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**JOANNE:** Major funding for Backstory" is provided by an anonymous donor, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the University of Virginia, the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations.

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**ED:** From Virginia Humanities, this is "Backstory."

**BRIAN:** Welcome to "Backstory, the American History Podcast." I'm Brian Balogh.

**JOANNE:** I'm Joanne Freeman.

**ED:** And I'm Ed Ayers.

**BRIAN:** If you're new to the podcast, Joanne, Ed, our colleague Nathan Connelly, and I are all historians. Each week, we explore the history of a topic that's been in the news.

**ED:** Farmville, Virginia is just about an hour south of our studio here in Chloette's. And in 1951, Farmville became the epicenter of the desegregation movement in America. But this movement didn't start in a church or a lunch counter, it was started at a high school by a 16-year-old girl.

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**JOANNE:** Robert Russell Moton High School was built for African-American students in Prince Edward County. It was one of only 12 black high schools in rural Virginia.

**BRIAN:** The school had no plumbing and was heated by wood stoves. No gymnasium, athletic field, or cafeteria. Tar paper buildings were constructed to alleviate overcrowding. And some students took classes in an abandoned school bus.

Farmville High, the white high school in town looked a heck of a lot better by comparison.

**SAMUEL** For instance, they had a modern science lab, we did not. We had just one microscope, one for

**WILLIAMS:** 400 some students.

**BRIAN:** This is Rev. Samuel Williams, who was a student at Moton High.

**SAMUEL WILLIAMS:** They had a first aid room, teacher's lounge, we didn't have any of that. Athletically, we received their hand-me-down football clothes. Athletically when we had to play football, our coach would get together with the white coach to let us go over and practice the night before the game so that we could get accustomed to playing at night. We didn't have lights on our field.

[BELL RINGING]

**BRIAN:** On April 23, 1951, Moton High students gathered for a morning assembly. Here's Joy Cabarrus Speaks, a Moton student at the time.

**JOY CABARRUS SPEAKS:** We thought that it was just the principal calling us in for the usual assembly, something that he had to discuss. But when we got into the auditorium, all of us and the curtain open, there was Barbara Johns along with the others, Kerry Stokes, John Stokes, and others that were on the committee.

**BRIAN:** Barbara Johns, that 16-year-old we mentioned earlier, had taken it upon herself to do something about Moton.

**BARBARA JOHNS:** This is a meeting for the students to talk about the bad conditions here at Robert R Moton High School. I asked that all the teachers please leave before we begin.

**SAMUEL WILLIAMS:** None of the students or the bulk of the students did not know, they were not aware of really what was transpiring in the auditorium at that time. It was done in such fashion, that the principal, Mr. Jones, was tricked to go downtown to check on some students. He had received a call that things were disordered, at that. And that was how the internal committee structured things in order to get him out of the auditorium.

**BARBARA JOHNS:** For too long, we have quietly accepted the hand me downs that end up in the school. I say, no longer. There are some who tell us that we should be content with what we have, that some day in the future things will be better. When will that day happen?

**JOANNE:** Barbara Johns and a small committee of friends lead their fellow students to walk out of Moton High and strike against the substandard conditions of the school. And they did a number of

things, they picketed houses of school board members with placards that read, "We want a new school, or none at all." And, "Down with tar paper shacks." They met with the school superintendent, who told them nothing could be done until they went back to class. The students refused, and parents weren't sure what to make of it.

**SAMUEL WILLIAMS:** There was a lot of ambivalence, immediate ambivalence among the parents and other relatives in the community. For instance, we went from one extreme to the other. "Go back to school, you may not have the state of the art equipment as to what white people have in the white high school, but I didn't have that when I attended school. Go back."

**JOY CABARRUS SPEAKS:** The day of the strike when I went home-- and really that day, I was more fearful of what my grandparents were going to say than I was on any other repercussions at the time. But when I got home, my grandmother, who was a teacher also, she said she did not think it was right.

**SAMUEL WILLIAMS:** Then there were others who said, "No, no. You stand your ground. Protest, develop dull determination." And then there were some who weighed in between until they began to grasp the meaning and get a firm grip on what we were doing.

**JOY CABARRUS SPEAKS:** The parents had been fighting for a better school for a long time, and they didn't get it. So their children just got ahead of them and were able to put it into motion.

**ED:** The Moton High students stayed on strike for nearly two weeks. But it was two years until they were able to move to into a building with facilities equal to the white school. With help from the NAACP, the Moton strike resulted in a court case that became part of Brown V Board of Educaton, the Supreme Court decision that mandated desegregation in public schools.

