Interview Transcript

**Interviewee:** Bill Benson
**Interviewers:** Jacob Albert and Jacob Furtado
**Date of Interview:** April 24, 2014
**Location:** Greenfield MA, Bill Benson’s home
**Transcriber:** Jacob Albert
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**Abstract:** Bill Benson was born in 1948 and raised in Fitchburg. He attended Saint Bernard’s High School before deciding to go to Fitchburg State. After graduating from Fitchburg State and working in the Microbiology field, Bill ran for the House of Representatives and won his campaign as a Democrat. He is now retired and lives with his wife in Greenfield, Massachusetts and is a very active gardener. In the interview Bill describes his experiences at Fitchburg State during the late 1960s. He was an active member of the Student Government Association (SGA) and was part of the committee that decided to organize a student walkout in protest of the Vietnam War. He explains what life was like on campus during the first two years of his college career and how life on campus began to change in response to antiwar activism. This activism influenced the SGA, which challenged the administration to treat students less like children and more like adults and supported the free speech case against President James Hammond.

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**JF:** Can you tell us a bit about the student newspaper free speech case and how it began?

**BB:** Well, it was funny if you had seen the recording of the panel discussion we had. I had a hard time remembering a lot (laughs). It was ridiculous, what was it thirty years? It was 1969, I believe, yea forty years, could it be forty years? YES. I think we had our panel in 2011 so I actually forgot about it and then when I received the call or email from Mark, I think he called, a lot came back to me like yea, yea we did do that (laughs). I think again it was more of the atmosphere of the time, which was my senior year. I think it was John Antonelli’s junior year and at that time there was a lot of changes in the air. There was a vast difference between the dynamics of being a student my freshmen, sophomore years, then in my junior, senior years. Just a lot nationally, and actually internationally that occurred in that very short time frame so we were definitely caught up in that.

I wasn’t integral in the newspaper, it was really John and Jay and Tony and Joan to a great degree. They really took the leadership of it and I know they definitely wanted to push the envelope and be edgy. I think that was senior year and you have to understand the type of people who ran state colleges at that point was much different than the type of people you have now at state colleges. Now you have very open lines of communications between presidents and the student body. There’s an attitude on their part that they are dealing with adults, not extended versions of children. And the atmosphere now, I think, is a lot looser and a lot freer and you have a lot more freedom in how your treated and how you think then we did then. So basically, we wanted to act like we were adults. We were responsible and we wanted to say something important because it began in the air, change was in the air, and it was really a big dynamic going on. I think that the newspaper was just the vehicle, there were many other vehicles, but the
newspaper was a vehicle for expressing that. Again, we just kind of went over the edge with, it was really one story, it was an Eldridge Cleaver story. I don’t know if you read the story but it was pretty provocative and it’s funny. President James Hammond treated us like he was the father figure and this was not going to be allowed.

What would of occurred these days and the vast contrast between the leadership--I remember your president stating at our forum, “I really don’t know what I would of done if this had occurred to me.” I had a response prepared after the whole thing and what I should of said to him [President Antonucci]. I know what you would have done. You would have vented into a dialogue, you wouldn’t of acted in a dictatorial fashion. You would have sat down with us and asked what the hell are you trying to do? You would have engaged us instead of basically acting like big brother and that’s exactly what the president did.

We had enough savvy and I think John and Tony were really the leaders in this; they contacted the attorney who really ended up being the hero in this case. At that point we were defeated you know. What do you do? The president shut you down, he didn’t say you couldn’t print this article, he shut the damn newspaper down, so it’s like you’re being punished, and you’re being bad children. We got this call, a guardian angel calling us saying, I think your rights have been violated, and we said “we do too, is there anything we can do about it?” and he said “yes, you can do something about it” and that was the beginning of the case.

