

# Student Power, Democracy and Revolution in the Sixties

## Praise for the Book

“Licata tells how the student movement played a critical adversary role to the prevailing culture of accepting authority without questioning who benefits.”

—Thom Hartmann, of progressive talk radio *The Thom Hartmann Program*

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—Lance Bennett, Professor of Sociology, University of Washington, author of *Communicating the Future*

“*Student Power* sizzles with the freshness of a first-person account of navigating his way through the pitfalls of the far left and far right. He became a believer in step-by-step democratic change.”

—Harry Boyte, Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg University, author, *Backyard Revolution*

“Licata provides a primer on effective organizing; I recommend this book for classes dealing with community organizing, social movements, and people’s histories.”

—BJ Bullert, Ph.D. Communications, Core Faculty at Antioch University

# Student Power, Democracy and Revolution in the Sixties

By

Nick Licata

**Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing**



Student Power, Democracy and Revolution in the Sixties

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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-6928-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6928-7

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank all I met at Bowling Green State University who encouraged me to be an independent thinker. I became a part of an ever-expanding community of idealistic and forward-thinking students. We did not know what was beyond the horizon, but we were determined to pave a new path forward, inviting everyone who cared about their fellow human being to join us.

The Southenders community at BGSU provided me a haven from boredom. We were nothing more than a loose collection of students and professors that hung out at the south end of the university's student union café, the Falcon's Nest. We shared no overall articulated philosophy but shared a joy in exploring the unknown.

I thank my Southender friends for sharpening my recollections and adding relevant details and important events to the book. Any errors of omission or chronology are solely mine. Their encouragement enabled me to write this history.

The Southenders are listed in alphabetical order by their first name and their post-graduate names appear in parenthesis if different: Ashley Brown, Bill Barrow, Bob Pearman (Robert Pearman Sr.), Charlie T. (Tabasko), Cheri Erdman, Chris Bieri, Ivan (Ivan Byczyk), Jim & Mary Coffman, Jon Wierwille (Prof J Paul De Vierville), Joy Teckenbrock (Joy Schwab), Kathy Skerl, Ken Pritchard, Lyle Greenfield, Max Stamper, Nora Leech, T. David (Dave Evans) Tom Hine, Tom Shelley, Wally (Mark Scheerer), Zack (Fred Zackel, Ph.D.), and in memoriam "Big" Al Baldwin.

Finally, thanks to my wife, Andrea Okomski, I was able to write in a loving home environment.



## INTRODUCTION

I'm a collector of various things that help me reflect on the past, like street posters, political flyers, and newspaper photos. While attending Bowling Green State University, I collected clippings from my college newspaper, *The BG News*, and alternative newspapers. As I read through them, I realized they captured the student power movement's growth, which created a sense of hope that marked the sixties and shaped my life.

I went from being a student activist in the sixties to a citizen activist in the seventies and beyond. I founded an alternative community newspaper, testified against bank redlining practices before Congress, and got an initiative passed to stop public funding of a professional sports stadium. Afterward, I ran for the Seattle City Council. In 1997, I beat an opponent endorsed by the daily newspapers, the majority of the city council members, and the mayor. Although I considered myself a pragmatic populist, I was seen as the most radical person on the Council.

Nevertheless, I won five consecutive terms and became the president of the Council. *The Nation's* "Progressive Honor Roll of 2012" chose me as its "Most Valuable Local Official" in the United States. In 2013 I won my citywide reelection with 88% of the vote, the largest margin ever recorded for a contested Council race.

Looking back, I ask myself, where did this drive come to want to make things right? I think the answer is in the story of how I and many other youths challenged our major institutions' morality, deconstructing society's beliefs of right and wrong. We believed that our future depended upon a democracy accountable to its citizens. We supported Black citizens' civil rights, opposed a useless war that killed millions of innocent civilians and thousands of young men, and, perhaps most importantly, ushered out a quiet acquiescence to authority. Students began asking, who is making the decisions, and who is benefitting?

I came from a working-class family; my parents grew up with limited expectations for themselves. Both had to drop out of school to support their family. Mom worked in a print shop, making holiday greeting cards until she became too chronically ill to work. Dad worked various jobs, stoking coal furnaces, driving trucks, making sand molds in a factory, and finally owning a small barbershop while keeping an evening job to pay our bills.

For my generation, a youthful, 43-year-old President John F. Kennedy raised our expectations in his 1961 Inaugural Address, when he said his election was a “celebration of freedom—signifying renewal, as well as change.” I believed those changes would open doors for me that had been shut for my parents.

I wasn’t alone in feeling this way. Five months after Kennedy’s Address, in May of 1961, the national, primarily Black, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized students to ride Freedom Buses into the Deep South to overturn the Jim Crow laws. During the summer of 1963, while I was in high school, I watched on TV as several hundred thousand Black and white citizens marched together in Washington DC to lobby President Kennedy for a new civil rights bill. It was the largest political demonstration anyone had ever seen, and students led it. Twenty-three-year-old John Lewis, a SNCC leader, was at the podium beside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he gave his “I Have a Dream” speech.<sup>1</sup>

That same summer, I endlessly played Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” performed by the folk trio of Peter Paul and Mary. It caught the spirit that fueled the civil rights movement, and it soared to number two in the Billboard Top Chart. The answer *was* blowing in the wind; it even drifted into John Marshall High School in Cleveland, Ohio, where my teachers spoke of the protests as a call for justice.