As for Barbara Johns, well her life was never the same. She left Farmville shortly after the strike.

**JOY CABARRUS SPEAKS:** Because they feared for her life, because of the threats on her life. But the thing is that anything that you do, you have to make a sacrifice. There's a sacrifice for everything that you can do that you achieved something from.

**BARBARA JOHNS:** We wanted so much here, and have so little.

**BRIAN:** Here's Barbara Jones in a rare television interview.

**JOY CABARRUS** And we have talents and abilities here that weren't really being realized. And I thought that  
**SPEAKS:** was a tragic scene. And then basically, what motivated me to want to see some change take place here.

**JOY CABARRUS** And what she did will show a young person, a young man, a young woman that they can  
**SPEAKS:** change government. Whatever they feel that's unfair or should be different, they can make a difference in this world and in this nation. All they have to do is stand for what they feel should be changed.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**FEMALE**  
**SPEAKER:** The people in the government who were voted into power are lying to us, and our case seems to be the only ones who notice and our parents would call "BS." Companies trying to make caricatures of the teenagers nowadays, and saying that all we are is self involved and trend obsessed. And they hush us into submissions when our message doesn't reach the youth of the nation, we are prepared to call "BS."

**JOANNE:** With students across the country organizing walkouts and demanding stricter gun laws, we're exploring the history of young people in American politics. We'll talk about how young people in the revolution and the early republic looked to the glorious past to forge a new future. And how young people made it OK to be an independent voter in the 19th century. We'll tell the story of another student walkout in Gary, Indiana against integration. And speak to a young Lakota woman who traveled to Standing Rock with her fellow activists.

**ED:** Young activists from Parkland and other communities affected by gun violence have made headlines for leading the movement for gun control. In speeches and interviews, they underlined the idea that their youth is part of what makes them effective advocates in a time when adults have become resigned to a broken system. And that's not surprising to those of us in the 21st century. After all, many believe that protests and rebellion are part of what defines being young.

**JOANNE:** But our ideas about young adulthood is a time to push back, protest, or rebel. Well, that has not always been the case. Historian, Glenn Wallach, says that even during the American Revolution when young college students like Alexander Hamilton and Nathan Hale played an outsized role in the fight against the British, they rarely drew attention to their age. As a matter of fact, if they did, it was only to emphasize that they were adults.

**GLENN** Alexander Hamilton is a student at King's College. And he jumps to the defense of one of his

**WALLACH:** professors and writes pamphlets and does these various things. He's not doing that speaking as a young person.

**JOANNE:** Kind of the opposite of speaking as a young person, right? He's basically saying, "Look at me, I'm an adult and I'm stepping into the public sphere. And I've got something to say."

**GLENN** Sure.

**WALLACH:**

**JOANNE:** Yeah, interesting.

**GLENN** Right.

**WALLACH:**

**JOANNE:** So many people when they speak about the revolution, they think about the fact that like Hamilton, so many of the people literally fighting it in the army or just engaged with it, there are people who are surprisingly young. But the main point, it sounds like what you're saying here is they may have vim and verve as young people, but they're putting themselves out in the public sphere and asserting themselves as adults. And that their identity as young people is not part of the conversation.

**GLENN** Right. And it gets complicated because, of course, the whole language of the revolution is

**WALLACH:** caught up in all this talk about fathers and sons and the king as a bad father and England is a bad mother, which has led some people to see it as some kind of generational rebellion.

**JOANNE:** Right. OK, so that's the Revolutionary Period. So let's shift, sort of walk ahead in time into the 19th. Your work suggests that things begin to really change in the 19th century.

**GLENN** Partly because now, young people are increasingly more and more on their own. Many of

**WALLACH:** them go into cities and they've left the country, or they're growing up in the city, and they are increasingly freed from their parents. And then, young people themselves start to notice each other and start to form voluntary associations. The Young Mens' Temperance Association, Young Men's Anti-Slavery, Young Mens' Democratic Society, Young Men's Wigg Convention, built around the fact that their young.

**JOANNE:** Like clubs, basically.

**GLENN** Now some of those are going to be the sort of classic kind of benevolent association so that  
**WALLACH:** sober minded young folks can get together and not be--

**JOANNE:** Drunk. You know? Temperance. Benevolent associations, yeah.

**GLENN** Yeah, exactly. And it's a place where they can get together and read. And a lot of these young  
**WALLACH:** men's associations actually become the kind of building blocks for city libraries in a lot of towns. But then also, they start to get involved in reform, they start to get involved in politics, and a range of other kinds of things. And the language that they start using to talk about themselves of hearkening back to founders and fathers and how they are picking up that mantle and as young people they have a responsibility to move the ball forward.