I remember at the time there was a lot of controversy in the local newspaper radio stations. I remember the TV interview and I think John Antonelli was obviously on our side and it wasn’t Hammond but it was another administrator on the other side. I remember Tony McNamara calling in. John doesn’t remember this but he acted like he was a right-winger. I remember listening to it. I think I was working then and on the floor laughing. Anyways, it was a really controversial thing in the community. I remember the state representative making some very provocative statements against us. You can’t take what happened at the newspaper in isolation, a lot of things were gelling at that point, a lot of things were in motion. The whole anti-war war movement, it was really an us and them attitude on a number of people’s part. Hammond was part of the old guard and a lot of local politicians were saying who do these people think they are? Who do these students think they are? So that’s how we got involved in this and again I think the case was very important, I was reminded of it when we had the Constitution Day. I actually forgot, just a lot of things happen over a forty-year period. You know, I’m glad Mark Price happened to be on campus that day and went to the SGA office. Because it did remind me of something we did that day that was very important. Again there was so much going on in that period. Between the academics, the national politics and then we had this internal thing, which was really a whole part of a much bigger dynamic so I’m glad that I was made to remember and it was funny when we had our panel. It was in the James Hammond auditorium so I made a crack about it. The irony of the whole situation and how he must be rolling over in his grave that such troublemakers were there. Actually there were eight of us but Tony passed on. It’s just a total change in atmosphere now that you benefit from. I think you guys really benefitted from sort of the chaos we put the school through.

JF: You said that the administration had a dictatorial relationship with the community.

BB: With us.
JF: The SGA is what I meant. What relationship do you feel, before the case, the SGA had with the school community?

BB: I actually didn’t think there was much of--there wasn’t necessarily an adversary relationship. I wasn’t really aware of--the SGA was taking very controversial stances the first two years I was on it. That was my freshman, sophomore, when I began. It was sort of, you weren’t really political, you weren’t really aware, you were just going to school and drinking beer and having fun. I had to study because I had sciences. You know, you did some studying in between. Things started changing my junior, senior year obviously. The whole Vietnam War protest just exploded countrywide. The war exploded itself and everyone that really played a part in what was going in the SGA. But I don’t remember going to war with anyone during that. It was really--I think the newspaper really brought everything to the floor. Just what is the relationship between the administration and the students, especially if the students don’t want to toe the line? This was a board elected by students and funded, the school didn’t fund it, student fees funded it. That was the other thing, it was our vehicle for expression and before it was all like rosy and fun. And you know this is what college students do and there wasn’t really much provocative stuff in there. I just went through some of the newsletters being put out now that don’t really have the sting of what we were going through but the issues are there. There are a lot of issues, obviously global warming, environmental, civil rights, a whole range of issues. It’s almost taken for granted that they will be discussed and that was not the case when we were students, not the case at all.

JF: How do you feel the relationship between the SGA and the community changed after the case?

BB: It wasn’t really the SGA, it was the newspaper, and I think the sides were drawn. I don’t think anyone changed. I think people really felt the students were out of control. You remember Ronald Reagan got his start as the Governor of California beating up on Berkley students. You drew the line and you had your constituency. They’re wrong and they need to be corrected and so I think it was a similar situation in Fitchburg. I think the local conservative politicians were with the president and the more liberal factions in the community were with us. They were for students, free speech. You know I don’t think the article itself would win any converts to us but I don’t think people read the article. The issue became, can the president shut down a student organization because he doesn’t like something said in it? It wasn’t a criticism of him. He just didn’t like the nature of the article, totally understandable, but it doesn’t mean he has the dictatorial power over students. Again, that would never happen today. Especially with your president, he seems like an open and sophisticated guy, so you know it’s a difference of time.

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JF: How did your views compare to your peers at the time?

BB: How did I what?

JF: How did your views compare to your peers?

BB: Things were changing, the views I had as a junior, senior were different then when I was a freshman, sophomore. I think again the times were changing. I remember vividly, I think it was
my freshmen year, there were students protesting the Vietnam War, a small group about 8 students. I remember thinking “what a bunch of jerks” and I think that was the prevailing attitude. Two years later the opposite was the prevailing attitude and we were all like, “what is going on here?” I was thinking about that today, it wasn’t because of the draft, it wasn’t because we were worried about getting drafted. It was certainly in the background. We were there as students so we weren’t thinking about the draft really and it was like the whole atmosphere changed. I’m glad I got caught up in it. Some students remained what you’d call conservative, but I don’t think any thinking person could not be at least suspicious of what was going on in Vietnam. You’d have to have blind faith in what our government was doing to not be suspicious if not protesting the situation. I think the majority of the country protested.