Believing that a college degree was the key to success, my parents had put aside a little money each month to pay for the first year of college. After that, I was on my own. I attended Bowling Green State University, or BG, as we called it, where most students came from Ohio working-class families.

I came prepared to learn from textbooks and professors but soon found more to learn outside the classroom. As the Vietnam War grew more extensive, the army drafted many of my high school friends who were not exempted as college students. Meanwhile, across the nation, race riots sent inner-city neighborhoods into flames while students occupied university buildings. Our political science textbooks, unable to keep up with events, felt outdated the day they were printed.

From the fall of 1965 until I graduated in the spring of 1969, my college years saw a national shift in public opinion from polite requests for reform to calls for revolution. Although there was no violence at BG, students passionately challenged the conventional social attitudes and the university’s regulations that restricted their behavior. What strikes me now is how mild and piecemeal our proposals for change were, yet they generated immense resistance and hostility. It seemed to me that many white students feared that these changes would topple their future into an unpredictable and

insecure world. BG's Administration, like those on many other campuses, resisted any significant structural changes. Their mission was simply to maintain a stable and predictable status quo.

Bowling Green State University was primarily a teacher's college located in a region where religion ruled at home, and the Republican Party led at the voting booth. BG was one of the most conservative public universities outside the Deep South. Four years before I enrolled, sociology professors there described the school as being "more like a private, bible college than one supported by public funds."<sup>2</sup>

During the 1968 presidential election, a poll showed that BGSU students supported Richard Nixon over Hubert Humphrey 64 percent to 18 percent, even though Nixon only beat Humphrey by 1 percent. George Lincoln Rockwell, the American Nazi Party leader, spoke on our campus in March 1967. He attracted an audience of close to three thousand who attentively listened to his message. Rockwell was fighting for the "White majority" in this country. On BG's campus, that was a pretty big majority. Only 1 percent of our student body were Black students.

In this political environment, I helped create BG's chapter of Students for a Democratic Society. *Life* magazine called SDS "the most vocal representative" of the student movement; J. Edgar Hoover's FBI considered SDS soft on Communism, if not actively helping them overthrow our government. I headed up our chapter in my junior year after our most active members were arrested and jailed. That same academic year, the student body elected me as president of the BG student government. Few universities had elected SDS leaders to head their student body. And with the exception at BG, none had been able to stay in power. Our effort was unique in using student government to pursue radical changes in the heart of a conservative environment.

Our orientation stemmed from SDS's 1962 Port Huron Statement<sup>3</sup>, which popularized the term "participatory democracy." It was more a concept than a theory. It advocated the involvement of ignored groups, particularly youth and students, in a "search for truly democratic alternatives to the present, and a commitment to social experimentation with them."

The Statement served as a morning bugle call to the campus barracks: wake up, become involved in shaping your own life. More than 100,000 copies flooded onto campuses urging students to organize. Students were hungry for a new political approach. They were avoiding the staid Democrat and Republican Parties, mired in the intricacies of electing politicians. Students were also not attracted to the dogmatic, armchair-bound, old left groups. SDS offered something new; it didn't adhere to a "correct ideology," and it worked with any group interested in social change.

I believe that our SDS Chapter made headway because we adhered to this original, democratic orientation. Simultaneously, the national SDS and some chapters at more prestigious universities eventually rejected this approach as futile. Still, just being an activist and a student government leader presented challenges. Many students at BG, and other universities, saw student government as a shill for a university's administration. They busied themselves with organizing social pageants and enforcing campus rules of conduct. Reforming the university power relationships was beyond their scope of interests.

Students on the far left, who wanted a revolution, saw me as a tool of the establishment. While those on the far right, who didn't want any change, saw me as a tool of the Communists. My goal, and that of other activists at BG, was to crack the stupor of accepting a status quo that relieved students of taking responsibility as future citizens. In essence, we wanted students to gain enough political power to shape their future.

From these experiences, I found that there is no "total revolution," as promised by the various ideologies. There is only real, gradual change, not achieved overnight but through a persistent struggle to demand that our democratic institutions be accountable to the people they should represent. I began to see students as citizens in the making; we should help govern universities, much like citizens should shape their democracy. While securing a more participatory political environment exhausted many of us, I also saw how individuals could make a difference. By working together, we made a movement that changed the world.

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I have captured memories as best I could, augmented by news articles, recollections, and histories, and talking to those who lived through these events. I have also sprinkled in a few stories that capture the freedom that characterized the sixties, a feeling that one could drop everything and take off down some uncertain road in the hope that it might lead to something good and useful.