**JOANNE:** So Glenn, talking about these young men in these various groups, what's your sense of how they view their elders at that point?

**GLENN** Well, I think it's interesting because they very much wrap themselves in the mantle of the  
**WALLACH:** revolution. And in the case of a couple of groups of African-American young men in New York City, they wrap themselves in the mantle of particular African-American founders. Early leaders in education in New York and other community leaders, and they say we are following in their footsteps to move our society forward.

The revolution and the passing of the founders-- because of course, as you well know, by the 1830s all of the actual founders are gone. And that becomes a sort of important moment for these young mens' organizations who say the founders are gone, now it's up to us. And so they are sort of very much talking about themselves in that kind of way.

**JOANNE:** Modeling themselves after adults of the past.

**GLENN** Yeah. Or saying in that tradition, we are now doing something new, and different, and  
**WALLACH:** important. So it's not we are simply repeating them, but they are the inspiration for us to move forward.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**JOANNE:** Glenn Wallach is author of "Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630 to 1860." Earlier in the show, we heard from Reverend Samuel Williams, and Joy Cabbarus Speaks.

**ED:** That interview came from an episode about the Moton strike, produced by "With Good Reason," a radio show based here at Virginia Humanities. You can find that episode on our website, [backstoryradio.org](http://backstoryradio.org).

**JOANNE:** Special thanks to Lacey Ward Jr. and to Jolie Milner who played Barbara Johns.

**ED:** And you can visit the Moton Museum in Farmville.

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**BRIAN:** Support for "Backstory" in the following message come from Volvo. Remember when you could only listen to programs like this live on the radio? Someday, you'll remember when people had to buy cars too. Introducing the new Volvo XC40, the car you can subscribe to. No down payment, no negotiation, one monthly payment, insurance and maintenance are all included. You can even upgrade to a new car after 12 months. Subscribe now to care by Volvo, the revolutionary new way to own a car.

**ED:** If you go into any campaign office today, you'll see an army of college students making phone calls and stuffing envelopes. But we shouldn't think of this as just a modern phenomenon.

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** Yeah it's funny, we associate young people with the baby boomers or the modern era, but young people have always played a role in politics because American democracy has always needed boots on the ground. It's always needed labor, and free labor and energetic labor, especially. So often, young people play a key role because they're willing to do the hard dirty work of getting people to go out and vote.

**ED:** This is John Grinspan, curator of political history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Since the mid 19th century, most white men have been able to vote in the United States. And political parties have valued young men, in particular, for their energy and for their impressionability.

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** Abe Lincoln said you go out and recruit the shrewd wild boys just under age, that you want them before they can participate. Because you don't really want them making up their mind in an election, you want them committed Democrats or Republicans for a decade before.

**ED:** And generally the best predictor of how a young men would vote would be how his father voted, right?

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** Absolutely. Partisanship is tied up with family identity, with region, with race, with class. Most people inherit their party identities. And then once they've voted for that first time, 95% vote for the same party in presidential elections over decades. So if a father convinces his son to vote a certain way, or if a sister convinces her brother to vote a certain way, they're often locked into that partisanship for life.

**ED:** But in the 19th century, it was just family expectations that convinced young men to remain true to a party, politics was public. And political parties tended to throw the biggest social parties in town.

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** A rally in a small town might be the largest gathering a person ever sees. It would usually happen at 11:00 PM or midnight, and it would involve large groups of young men organized into political clubs, maybe 100 people in a club, with lit torches marching down the street. There would be no refreshments ranging from whiskey and beer to roast ox or roast hog. There would be people speechifying on the sidelines, what they called "boy orators" of the time who were as young as 12, but maybe in their early '20s on soapboxes, giving speeches about the issues or about the parties. And the spectators would often be older people who are kind of watching young people engage in politics.

**ED:** Young people benefited from being politically active, but their views didn't have much influence on the policies of the parties they joined.

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** The parties don't care all that much about their beliefs on the issues. You know, the elites who are running these parties and making the nominations, they want a political party run by 60-year-olds but manned on the ground and fueled by 21-year-olds. This is still a hierarchical culture where young people are expected to follow the lead of enough adults, or older people.

**ED:** That obedience however, didn't last. After the Civil War, young people began to question party leadership and the direction of their country.