John and I and a bunch of others flew down to Washington for the first moratorium. It was in November. It was right around--I don’t know the date, but it was right around the time he [Hammond] shut us down. We flew down and flew back and got gassed in Washington and then we went down for a second time. I think we may have driven that time and that same year we shut the school down. It was the mayday. I had been at a rally at Yale where we got gassed again and I came back and found out Nixon had bombed Cambodia which was really like “What the?” It was like what more can this guy do? The whole country sort of went into protest and many schools were shut down. We did shut ours down and there were a number of individuals involved who went beyond the paper and I bring this all in because our case was all part of it. The case, you can only take the case so much in isolation and I want to emphasize it’s important but you can’t take it in isolation because it’s part of a much bigger picture. That whole year was a tumultuous in many ways. My damn internship at the same time, forty hours a week, doing medical stuff and I don’t know how I did it but I did fine academically. It wasn’t like others did; they sort of let their academics go. I couldn’t do that, I wasn’t trained that way but anyways it was an unbelievably tumultuous year, I’d say a great year.

JF: So there were those that were willing to protest but not try and sacrifice academics but there were those who were willing. Where do you think this difference in zeal came from?

BB: I think it’s just personal preference. Some were wedded to a major or wanted to do well or had an opinion regarding there academics. I mean, John dropped out and basically, probably would have failed out if he had stayed. Then he went on to do what he was called to do. I’m sure you’re aware that he is a filmmaker. He does great stuff and you know that spoke well to that, he spoke well to that, he followed up in a fine manner. Everyone else that I think about at school either went when they were supposed to or maybe they had to take courses later. I think Dave Celluza went another year to get his degree but everyone got their degrees that I hung out with. I think they did. One guy who isn’t mentioned here, Steve Walsh, was part of the crew who died twenty years ago. He moved to Texas and got married and moved to Texas and went to the University of Houston in the art program. I think everyone continued but it was a personal thing. I don’t think it was any political decision making.

JA: We should have probably asked this when you were talking about it but the moratorium you went to, Could you explain this more? What was it like when you went there?

BB: Well, it was a national day of protest focused in Washington and it was the major speeches occurred on the Lincoln memorial. You know, the waiting pool and there must have been
between to 250,000 -500,000 people. People just came and it was the easiest hitchhike I ever made. I don’t know how many hundreds of miles there is between Fitchburg and Washington. People would just pick you up because everyone was going to the same place. Then they’d put you up. They had places to put people up who came down and coming back we got picked up by a couple from Concord whose kid was in college. They took us to their home, put us up, fed us the next morning, it was great; they treated us like we were their children. It was like being a part, and it’s a rare thing. Students today don’t really feel it unless you are the 99% as far as protests go.

**JF:** Occupy Wall Street.

**BB:** Occupy, it was like being a part of something; it was a national thing, much broader then the Occupy movement, with a focus obviously to stop the war. You know in hindsight it didn’t really do it. Nixon continued until 1975 but that had a lasting impact on me to be a part of something much broader then you. You had all these little things that sort of set a path for you and so it was like being with hundreds of thousands of people. I remember looking down the street, whatever street it was, it was just a mass of people and you’re all there for the same reason, and there were different elements. I remember the Weather Underground, which were the radical elements of Students for Democratic Society. They were the violence, “the peaceful protest ain’t going to work,” and they did some minor damage. They stormed some of the commercial property and what not and then they went onto more infamous stuff like blowing up the buildings. There were a lot of socialist elements but there were a lot of peace elements too. It was great, it was one of these experiences that I found difficult not to live with and a lot of people do stuff and they forget about it and move on. It was great, it was one of the highlights of my life doing that, just taking off and being part of something massive.

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