# CHAPTER 1

## A CITIZEN OF THE GALAXY

Going to college was a dream for me. Due to my dyslexia, I couldn't read and almost flunked first and second grade. I had severe doubts about making it to the twelfth. The nuns at the St. Patrick Elementary School, being generous, kept passing me onto the next grade, but each time on a six-week trial basis. In fourth grade, my dyslexia subsided, and I read my first book: *Citizen of the Galaxy*, by Robert A. Heinlein. The protagonist is a boy growing up in the distant future who discovers he can change his life after becoming aware of his social and political environment. I saw myself as that boy and college as that far-away galaxy.

It was going to be a long trip getting there. For one thing, my grades were average. My public high school teachers knew who the "smart" and "dumb" kids were. Each of us was tagged with a "tracking number" derived from a standardized test. Those with the higher scores were labeled the 1s and 2s; those at the bottom were 4s and 5s. I was a 3, not yet seen as a success or failure. Looking around, I didn't need a tracking system to tell who was on top. They dressed well and had a bounce to their gait.

In my senior year, I was assigned an Advanced Placement class in European History. Surveying the other students in the room on the first day, I didn't belong there. These were the students who ran the student government and service organizations. Their dads were professionals and managers, all safely employed. My dad made a career looking for steady employment. They talked about all the books in their homes. My home had half-a-dozen. I told the teacher that the clerk made a mistake. He didn't have time to check, so I remained in the class, keeping a low profile and commenting infrequently.

Over the year, I gained confidence and punched out a few decent papers. All of these were meaningless since one final comprehensive all-day test at the end of the semester determined the final grade. To my surprise, I was one of two students in the class to get the highest grade possible. I felt that I had crossed the finish line and had a future ahead of me. I could compete with the best of them.

But I still had to somehow pay for that future. My parents decided to divide their savings between my younger brother Joey and me to establish careers after high school. It was a big deal putting the money aside. The only other thing that they had saved for was our one family trip outside of Ohio, driving down to Florida to enjoy Miami's beaches.

Joey was bright but got bored quickly and had little interest in school. Instead of college, Dad decided he should play an instrument in a band to support himself. Since Dad and Mom went out dancing most Saturday nights to the local Polish club, it was obvious to Dad that if Joey was to be successful, he had to play the accordion. Despite learning to play the accordion, Joey never joined a band. Instead, he went to work at one of Cleveland's auto plants, making more money than the average college graduate, back when Cleveland, like the rest of America, was a manufacturing workhorse.

While Joey got accordion lessons, I got the same amount of money for my first year of tuition and board at Bowling Green State University. I had no idea how to pay for college after my first year. Luckily for me, both the Democrats and the Republicans supported federal financial assistance to college students, and public colleges were affordable to working families. My summer jobs paid enough to cover a significant portion of my tuition. A federal grant and loan covered the rest of the necessary costs. Under President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Administration, students could qualify to receive federal support by getting passing grades in high school and coming from a financially needy family.

While seemingly high to us at that time, college costs were not so high as to force students and their families to take out bank loans and carry debt far into the future. Lastly, colleges offered several campus jobs for those in financial need. I served in the dorm cafeteria as a busboy, a skill I used during high school working at the local Perkins Pancake House.

Wearing a just-purchased sport jacket, acquired for my high school graduation, I rode in the backseat of our '57 Plymouth Fury, the car with the most prominent fins on the road. I watched miles of cornfields whiz by as we drove a couple of hours west of Cleveland on our way to the small town of Bowling Green. It was a summer day, and the ivy-covered brick buildings on the central campus awed me. I would be studying here. I was finally a citizen of the galaxy.



## CHAPTER 2

### ENTERING A NEW WORLD

Bowling Green, Ohio, in 1965, could have been the movie set for Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*: a rural, peaceful, and orderly community. A double line of railroad tracks sliced through the town, protecting its community of single-family homes from the college youths housed on the Bowling Green State University campus. Students would cross that boundary on weekends, searching for the town's few bars nestled in the quaint downtown. On the way there, I would pass by an imposing turn-of-the-century county courthouse built from colossal limestone blocks and surrounded by a neatly mowed lawn. Behind the courthouse was the county jailhouse; little did I know at that time that my closest friends would end up behind its two-foot-thick walls.

I liked the feel of this small town. It felt safe. Not that my neighborhood in Cleveland was dangerous. But there was a certain amount of tension in the air. There weren't roaming gangs, but one might get beaten up venturing into the wrong part of town. The most obvious division between neighborhoods was that of race. With the notable exception of one small area, the west side of Cleveland was white. The east side, divided from the west by downtown and the industrial sludge-filled Cuyahoga River<sup>4</sup>, was primarily Black. My parents warned me not to go to the east side, "Those people don't like you – keep to the west side." So, my first thought wandering around Bowling Green was, "Where is the Black neighborhood?" There was none.

I hadn't thought about what it would be like to live in an all-white town. Later I discovered that Mexican migrants came and went with the tomato harvest—Wood County's cash crop. But there was no sign of them in town; the seasonal farmworkers that permanently stayed lived on the towns' outskirts.

