

AFTERMATH

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York's executive offices were stormed by 300 students last March. The students were furious after witnessing a series of racist incidents directed against black students by York's guards. Six months later, their demands are being met. But has York really changed?

by Excalibur Staff

It was six months ago this week — on March 12 — when hundreds of angry students boarded elevators in York's Ross Building and took control of the university's highest offices for three hours.

They came looking for President Harry Arthurs, wanting him to approve

an eight-point plan to prevent further incidents of racist treatment and harassment by members of York's security force and bouncers at The Underground pub.

"We want Harry!" students chanted in the ninth-floor presidential offices — some banging on walls or furniture — until they were told that Arthurs was "out of the country" (*Excalibur* later

- The immediate dismissal of all non-student bouncers at The Underground nightclub in the Student Centre.

- Mandatory race relations training for security officers and officials.

- One additional full-time officer in the Race and Ethnic Relations office.

Leaders of the protest said they wanted a meeting to work out the details and told the administrators they would not be given a choice.

Changed Atmosphere

"We're giving you 15 minutes to give us a yes, or we're going to stay here," former *Excalibur* editor Jeannine Amber, standing on a desk above the vice presidents and holding a megaphone, said after she read the demands.

Just as their time was about to run out, the vice presidents gave in. Four days later they met with 300 students in the York senate chambers on the ninth floor of the Ross Building. They were joined by Student Centre manager Rob Castle and York Security's executive director Pam MacDonald.

The protest changed the atmosphere of the campus for black students, according to Heather Dryden, a York Federation of Students vice president and an organizer of the occupation.

Security officers now know their actions are being watched and students are more likely to approach her or the office of Race and Ethnic relations with complaints, she said in an interview last week.

"It's made students talk more, stand up more. Students are getting to the point where they are not keeping things to themselves," said Dryden, who guides the federation's approach to social and equality issues.

But Dryden said she objected to remarks about the occupation by incoming York president Susan Mann, who told *Excalibur* last month that student protesters chose the move because it was part of a "tradition" for the university and had "an aspect of fun."

Dryden argued that all of the protesters were serious enough to risk their academic careers right before final exams. She also said Mann should have met the students herself.

In the same interview, Mann had called the move "an action of last resort" and said it suggests "some people are unwilling to use [the] existing structure" of the university to resolve their complaints.

"These students went through every single process they could think of and had doors slammed in their face the entire time," Dryden said.

John & Jane Doe

In weeks before the protest, students — especially black students — tried to draw

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Carnival or resistance? York officials differ on occupation

Race and ethnic relations officer Teferi Adem — who was hired last month in response to one of the March demands — comments on the occupation of the administrative offices. He was interviewed by Gamal Abdel-Shehid.

York president Susan Mann, who was hired shortly after the occupation and assumes office this month, offered these comments in an August *Excalibur* interview.

“As long as any form of oppression, suppression, discrimination exists, it is bound to lead to resistance.

The students are really dealing with their rights and their choices in an institution like a university. I think that is where one would always expect that. Universities are places where people have the highest level of understanding, intellectually.

I also read about some of the things [happening] around that time — the system has responded because of those actions. That automatically led me to understand that, yes, some of those activities are part of the [response to] what those students demanded.”

“I think that's an action of last resort. And although there's a bit of a tradition of it at York, and therefore it takes on an aspect of fun, of *carnivale*, of 'this is what students at York do, and we ought to do one of these,' I think it's also a wee bit of a reflection on how regular processes are working or not working.

It suggests more that existing structures don't meet existing problems. And that's a serious issue.

That kind of action also hints, however, that some people are unwilling to use the existing structure. And I think fundamentally that's a bad sign...

Moreover, we also have some new wonderful outdoor spaces at York. You could think of a speaker's corner somewhere out in the Common there. And they could have a topic every week and people could pop up at lunch and shout me out, or whatever's on their minds, and gather their enthusiasts and that sort of thing. And that, I think, is super...”

confirmed that he was less than 100 metres away, in Atkinson college).

The crowd told startled staff in the office to produce the university's vice presidents instead. They were asked how many they wanted to see. "All of them," several students shot back.

List of Reforms

Four of York's top bureaucrats arrived two hours later and listened to students while Metro Police cruisers waited below. The protesters gave the vice presidents a shortlist of reforms which included:

- A full-scale investigation of York Security by an external body approved by the students leading the protest.

- Immediate dismissal of any security officer convicted of "discriminatory behavior" by a new review committee of students, professors, and community members.

Committee members would be chosen by the university's Office of Race and Ethnic Relations and by the protest leaders. The group would act on specific incidents of alleged discrimination, and review the entire security force each year.