barnard and Columbia students occupied five academic buildings in 1968 as an act of protest against the Vietnam War and the proposed construction of a gym in Morningside Park. Over 700 protesters were ultimately arrested by the police and detained for trespassing and disorderly conduct.

Langer explained how the Vietnam War and the University's gentrification of Harlem prompted students to initiate these landmark protests.

"The draft had the effect of increasing inequality. The wealthy could avoid service by enrolling in college [or graduate] schools, ... leaving the working class and the poor to be drafted," Langer said. "The student protests on campus during 1968 arose out of these inequalities ... and [Columbia's] taking of the land in Morningside Park, which displaced many low-income African-American residents."

Despite the apparent willingness of some students to face arrests for their participation in the protests, Spurlock-Evans said that black students, who occupied Hamilton Hall, faced greater risks than other students.

"[We were not comfortable] with the idea of being jailed or endangering your life, because you only had one," she said. "As black people, we knew that we could not be protected."

However, Spurlock-Evans, who ultimately joined other black students in their occupation of Hamilton, decided that the cause was worth the sacrifice.

"Socially, I was ready to take the next step. By the time we left, I was ready to die. I mean really we thought we could die, and I was ready to do that," she said.

Similarly, Bhatt discussed the importance of activism both for and in support of students of color, an issue which Barnard President Sian Beilock recently discussed with students at a fireside chat.

"People of color, black and brown people have never had the option not to organize ... what constitutes a mass movement is people coming together for black and brown liberation, fighting for black lives, fighting for indigenous lives," they said.

Ballou also touched on her experiences as a woman of color during her time at Barnard, where she was the president of the Black Theater Ensemble and advocated for more creative outlets and spaces for black students.

"We are looking at the intersections between identity and space," she said. "If we feel uncomfortable in spaces where we are the minority, and we already don't have the power to be seen in those spaces, then those narratives are already silenced."

In addition to the role of race in the protests, Biberman also commented on the difficulties women faced as activists in 1968, with Barnard students unable to take control as independent leaders.

"We women were recruited and allowed into leadership by the virtue of men that we were connected with," she said. "Even though we were as smart as they were, we were as passionate as they were, we knew about the issues, we were prepared to put our lives on the line, but it was hard to be heard."

For Ballou, the importance of hearing these underrepresented groups remains as pressing now as it was then.

"If you are in a space of power in general, giving someone else the power to speak up. It's about you listening, ... it's the intersection of organizing," she said. "We are starting to listen a little better, but I still believe that we can do a lot more."