Our campus was as white as the town. There were far fewer Black students at BG, with a ten thousand student population than had been at my high school, with less than two thousand students. That wasn't the only difference from high school. The campus was void of the "toughs," the students who physically created a bow-wave in the hallways and

lunchrooms. It was as if they had been swept from the stage. Likewise, the best and the brightest in high school were also absent at BG. They had headed off to mostly private colleges or more prominent state universities.

I met new actors at BG, students who hailed from small Ohio towns and farming communities. They struck me as apolitical, viewing a college diploma as the ticket to getting a decent job and supporting a family. I imagined that most would return to their communities that were probably much like Bowling Green's town.

On my first day in the all-male dormitory, hundreds of boys crowded the hallways in the four-story brick building, hunting for their room number. Upon opening my door, I discovered there would be three of us sharing our tiny space with two built-in desks, two closets, and three beds, one of which was a bunk bed. The girls were worse off. They had four to a room with two bunk beds. The college administrators were not planning on having all two thousand freshmen make it to the end of the first year.

Many students did leave due to low grades. Having been a grade C student in high school and told that college would be much harder, I feared I could be one of those sent home. Most evenings, I studied in my cramped dorm room or sought refuge in the library away from my two roommates, Ken and "the Devil."

Ken was a perpetually sweating, overweight kid from a small town beside Lake Erie. His prolonged deep breathing and odor filled our room. But he was kind, generous, and had strong opinions. He condemned deviants, like the students at Oberlin, a small liberal arts college near Cleveland. The guys dressed in jeans and the girls had "long stringy ass hair," unlike the BG girls' permed hairdos.

The Devil was from some big city back east. He was dismissive of religion and its trappings, the stuff that churchgoers like Ken and I held dear. I christened him "the Devil," and he relished it.

Our cultures clashed the first night as he landscaped our walls with Playboy pinups. Ken, bashfully amused, did not think the pictures were so deviant as to protest. On the other hand, I was mortified. Being a strict Catholic, I had always kept a close count of my venial and mortal sins in preparation for a proper confession. How could I live with, sleep with, and wake up to these naked girls every day without being in an endless weekly cycle of sinning and going to confession? Recognizing that ridiculous situation, I finally objected when he started to post the pinups over my bed. That was too much for me.

The Devil laughed, enjoying my angst. "You'll have to confess to your priest, won't you?"

Perhaps I would, but I didn't like being bullied. Since there were three of us, I suggested we just divide the wall space among us. Ken agreed, and the Devil had to relent. It was a small victory and the germ of a political approach I would later apply to more immense struggles: weaker individuals can overcome stronger ones if there is an agreement to follow some procedures, like majority rules.

While dorm conditions were cramped, there was an escape route: one could live in a fraternity house. Although they were located on campus and subject to campus rules, they were more spacious, and there was less supervision. However, not anyone could join. First, a fraternity had to invite you to join, and second, their housing cost more than living in a dorm.

Not having much money, I never considered joining one. Being curious, I accepted an invitation to attend a fraternity's "smoker." It was a reception held in a fraternity house to assess potential members in an evening of smoking cigars and playing pool. Had some members spotted me as possible fraternity material? Later, I discovered that this particular fraternity had mailed invitations randomly to freshmen. I had won the lottery.

Dressed in my new herringbone jacket and knit tie, I strutted over to the fraternity house. I gawked at their huge mahogany pool table and plush leather chairs. Some guy in a V-neck lambswool sweater asked me my name. By the time I had introduced myself, he had already guided me into the kitchen, which I had thought was odd since all the action was around the pool table in the den. However, the kitchen led to the backdoor, which he ushered me out of with a quick pat on the back and a hearty "Nice meeting you."

The majority of students were not Greeks, males belonging to fraternities and females to sororities. Although they were a minority on campus, they seemed to dominate positions of recognition at the university, like sports stars and government leaders. BG Sociologist Norbert Wiley wrote that fraternities and sororities "were composed of the student elite, both in socioeconomic status and in the eyes of the Administration."<sup>5</sup>

It struck me that they were primarily social animals, traveling in packs and testing their competitive skills on the sports teams and various honor societies and service organizations. College was their training ground for seeking well-paying jobs after graduation, but they excelled at having fun both as individuals and as fraternity houses while at college.

Before the sixties' protest demonstrations, fraternities were the most organized groups to pull off mass gatherings. In 1957, the Greeks led a torchlight parade against BG's drinking rules, which blocked traffic downtown until Bowling Green's Fire Department dispersed them with their fire hoses. In 1961, they again protested BG's strict social regulations

after several hundred fraternity men refused to obey the dean of men Wallace Taylor, who pushed his way into the crowd ordering them to stop their water balloon fight and go to dinner. He first received boos and then a water balloon over the head. A three-day campus demonstration followed, resulting in a few bonfires and an attempted class boycott, but otherwise no property damage. In the spring of 1966, the fraternity houses again precipitated a mass gathering. But, this time, it was a “panty riot.”

