End of the Innocence

By France Griggs Sloat

As Xavier University approaches the 175th anniversary of its founding in 2006, Xavier *magazine is examining key moments in the University's history. This is part of a series of stories about the people, places and events that have made Xavier what it is today. You can read previous stories by clicking on the links below.*

It dangled from his neck, landing squarely on the front of his black graduation robe: a white wooden peace sign. And student body president Gene Beaupré wore it proudly as he strode onto the stage in June 1969 to receive his diploma from President Paul O'Connor, S.J. They had a history, these two, clashing more than once over student demands. On this warm June evening, however, O'Connor happily handed Beaupré his diploma. Then he spied the medallion on Beaupré's chest.

"What's this?" O'Connor asked, picking up the ornament.

"It's a peace sign, Father," Beaupré said. "Would you like to wear it?"

O'Connor looked him right in the eye. "No, thanks."

O'Connor had just about enough of Beaupré and his fellow student activists. The University's 29th president presided over Xavier at a time of monumental change-both in the nation and on the campus. While the Vietnam War raged and soldiers died and politicians ranted and black activists marched, the tumult of the 1960s was echoing at Xavier as well. And it left its mark.

By the time O'Connor stepped down in 1972, Xavier was a different place, both physically and substantively. Not only did it undergo the most significant building boom since the 1920s, but it was transformed from a tranquil, unquestioning institution catering to well-raised Catholic boys into an active campus where women and black students were among those demanding more of a say in their education.

The decade began peacefully, resembling the 1950s when the World War II generation settled into a period of peace and quiet after the uncertainties and horrors of war. The all-male, mostly white Catholic university that O'Connor arrived at in 1955 was a perfect representative of its time, turning out well-educated, morally formed young men who attended Mass regularly and had a bit of wild, safe fun while on campus.

But the reverberations of a society increasingly discontent with the status quo began to be felt in the mid-1960s. Anti-war sentiment led to a new look at poverty and race. Folk songs gave way to rebellious rock 'n' roll. Even the Catholic religion was getting a makeover as the Second Vatican Council gathered from 1962-1965. In short, anything and everything was questioned, challenged and changed.

Xavier was no exception. Radical ideas were discussed, loud music was played, students staged protests. Some say it began when Mary Lynn Tekeulve walked onto campus.

SEPTEMBER 1965

Tekeulve eschewed the traditional all-female Catholic colleges for an education with the men of Xavier. Women had attended Xavier's Evening College for years, and that's where she

enrolled. But Tekeulve's mother worked in the Registrar's office, and the Jesuits agreed to let her attend day classes. So, she and Marie Bourgeois, whose father was a professor, tread where no women had gone before-the University's daytime halls. In four years, they were allowed to graduate with the Class of 1969, which led to an administrative change the next fall that allowed women to register as regular day students for the first time. It was, says director of student retention Adrian Schiess, one of the most important decisions ever made by the University's board of trustees.

"I'd been in an all-girls school all my life and I thought, I've had it. I would like to go see how the other half lives," says Tekeulve, now a grandmother.

Women of that era had to endure urinals in their bathrooms and a strict skirts-only dress code. Tekeulve once tried to return a book to the library, but the librarians wouldn't let her in because she was wearing slacks. They also ran into resistance from some of the older faculty, including some Jesuits. Patty LaGrange tells of an English professor who invited her to leave the classroom because of a literary discussion he was about to launch on a sexually related topic. She declined.

But Tekeulve found the campus welcoming, even if the boys were nervous around them. "It was intimidating, all the men," Tekeulve says. "We thought here we are two freshman girls-we'll have dates coming out the wazoo. But the fact of who we were made the guys shy away from us."

APRIL 1968

The assassination of The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. triggered riots across the country, including Cincinnati. "Sitting in the classroom you could see Avondale burning, the flames and smoke," Tekeulve says. "It was sad. It lasted almost a whole week. UC closed and their students didn't have to take finals, and everybody thought Xavier, being so close, might have to do the same."

The riots never touched campus, and the University never closed, but the events were felt by many, particularly a cadre of activist African-American students. J. Kenneth Blackwell, now Ohio's secretary of state, and Donald Darby, now a retired educator, and two other students went to see the dean of men, Patrick Nally, to petition the University to send them to King's funeral in Atlanta. Blackwell told Darby to "put on your toughest game face," and Darby tried to look his militant best in an attempt to show the administration they were determined about how important it was for them to go. Nally first told them there was no money in the budget. They said they'd be back at 2:00 p.m. "Within a few hours, they had round-trip airline tickets for us and meal stipends so we could take care of ourselves," Darby says. "That was one of the most significant events I ever participated in, and I owe it to Xavier."

A sense of mutual respect developed between the black students and the administration during the decade, but acquiescence to their demands was never certain. "Even though there was preliminary resistance," says Blackwell, "they, in fact, allowed us to speak, and when we spoke convincingly, they would listen and change did take place."