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** There's always new generations of young people coming, and they are increasingly hostile to a political system that seems stuck in the Civil War era. They look at this generation that kind of made their names and fought their battles during the Civil War who dominate the political system, and also dominate much of the economic system as stuck in the past. And this is an era when there's a real excitement for finding dinosaur bones, and they start to compare these parties to fossils. And there's a great quote where they say, "Young people have no more interest in the issues in their parents than they do in the wars of extinct monsters whose bones

are gathered in museums." There's this sense that the political system has stuck, and it's not paying attention to the needs and demands of young people in the 1870s or 1880s. It's arguing about 1861 over and over and over again.

**ED:** And they're still electing veterans at the beginning of the 20th century, right? McKinley, I guess, is the last one. I don't know.

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** Yeah. Yeah, and veterans are running on what they did during the Battle of Antietam in the 1890s, you know? And if you're a 21-year-old voter in the 1890s, you weren't alive during Antietam. It doesn't mean as much to you.

**ED:** Right. So what happens to the parties when young people begin to not pay as much attention?

**JOHN GRINSPAN:** Well, they freak out. Especially the Republican Party in the North, which has seen itself as the party of the young as kind of a defining identity when young people start to dabble with voting for the Democrats or making up their mind in each election. First, they scold young people and tell them they don't know what they're talking about. And then they try to insist that they're the party of the independents, and all good independents vote Republican. So they try to use the rhetoric of independents without actually following through on it.

But over the last decade or two of the 19th century, there starts to be a real movement for genuine political independence, that new generations of young people who don't care about their father's issues or their mother's issues are making up their minds as elections come. As looking at both parties and choosing which candidate, which party they'd like to support. And this is really revolutionary, even more so than the emergence of third parties. The idea of being a genuine independent really changes American politics. And it comes from a young generation that's hostile to these kind of ossified, stuck old parties.

**ED:** The idea becomes that if you're a man enough you'll make up your own mind, rather as before, if you were man enough you would declare your loyalty to a party no matter what.

**JON GRINSPAN:** Absolutely. And it is tied to masculinity again, that independents are seen as wishy-washy and effeminate, and not real men for most of the 19th century. And then at some point in the 1890s, the really strong, stable person looks at both parties and chooses based on their unconscious, as opposed to following how their father voted or how their grandfather voted.

**ED:** Now this must have been especially tricky for African-American voters for who in the

Republican Party was really their only refuge. How would they negotiate this?

**JON GRINSPAN:** Yeah, African-Americans are in a real bind. I mean, in addition to the fact that there are large numbers of people in the South trying to completely disenfranchise them, and in the North to, the party that has historically supported black people, the Republican Party, isn't often giving them much in exchange. One great quote I love from Reverend in Philadelphia who says, the Philadelphia's African-American community, "It's time you were getting more for your political surfaces. With all your speaking, organizing, parading in the streets, ballyhooing, holding mass meetings, voting, and sometimes fighting, what do you get?" That's a fundamental question, what do you get for being a good Republican for 30 years?

**ED:** And what do you get if you're a woman in all this? The decades marched by and still women were not allowed to vote. Do they become disenchanting or does this opening of independentism create a space for them?

**JON GRINSPAN:** It absolutely does. One of the really interesting things is the way women drive the push for independent voting and the way being distant from the two parties, being denied the right to vote actually allows women an in to be really consequential and influential going into the 20th century in the progressive era. Most men are trapped within this political system. And they have biases for the Democratic Party or the Republican Party and their same old fights going back to when they were children. Because women were denied the right to vote, they tend to think more broadly about political reform and change. And so, they might be rethinking social services for poor people or how to protect child laborers or these kind of bigger issues that the parties just have not managed to address.

And also, as there's a movement for women's suffrage kind of building over the 1890s and 1900s, they really cleverly play the independent approach to see which party will be more supportive to them. They learn that they can't rely on any one party ever. And so, intellection, intellection, state by state, they mean manage to court both parties and say, "Well, who's going to support us more?"

**ED:** Interesting. Despite all the courting by the parties, people begin turning away from voting after 1900. I think that's something that really surprises people who sort of believe that American history keeps getting better and better is that sometime around the beginning of the 20th century, people decided this two party system is not really doing much for me. Were young people a part of that transformation?

**JON GRINSPAN:** I'd say young people are the driving force behind it there's large political changes going on, but one of the key ones is that as people, especially young people, break from this really die-hard partisanship, they don't see as much reason to go turn out and vote. And so independent voting is much better for making up one's mind each election and thinking through the issues. But in terms of that big mass participation and those public events and those high turnouts, partisanship was really working well. And as they say break up this kind of partisan culture and support independents, and also as they break up the idea that politics should be public and begins to support the idea that it's a private matter of individual conscience, not necessary to be discussed at the dinner table, but to be decided behind a voting curtain. Turn outs start to fall, and there's less of a kind of sense of a National Public campaign each election that it's too excitable, too silly, often too working class, too driven by what they called nonsense at the time, and too drunk.