A friend of mine rushed down the hall, yelling at the top of his voice, “There’s a crowd heading over to the girls’ dorm. Come on! Let’s go!” Doors swung open. Guys rushed out, hooting and hollering, throwing on t-shirts and jeans. The dorm’s house manager, who was a senior, had vanished. Caught up in the energy, I followed the growing flow of boys out of the men’s dorm and fraternities heading to the women’s dorms chanting “We Want Panties!”

The response from the girls’ dorm was nothing short of enthusiastic. Windows opened, and panties hailed down on the appreciative mob. In response, some boys slowly inched their way up the side of the three-story brick building toward open windows. Squealing girls waved them on, dangling their panties out the windows before the dorm supervisors, known as “Den Mothers,” dragged the young sirens away from their perches.

Bored by the mob’s aimless stomp around campus, I headed back to my room like most others. The next day in *The BG News*, the university’s daily newspaper reported that “Two males broke into a woman’s room in Harshman Quadrangle and stole eight pieces of wearing apparel.” It also said that several hundred students had gone into town, pulling up shrubbery, twisting street signs, releasing their collective libido. A front-page photo on the *BG News* captured the proof: a lonely park bench sat in the middle of Main Street. The caption read that it was placed there “by a mass of energetic University men Monday night.” The accompanying article said, “Damage to University and city property could run as high as \$600 in the wake of a combined panty raid and destructive rampage.”

Dean Taylor warned, “If I find any of them [students involved in the outbreak], they will be suspended until they are old enough to respect the educational environment of the university.” Although the police arrested no rioters, they hauled off a well-known student activist, Ashley Brown. I learned later he was the university’s severest, most outspoken critic of the Administration. They barely tolerated his nuisance. He had been standing outside a sorority house talking to a resident when the mob rushed by him. The pursuing police saw Ashley standing there and arrested him. They couldn’t pass up the opportunity since, as I would later find out, they had him under surveillance in the hopes of finding him breaking the law. Since

he hadn't been doing anything illegal, they had to apologize for making a false arrest.

Chief of the university security, Spencer Calcamuggio, said the spontaneous outbreak might have resulted from spring fever or mounting sexual tensions. However, outside Bowling Green, other tensions were mounting. There was a war going on, and it was casting an ever-larger shadow over campuses nationwide. What was once a small military intervention to prop up a regime in Vietnam to help fight off a communist invasion was becoming a full-blown war and an increasingly unpopular one among male college students

I didn't pay much attention to this conflict in high school. I simply wanted a world free of misery and had even considered becoming a priest and ministering to the poor in other countries. I was taught that Communism wished to conquer the world, so when President Kennedy sent military advisors to Vietnam, it seemed reasonable to help a more impoverished, weaker country fend off the Communists.

During my senior year of high school, I read how our presence in Vietnam was expanding. By February of 1965, President Johnson had begun daily bombings of North Vietnam, and I started to have doubts. How could a small country like Vietnam be a threat to us? My parents, staunch Democrats at that time, voiced the same concerns. Even Dad, a WWII veteran, couldn't understand why we were there.

In April that same year, the civil rights organization Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) led twenty-five thousand protesters in an antiwar march in Washington DC. And civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out for halting the bombing of North Vietnam, linking the desire for civil rights with opposition to the war. It jarred me; I hadn't made that connection. But when one of my sports heroes bluntly spoke out, I received a bigger jolt.

Throughout high school, I would watch boxing matches on TV with Dad. One particular young, Black boxer was known for demolishing his opponents in the ring and mouthing off outside of it. I knew him as Cassius Clay before he converted to Islam and changed his name to Mohammed Ali. Dad thought his conversion was a bunch of bunk, but the boxer caught my attention. Here was someone saying he was proud to be Black. Summoned into the army after he won the world-boxing champion title in 1966, he refused and said, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong ... They never called me Nigger."

My doubts were growing. And I wasn't the only one. A Gallup poll in May of 1965 showed that 28 percent felt the situation in Vietnam was poorly handled, and another poll in August showed that 24 percent of Americans

viewed sending troops to Vietnam as a mistake. Our nation was not united. My search for why we were in Vietnam didn't take root until my sophomore year at college. First, I would have to meet the "White Rabbit."

## CHAPTER 3

### FOLLOW THE WHITE RABBIT

I studied hard and made a few acquaintances during my freshman year, but something was lacking. It felt like a continuation of high school since the classes weren't stimulating or thought-provoking. I expected discussions on essential topics; there were none. I found myself often visiting the Rathskeller, the on-campus nonalcoholic pub near the men's Rodgers dormitory. It was frequented by first-year students and relatively quiet, so I could read, write, or just think.

One evening just before closing, the jukebox turned off, and the last couple drifted off the dance floor. I was left sitting alone, writing poetry at one of the many tables that ringed the room. I was just another introspective freshman guy without a girlfriend on a Friday night.