NOVEMBER 1968

The call came to Beaupré from the president's office. Father O'Connor wanted to see him. Beaupré just organized and led a boycott of one of the University's longstanding traditions-the mandatory Memorial Mass. About 50 students carried signs and marched around the Fieldhouse before holding an "alternative Mass" in a nearby coffee shop. They thought it was wrong to demand attendance at a religious ceremony. Besides, it was common for students who went to sign in for those who didn't.

"I was asked by O'Connor if I understood how disappointed many alums would be," says Beaupré, a longtime political science professor at Xavier and its community relations director. "I said I was sorry, but we were making a statement about freedom to choose, and the Mass had much greater meaning when you are able to choose to go. It was a stormy time on campus, and I think he was trying to exert some authority."

The only discipline O'Connor imposed was a $5 fine to those who skipped the Mass. By December, spurred by a petition from the student council, the administration agreed to let attendance at the Memorial Mass and the October Mass of the Holy Spirit be voluntary. But O'Connor maintained the fines, though he agreed to direct them to religious development on campus, an idea proposed by the students.

Though he sparred with and often stood up to students, his manner and decision-making earned their respect. "Paul was a real leader of Xavier," says Tim Burke, a Cincinnati lawyer and Democratic Party leader who was student body president in 1970. "He would make clear what his position was on issues, but he would listen and was open to change. You could not help but respect him. He was an awesome figure, someone who cared enormously and deeply about Xavier University."

SPRING 1969

During her senior year, with the Vietnam War escalating, Tekeulve would sit in the University Center while the guys guzzled gallons of coffee before going for the physical examinations required by the draft board. The hope was the caffeine would elevate their blood pressure enough to warrant a deferment.

"When they'd come back from their physicals, it was very sad because you knew these friendships you'd made could be over," she says. "Some, like Bob Rice, felt it was their duty and they were going to be heroes. I thought anyone who went over there was a hero."

About 14 months after their class graduated, Tekeulve returned to campus to attend Rice's funeral at Bellarmine Chapel. The popular Xavier Musketeer mascot was killed by a mortar round in Vietnam. "I remember thinking, all these people were going, and for what?"

OCTOBER 1969

Anti-war sentiment was building, but it was muted by the presence of ROTC on campus. Many not only supported the war but signed up to serve. More than half the student body participated in ROTC, says Schiess, who was a gung-ho ROTC member. Back then, he says, opponents of the war were viewed as the enemy. So when a national anti-war protest was planned at colleges across the country on Oct. 15, Xavier canceled classes and held a day of observance for all points of view.

"We knew that around the country students would be striking against their universities in protest of the war, and we said, let's do something different," says Burke. "We put together an educational day and presented both sides. We were Xavier, and we were going to do it different."

O'Connor not only approved the event but moderated a debate between a Jesuit conservative and a member of the Chicago 7 on trial for the melee during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The University turned a potentially divisive event into a learning experience for people of differing opinions. By the end of 1969, ROTC was no longer mandatory.

MAY 1970

After National Guard soldiers killed four students during an anti-war protest at Kent State University just a few hours up I-71, marches and riots sprang up on campuses across the nation. At Xavier, Burke led about 500 students on a march to the University of Cincinnati, blocking traffic and carrying signs of non-violence. By the time the group headed downtown, they numbered 10,000, walking silently in the streets during rush hour. "We realized you didn't have to go to Vietnam to get killed," says Burke. "You could get killed right on campus just protesting. It was ugly."

SEPTEMBER 1970

The Jesuits themselves were not immune to the changes, and some protested alongside the students. While older, more traditional Jesuits rejected Vatican II, younger priests welcomed the relaxation of clothing requirements and the liturgy. They gladly turned to face the

congregation and celebrate the Mass in English, not Latin. They invited students to take part in readings and willingly abandoned the flowing cassock and pushed for pants and shirts.

"When I got here in 1970, we were expected to wear collars and cassocks or clerics suits, but that was coming to an end," says Leo Klein, S.J., vice president for mission and ministry. "It was extraordinary. People were saying, 'Why do that? Why can't you wear a tie and be a Jesuit?'"

As campus minister, he saw students wantonly avoiding the mandatory retreats and promptly replaced them with a voluntary system that now attracts more than 500 students a year. Required Sunday morning Mass was replaced by a voluntary evening service. And he made sure the altar in Bellarmine faced outward.

The curriculum, too, changed to make it more appealing, especially in the sciences where interest was waning. Ted Thepe, S.J., a chemistry professor, put together a new required chemistry course that was difficult but more interesting. "I called it kitchen chemistry," Thepe says. "The approach was to try to make it practical and more relevant."

In hindsight, perhaps that was everyone's goal-make everything practical and more relevant. Perhaps that's what the graduates' peace signs came to symbolize. For students like Burke, it was all about the ability to engage.

"We came out of that activism believing we could change things," Burke says. "We didn't have to accept things the way they were, and we could always try to make things better."

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