Those people who feel that the political system isn't reflecting the best values for America deliberately make an effort to change political behavior. More than the issues, more than any ideological question, they say they want to changed how Americans engage democracy. And so, over the 1880s and over the 1890s, they really construct a new way of engaging in politics that is much more private than public, much more independent than partisan, and much more restrained than passionate.

**ED:** More reading than talking.

**JON GRINSPAN:** They actually say more thinking, less shouting. But at the same time, it means shutting down those big demonstrations, shutting down the barbecues, shuttering the saloons, not buying fireworks for your marchers. And it really does end up almost killing this kind of folk culture that Americans had created over the 19th century. So that by the early 20th century, these big mass parades and engagements really don't exist in politics the way they used to.

**ED:** So what parallels do you see today between sort of the resurgence of young people in the political sphere in this earlier era?

**JON GRINSPAN:** Well, there are a few things. And obviously, it's a very different time and things are very different. The first is that political engagement today is fairly good, or at least improving over how it had been much of the 20th century for young people. That we tend to kind of tut tut and shake our fingers, but millennials are voting at higher rates than baby boomers or Gen Xers did. And so, it's easy to blame the young, but I do think there's good news there. I think in

terms of the mobilization around gun violence and the students at Parkland, one of the things that I found interesting looking at young people in the Gilded Age is that a generation of young people who thought their political system wasn't working for them and were kind of raised to believe that it was corrupt and vulgar was actually much more motivated to make change than a generation raised to think that their political system was wholly imperfect and untouchable.

So maybe there's an argument to be made that these 17-year-olds who have basically believed that democracy has been broken to some degree their whole life, they might be more engaged and more willing to go after sacred cows or rethink things than a generation in the 20th century who had like a sunnier sense of American democracy.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ED:** Jon Grinspan is the curator of political history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. He's the author of "The Virgin Vote: How Young Americans Made Democracy Social, Politics Personal, and Voting Popular in the 19th century."

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**BRIAN:** Well Joanne, Ed, we're talking about youth getting involved in politics. A lot of social protest and kind of curious to hear when you came of age politically and whether you ever protested anything?

**JOANNE:** Well, I actually have a really distinct memory of that. And that's because it was my first semester at college, but it was 1980 and Reagan was on a helicopter tour around California during that presidential campaign. And he came to my college, and they actually said in our classes-- because it was a big deal, that we could skip class if we wanted to to go and see this rally.

So I went to this rally with no expectation of any kind. I had never seen anything like that, I don't even think I'd been tuned in ever on the news to anything like this. And I actually looked it up before today's conversation so that I would know I was accurate. There were several thousand people.

**BRIAN:** Nothing like being there, Joanne.

**JOANNE:** I know. Well, you'll see what I do remember about it. I don't remember how many people were

there, but apparently there were several thousand. And there were several hundred of them were actually heckling Reagan. And I do remember he lost his cool and yelled at us, "You kids," sort of a moment that I remember thinking, "Wow, I didn't expect to see that." But the thing that struck me and that stayed with me was that before he came on stage to speak, there was like a warm up bands, like singers. And they were singing Christian songs, they were singing Jesus songs. And I'm Jewish, and I stood in the audience and I felt like I had just been told to go away. I felt like suddenly I was not-- although no one did anything, but it was like wow, I was just exclusively cut off from this. They didn't include me.

**BRIAN:** And was this a Christian college, perchance?

**JOANNE:** No. Nope. No, no. It was not. It was Pomona College, one of the Claremont colleges.

**BRIAN:** Did that translate into anything, Joanne? Did you take that sensibility and join Hillel?

**JOANNE:** It did not transfer, I think, into a Jewish sensibility explicitly. It did transfer into a I'm more involved in this political process than I knew I was before, you know? Like I was with a group of students, they were engaged in one way or another, they were either cheering or heckling, and then I was sort of like thrown in the middle of it because I couldn't avoid it because it felt like a personal statement. So suddenly, it was like I gained a political awareness that I honestly don't think I'd had before that moment.

**BRIAN:** Joanne, I'm going to go ahead and just share my political coming of age, and Ed can attest to this. This was not rehearsed in advance. It also has to do with being Jewish. And I grew up in South Florida where Jews were, of course, a minority, but a strong presence in the community. And I was shipped away to a fancy prep school in New England. And I had never been particularly religious, but we were required to go to, quote, "church."