Across the empty dance floor, barely visible in the dim light, I spotted another guy sitting by himself, hunched over and writing furiously on a notepad. I figured he might be on a similar path. He looked up, spotted me staring at him, and came over.

His name was John Betchik, but he preferred being called "Ivan" in homage to his Russian heritage. He had a Teddy Roosevelt grin while talking, and like Roosevelt, he also wore small wire-frame glasses. He was about my height but stouter with a barrel chest and an upright chin on his pimpled face.

Ivan stood on the other side of my small table, and leaning on it with both hands, asked, "Are you an R.C.?"

"What?" I was confused.

"You know, Royal Crown."

"What?" I repeated.

"Like Royal Crown Cola," stating it as if that were an explanation.

When I didn't reply, he heaved in exasperation and patiently broke down the code. Was I a Roman Catholic? I said yes, and he admitted he was too. We were two Catholics writing bad poetry in a deserted, faux pub on a Friday night.

Our friendship quickly developed. It was odd that religion was our first reference point. Perhaps it was because it had defined our lives, our entire

reality. That evening Ivan, with a few quips, like arrows piercing helium balloons, popped the sanctity of the Roman Catholic Church, the logic of the university's rules, and my certainty that I would forever live in Cleveland. I laughed. Encouraged, he continued popping other balloons I had held onto so tightly, trying to make sense of the unruly heavens above. We laughed as each exploded. Ivan was a one-person precursor to Saturday Night Live's comedy skits.

Moreover, everything he said struck me as having a note of truth. I could feel my grip begin to loosen around some firmly held beliefs. I enjoyed his company and his inquisitive mind.

I'd been considering my life's options, and they didn't look too appealing. I sat night after night in the library endlessly poring over books, searching for answers to tests. I felt no excitement or joy. A sense of impending boredom had filled my heart. I'd expected to find a world of new ideas and engaging conversations. Instead, I found lethargic lectures in the classrooms and drunken disorderliness outside of them. But Ivan, this funny-looking fellow who didn't take himself or anyone else seriously, had poked a hole in what was beginning to feel like a dismal existence. That evening, I recognized a common bond, and in our sophomore year, we became roommates.

I returned home to Cleveland after freshman year to find a summer job. Fortunately, Uncle Andy had found one for me. He had risen in the county government from a job throwing peanuts in Cleveland's Municipal Stadium to become a midlevel manager of custodial services. I might not have found employment without his help. Knowing someone in government, even a lowly bureaucrat, was an important connection. They could pass on a friendly word to higher authorities, nudging them to hire this person over that person. That's how Cleveland worked.

That summer, thanks to him, I became a dogcatcher. Despite my phobia of dogs, catching dogs paid well. So, I sucked in my fears and joined four other kids in a government van looking for dogs, or more accurately, looking for dog owners to determine if they had a license for their dog. The work was straightforward, knocking on doors and asking people if they owned a dog. If they did, they would proudly show me their pet, at which point I asked if they had a license for it. If they didn't, I handed them a ticket that fined them for not having one and departed quickly.

Midway through summer vacation, I got a call from Ivan. He lived in a suburb east of Cleveland and suggested we get together to explore the University Circle neighborhood, located about halfway between our houses. It was home to Cleveland's world-renowned symphony and art museum, abutting Case Western Reserve University and Hough, the city's largest



Black ghetto. The hour drive was a chance to explore the city's cultural center and venture into Cleveland's east side. Even though my father had forbidden me to go there because he saw it occupied by primarily Black residents and ridden with crime, I quickly said yes.

Ivan proudly told me that he had discovered Cleveland's counterculture's emerging nucleus, located at the intersection of 115th East and Euclid Avenue. There on the corner was a single-story frame building that housed the Coffeehouse. I thought it odd that this cafe had such a generic name, but then again, it was Cleveland's only coffeehouse. It had old sofas, cheap rickety tables, and a stand-up mic, available to anyone wanting to be a folk singer or poet for the evening.

Walking into the place, I saw the guys had beards, and the girls had long straight hair and wore no makeup. They looked like the actors from the educational films they showed in health class warning us to stay away from marijuana and heroin. Were these bohemians? The ones with loose morals? They looked harmless and certainly less rowdy than BG's college drunks.

The store next to the Coffeehouse was the real magnet for those living "on the edge of respectability." Cleveland's first and only headshop, the Headquarters. It was a storefront barely large enough for its single, glass display case. Within it was a display of an assortment of glass pipes, from small ones, you could hold in the palm of your hand to enormous hookahs allowing up to five people to smoke. Stacked next to it were colorful little packets of Zigzag rolling papers along with t-shirts with slogans that hailed freedom, drugs, and local bands. Psychedelic posters with letters that I could barely make out plastered the walls. The proprietor behind the counter wore a leather vest and had the longest hair I'd seen up to that point in my life. It flowed down past his ears. The Catholic Church would disapprove of this place, and yet I could find nothing wrong with it.