And Jewish kids on Sunday would attend, quote, "synagogue" in the basement underneath the church. And I started feeling resentful, and that really fed my Jewish identity. It's probably the only three years of my life where I really strongly identified-- not just religiously and culturally with being Jewish, but politically. And here is my first political act.

I played French horn, and I played in the brass quintet at the school. And of course, we'd be called on to play at the real church upstairs. And my first political act, something that the historian Robin Kelley would label "in for politics." My first poetical act is intentionally playing out of tune during those church services. There it is.

**ED:** I hope the Statue of limitations is up.

**BRIAN:** I hope so. I hope so. Now many would say, "Brian, I heard your French horn playing. You always played out of tune." But I did that very intentionally. I went on to do a lot of other political things. But I was thinking about this, and that really was my first explicit political act.

**JOANNE:** How old were you, Brian, when that happened?

**BRIAN:** I think I was 16 when I went there, and I probably didn't have the courage to do that until I was about 17-years-old, something in the vicinity. Ed, we haven't heard from you.

**ED:** Well, that's because they heard from me a lot back in the 60s when I was in high school.

**JOANNE:** Wow, what a segway.

**ED:** Yeah, but it's also just complete bluster because I'm in East Tennessee, which is not really a hotbed of student protest. But I had watched television throughout my adolescence. And you got the clear sense I felt a part of my generation, you know, a feeling that our job is to be a part of a counterculture. And I lived and breathed in music. But I decided that a more efficacious way to protest would actually to be write op eds for a local newspaper.

**BRIAN:** Wow. Did you know this about him, Joanne?

**JOANNE:** I knew nothing about this.

**BRIAN:** I didn't either.

**ED:** Well, I was a columnist for a short while for the "Bristol Herald Courier" when I was a junior in high school, and therefore 16-years-old. So I wrote two articles that I remember, both of which really got me in trouble pretty quickly. One, I wondered if the local Christian churches were doing all that they could to reach out to young people.

**BRIAN:** So, 3 for 3 with religion.

**ED:** It's interesting, isn't it?

**BRIAN:** Yes.

**ED:** But I was writing sort of from within the tradition and saying when there's so much going on in our culture, churches to fulfill their Christian purpose needed to be more engaged. People

were not happy with this, including my parents because it was seen as an attack on established religion. So the next article that I wrote was-- and I'm still kind of embarrassed by it, an attack, actually a parody of the two guidance counselors at our school. One male, one female. And the point was that you kind of had a bad choice. You could either get somebody who was either going to give you kind of blandly reassuring and maybe religious message, and somebody else who's going to kind of make fun of you, right?

And so I portrayed the kind of dilemma of the high school kids--

**BRIAN:** The Hobson's choice.

**ED:** Exactly. A solvent sentral, right? And kind of gently made fun of them. But what gave it a real edge was a cartoon was produced that portrayed the woman as an angel and the man as a bear. And these poor people are sitting there doing their jobs. And there's a cartoon in the local newspaper in front of all these adults. And these people have never done anything to me, but it was like what could I do to be kind of cheeky? What could I do to be kind of countercultural in my very narrow world?

And the only pieces of the establishment that I could see were Sunday School and the guidance counsels, right? So I was hardly radical, but you think about things that in retrospect seemed pretty high risk for a 16-year-old kid to be out doing, or stupid would be another way of putting it.

**BRIAN:** Well, except-- Joanne, I want you to be the judge here. But I have a theory which is that by the time Ed and I were in college, my guess is Ed was involved in protests. I actually don't know. I was involved in lots of protests, primarily against the Vietnam War. And I and the thousands of people with me, we were arguing against the establishment. We thought that we were unconventional. We were taking a chance. But in fact, I was doing exactly what all of my friends were doing. And it's not that I didn't believe in those causes, but when I think back on it, it was the norm. It was the easy thing to do.

I think of the kids who were in Young Americans for Freedom. They were conservative, they were Republican. I can't remember any of their names, specifically, I literally remember faces. And in retrospect, those kids, right or wrong politically, were the courageous ones. They were the ones at a fancy university college, like the kind that all three of us went to. They were the ones that were actually pushing against the grain. I will say, I've remained very involved in politics, but I've grown a great deal I hope in empathy for people who feel passionately

differently than I do and developed a real curiosity about why it is they feel that way.