Ivan basked in the glow of this bite-sized bohemia, tucked away in our no-nonsense industrial town. Cleveland was a place where people worked in car manufacturing and steel plants. The Cuyahoga River, spewing out billows of dark smoke twenty-four hours a day, sliced through the heart of the city. Here on the other side of this dark oily river, far from my west side neighborhood, was the beginning of a new society, started by those who would later be called *hippies*.

Next door to these two counterculture storefronts was another hangout, a motorcycle bar for a different group of outcasts. It was a small smoky cave of a place. Inside men wore leather or jean jackets, talked loudly, and laughed with beer bottles in their hands. Although only a couple of blocks away from Case Western University, no apparent students were standing

around when Ivan and I entered their den. On entering, I felt edginess in the air and agitation just below the surface of their laughter and jostling bodies.

I scanned the room furtively, looking for something familiar. I looked over at Ivan. For him, this adventure into Cleveland's seamier side was a jolly jaunt. He strolled in, nodding and smiling at the array of burly, ragged-looking customers, bikers wearing their colors, and old guys nursing their bottles at the bar. A step or two behind him, I smiled too, wondering what the hell we were doing here.

Rumor had it that the local crime mob owned this seedy bar, which accounted for why it continued to stay open, despite Case Western's university police station being right next door. A year ago, I couldn't be dragged into such a bar. Now I was walking among its gun packing patrons. Later that summer, I would catch a small news item in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* about someone shot and killed there. I read the article twice in disbelief; this was the place Ivan and I were regularly visiting.

In their rough way, the bikers were gentlemen. As I stood outside one day trying to strike up a conversation with one of the hippie girls, a huge, bearded guy standing off to the side of us would occasionally look over his shoulder at her. She was in worn, tight jeans with one slight flaw: a two-inch thread dangled out from the inside seam. Turning slightly around, the biker's beefy hand swooped down and plucked it out; the girl stiffened. He showed her the retrieved thread, she giggled, and he laughed. They struck up a conversation, then he opened the bar door for her, and they disappeared into the darkness.

I often sat in an old diner across the street waiting for Ivan to arrive before I would venture forth. I'd slurp my chocolate milkshake, looking out the window at this little nonconforming world that clearly teetered toward decadence.

The carefree attitude of both the bohemians and the bikers fascinated me. They were ignoring the rules I had grown up with, and I found that strangely exciting. Ivan may have led me to this corner of Cleveland, but I kept returning fascinated by the youthful bohemian culture. I had seen bikers before, but these bohemians were more my age and not at all threatening. I found the girls attractive without makeup or permed hair.

As the weather warmed, this whole counterculture moved a few blocks away to a human-made lagoon outside the renowned Cleveland Art Museum. A cascade of steps led to the museum entrance, a massive Greco-Roman building of white Georgian marble on the edge of the lagoon. A wide walkway encircled it, creating a border between it and a manicured lawn with cherry trees and Japanese maples. On Sunday, families, dressed

in their best, would stroll around the walkway on their way up the sprawling staircase, past Rodin's massive sculpture, *The Thinker*.

But for me, a more vibrant culture was on display just below the maple trees to the side of the lagoon. Spread out on the lawn, was on an array of blankets where bohemians gathered. It was an outdoor living room bursting with laughter and music to the amusement of museum visitors. In an era when young men dressed in pressed slacks and women wore dresses for a Sunday outing, these youths stood out: guys in jeans and girls in jeans or short skirts, necks adorned in beaded necklaces. In the hot summer afternoons of 1966, the young would lie about under the trees, laughing and playing a guitar or flute. Even the groundkeepers seemed to enjoy the scene. Ivan and I joined in the fun.

Other cities also saw the rise of spontaneous, open-ended gatherings. Looking back, it seems now that these loose-knit weekend events were a prelude to the vast concert "be-ins" that followed. The first one was inaugurated in San Francisco in January 1967 when twenty-thousand people held a "Human Be-In." The Age of Aquarius was born. Timothy Leary<sup>6</sup> promoted using LSD, while Jefferson Airplane's Grace Slick advised us to follow the white rabbit. By the end of summer, I was ready to return to Bowling Green and follow Ivan down the rabbit hole.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDING MY VOICE

I was told sophomore year was the year of wise fools, a time when students believed that their newly acquired knowledge made anything possible. Perhaps so. For the first time, I saw the future as an open field, free to run in any direction. Ivan and I charged ahead.

Early in the fall of 1966, a small notice appeared between articles on sporting and social events in the *BG News*. The university would be converting from the semester to the quarter system. The chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents ordered the university administration to go on the quarter system the following fall. Ivan pointed to the piece, slammed the back of his hand against paper, and said, “Nobody asked us.”

The idea that we had the power to demand to be asked flipped on a projector in the darkroom of my imagination. Here was a role for us to play, arousing our fellow students to resist the power of a distant, faceless authority controlling our lives. We didn’t care whether we were on the quarter or semester system, but we cared that no one bothered to ask us. We did not want to be moved around like pawns.

Until then, I had been shuffling down a predetermined route: get a job and raise a family. But I needed something more.

“We should do something,” I said.

“We’ll start a petition,” Ivan said without pausing.

Yes, this could wake students from their intellectual slumber. What a script to follow: riding our bikes across campus, calling on dorm dwellers and Greeks to rouse them to stop being excluded from decision-making that affected their lives. In reality, it was more like knocking to see if anyone was home. This effort was no thunderclap of protest but rather a modest squeak. We saw an opportunity for students to speak up on something other than choosing the entertainment calendar for the year. It was exercising student power. Here was something that allowed me to control or at least influence what was happening around me.

The day after the article ran on the quarter system, Ivan and I pondered how to get the word out to the student body about our petition. We wanted

to hand out flyers, but there were no public photocopiers for making cheap ones and using a printing press would be too expensive.

The only other option for cheaply distributing information was the mimeograph. This workhorse mechanical wonder allowed one to cut a stencil on treated paper and then run off a limited number of reprints. Photocopying technology phased out most of its use by the late sixties. The university departments controlled most of the mimeographs. Fraternities, social associations, and churches owned some, but we had no connection to these institutions. So, we went to the one group that might help us challenge the status quo, the Southenders.

Ivan had heard of the Southenders during our first week back at college. He had heard that at the south end of the Student Union cafeteria, the Falcon's Nest, there was a collection of students similar to those we had discovered at University Circle back in Cleveland: outliers and bohemians.

The south end of the Falcon's Nest was where "decent" BG students did not want to be seen. The students in the Southend were BG's version of beatniks. Men's hair went un-groomed; women's hair flowed past their shoulders; both sexes would wear jeans, and some women eschewed makeup. Even a few bearded students were apparent bohemians since no one, except professors, had beards. Most of them majored in the arts and social sciences, making them a distinct minority at a university of education majors. Those in the Southend slid into a kinship around drinking coffee and reading books. Some could care less about politics, and those who did ranged from Senator Barry Goldwater's libertarians to hardcore Democrats. Toward the end of the sixties, even socialists and anarchists joined in sitting at the Southend. Most students chafing under university rules or who opposed the war in Vietnam found refuge in the Southend.

In our search for a mimeograph, the Southenders sent us to the Crypt, a makeshift coffeehouse located in the United Christian Fellowship Center's basement and run by the Protestant Minister Dr. Henry Gerner. On the weekends, it served coffee and donuts and had an open mic for students strumming guitars. The Crypt played a critical role in allowing students to mingle and exchange thoughts on everything from the arts to politics. I realized how informal gathering places, be they coffeehouses or taverns, could serve as boiling pots for open debate and incubators for troublemakers willing to challenge established powers.

In the fall of '66, I still felt some guilt going into a non-Catholic church, even if it was only to pursue secular activities. Although I regularly attended Sunday Mass and catechism lessons, I was attracted to Gerner's open invitation to drop in at the Crypt. The Roman Catholic Rev. Wurzel had a Jesuit-like intellect and I found him to be rigid in setting boundaries on

where our curiosity should roam. I couldn't see him tolerating a coffeehouse that might encourage loose morals or questioning truths that were supposed to be self-evident.

However, at that time, the Catholic Church was trying to liberalize. At the end of the year, to my surprise, it lifted the ban on eating meat on Fridays, a practice I had followed. Seeing that the pope had changed a centuries' old rule alighted my guilt; visiting an ecumenical coffeehouse didn't seem so egregious, and so my world continued to grow larger.

With a mighty mimeograph available, we ran off a handful of petitions urging the board of trustees to retain the semester system until they had consulted with the students. The next morning, we stood in the middle of campus, casually stopping students between classes and asking them to sign our petition. Some had never seen a petition before and avoided us; others thought they might get in trouble if they signed. Others were cynical and thought any objections to university practices were futile. And some, either amused or doubtful of our effort, signed it anyway. Through it all, Ivan and I bantered freely with all who stopped.

By the end of the day, we had almost two hundred signers. The following day, a *BG News* reporter showed up, took our photo, and interviewed us while gathering more signatures. Two days after we had begun our effort, I woke to see ourselves on the paper's front page. I was quoted: "We want this to be a measure of the students' concern with both the new system and the tactics used to initiate it." Ivan said we were against the state's attempt to force BG to give up its autonomy. Our message was simple: we wanted students to have a voice shaping the university's future.

We and the rest of the student body didn't know that a week before we began our grassroots exercise in democracy, the Administration had concluded that they were going ahead with the conversion to the quarter system. In a memorandum from all of the academic deans and Provost Paul Leedy to the faculty's academic council, he wrote: "After discussion at length the matter of conversion to the quarter system, we have reached unanimous, if reluctant, agreement that, while we dislike the manner in which the change has come about, there is a job to be done and we might as well get on with it now."

The BG Administration didn't like being pushed around by the state's regents any more than the students did; still, they approved the recommendation the same day they received the memorandum without asking a single student. As a result, the Administration missed an opportunity to use the student body as leverage against a higher power. Instead, as was the custom, students were treated like livestock. Student power had yet to open the corral.