**JOANNE:** So Brian, what you're kind of saying it sounds to me, is that empathy is kind of a counterforce to disillusionment when it comes to protest. That even when you're disillusioned, you come away with something from protest. And that matter, that being empathetic with others in the world is something powerful.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ED:** We often associate youth movements with progressive politics. But our next story shows that's not always the case. Gary, Indiana was once home to a thriving steel industry. The pool of jobs there created a diverse population in the early 20th century, including Eastern European immigrants and African-Americans. But simmering tensions between these white and black communities exploded on September 18, 1945.

That day, hundreds of students walked out of Froebel High. The strikers were white, the object of their protest? Their African-American classmates. Producer, Nina Earnest, has the story.

**NINA EARNEST:** According to local reports, the Froebel strike began after a fight broke out between black and white students at a football game. But racial tensions in Gary had been brewing for quite some time. Froebel was located in Gary Central District, the only integrated neighborhood in a very segregated city. As a result, Froebel was its only integrated school. Historian, Ronald Cohen, says that this was a point of contention for Froebel's white student body.

**RONALD COHEN:** These were ethnic white students, Eastern European background. And they felt that they were being discriminated against that the richer white kids in Gary went to all white schools, but they were picked on because they were of ethnic ancestry.

**NINA EARNEST:** The more overt discrimination, however, was within Froebel itself.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** When the school was built, it was really supposed to be this melting pot, this showcase integrated school.

**NINA EARNEST:** This is Casey Pfeiffer of the Indiana Historical Bureau.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** But the school was internally segregated. So African-American students, though they walked the same halls as white students there, they could not attend the same classes or participate

in many of the same extracurricular activities.

**RONALD COHEN:** Black students would be on the sports teams which were integrated, but otherwise they had a separate prom for the black students from the white students, they had two swimming pools in the building. But the swimming was segregated, so black students only swam on Friday before they cleaned the pool.

**NINA EARNEST:** Despite this inequality, it was the white students who decided to strike and air their grievances in 1945. As more and more black Southerners moved to Gary for wartime employment, and more black students enrolled at Froebel, the situation reached a tipping point. The white students, led by a boy named Leonard Lavenda, presented the school board with a few demands.

**RONALD COHEN:** What they wanted was that the school system remove all of the black students from Froebel and put them in other schools.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** Students also wanted to house Principal Richard Newsome, who they believed was giving preferential treatment to African-American students.

**NINA EARNEST:** And lastly, that the Gary school board stopped treating students like guinea pigs and racial integration experiments. The student walkout elicited strong reactions in Gary and beyond. The working class white community and many of their parents backed the youth. But African-Americans, about a fifth of Gary's population at that time, condemned them.

A black newspaper, called "The Indianapolis Recorder" reported that the African-American students at Froebel were deeply hurt and insulted by their classmate's attitudes.

**RONALD COHEN:** It's important to understand this comes just after World War II ends, which was the war fought for freedom, democracy, toleration, and so forth.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** You know, here we were fighting against Hitlerism, Nazism, fascism abroad, and you come home to face inequality, race hatred here at home.

**NINA EARNEST:** This was not lost on the people of Gary. One journalist reminded--

**JOURNALIST:** "A negro student hurrying to his class in an all but deserted Froebel High last week during the hate strike of white students found time to turn and observe. My brother was killed overseas just six months ago fighting for this school and all the other fascists here."

**NINA EARNEST:** The school board refused to remove black students from Froebel. Instead, its members promised to investigate the principal and put him on leave. The strikers returned to school in an uneasy truce. But Newsom was soon reinstated, and the white students walked out yet again on October 23. This time, they had a new demand.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** So interestingly enough, the second time they basically say if we are going to be integrated, all schools in Gary should be integrated. It doesn't make sense to have one and not the other.

**NINA EARNEST:** Pfeiffer and Cohen say this isn't as much of an about face as it seems.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** This goes back to the point from their initial strike when they said they no longer wanted to be guinea pigs.

**RONALD COHEN:** Right, they said you're picking on us because we're working class ethnics, and that's not fair. So integrate the whole city.

**NINA EARNEST:** By this point, the Froebel hate strikes had attracted national attention, so much so that one of the biggest stars of the 20th century made a special stop in the troubled city.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** [? Linen ?] skies today had a silver lining, and damp cold winds blew heart stirring melodies for thousands of teenage devotees of the King of Swoon, who came by plane this morning from New York City to croon Gary bobby soxers and their boyfriends into a democratic attitude on the race relations problem.

**RONALD COHEN:** Frank Sinatra was the most popular performer in the country, by far. And he was very liberal politically, and he believed strongly that the strike was wrong.

**NINA EARNEST:** Sinatra chatted with Froebel students, and of course performed for the town.

**RONALD COHEN:** The girls strikers were supposed to boycott. They said they're not going to go and hear Frank. But some of them snuck in, they couldn't miss a free Frank Sinatra concert.

**NINA EARNEST:** Sinatra warned the students about the Nazi technique of divide and conquer.

**RONALD COHEN:** And requested the strikers to school as a favor, and I shall be grateful to you. Now that didn't go over too well.

**NINA EARNEST:** He also met privately with Leonard Levenda, the white student leader. Sinatra offered him a trip to New York to talk things through. Levenda told the crooner that he couldn't be bought.

Sinatra's visit was extraordinary, but it didn't accomplish very much. "Life Magazine," which covered the event, said Frankie was, quote, "Deeply earnest at the high school meeting."

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** First, he sang some songs. Then he made some vague references to the American way of life and the hot dog. When it was all over, Frankie had failed. The strike was still on.

**NINA EARNEST:** But the walkouts didn't last for much longer. The strikers had a powerful enemy.

**RONALD COHEN:** The elite in Gary, which was the daily newspaper, "The Post Tribune," the business community, the leadership from US steel, they were all very opposed to the strike.

**NINA EARNEST:** There were a few reasons for this. It was disruptive and there were fears of violence. For many residents, it was shameful. But it was also an image problem, especially in the wake of World War II. "The Gary Post Tribune" went so far as to call out the strikers families for their motives.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** The article really makes it clear and says, "Fundamentally, this is not a school problem. This developed out of the changing population the Froebel area. As a result of this influx of Negro families, some white property owners feel their homes and churches have depreciated in value." So this was a larger issue than what's happening in the schools. Again, really underscoring the racial tension that was prevalent in the area. And not just in Gary, but in the North at this time.

**NINA EARNEST:** With the weight of public pressure, the school board cracked down on the student protesters.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** If you are over 16, you face expulsion. If you're under 16, your parents face legal action. They continue to press and press and press, and eventually the students do back down.

**RONALD COHEN:** The white community did not back them up, and so they couldn't win.

**NINA EARNEST:** The white students went back to school in November, almost two months after they first walked out. The irony is that what is remembered as a hate strike had a positive outcome, at least on paper. In August 1946, the school board passed an anti-discrimination order that effectively integrated the school system.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** You want to think that is a positive thing and how great the story would be if the students were going on strike because initially they wanted all schools to be integrated, and they were protesting segregation. But that's really not what that was. And again, it goes back to why it

was called a hate strike. It was unfortunate and it is contradictory to what, I think, many of us think of in terms of student activism.

At the same time, these students were taking a stand for something that they believed in. No matter how hard it might be for some of us to believe that that was happening at the time.

**NINA EARNEST:** Leonard Lavenda died in 1995. His brother told a local reporter that Leonard believed that school should be integrated and quote, "Through his efforts and those of other students, eventually all schools in Gary were."

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** Now that's all great when you dig deeper. Segregation and discrimination is continuing to happen.

**NINA EARNEST:** As hard as the city's white elite fought against the student hate strike, they didn't look at their own policies. They made few efforts to integrate the city as a whole. And without integrated neighborhoods, it's hard to have integrated schools.

**CASEY PFEIFFER:** The white elite and establishment in Gary is OK in terms of having Froebel again as this showcase integrative example. But really when you look at community, no one's really pushing the envelope too far to make sure that integration does happen.

**NINA EARNEST:** There's an unexpected coda to this story. Gary remained a segregated city, but in the decades that followed, Froebel High School became much more to its alumni than the sight of a hate strike. Indiana State representative, Vernon Smith, graduated from Froebel in 1962. He says that less than 20 years after the walkout, conditions for black students had improved astronomically.

**VERNON SMITH:** I didn't even think about segregation in high school. I mean, I thought about it when I got outside of those walls. There were certain sections of the city that we couldn't live in. There were certain sections of the city we couldn't be in after it got dark. So that was part of Gary's history. It was segregated.

**NINA EARNEST:** But Froebel, he says, was a haven from that discrimination. The school board closed the school in 1977, despite protests, and the building was torn down in 2005. Today, it's a park. Smith and his fellow alumni still reunite every year to celebrate their time at the school. He also worked with the state and Casey Pfeiffer's office to ensure the location be remembered as a historical site.

**VERNON SMITH:** I firmly believe if you don't tell your history and people don't know your history, that you're destined for it to repeat itself. And so we want the young people to know what happened there, and not just see it as a park. I can genuinely say that I love Froebel, so I'm going to do all I can to keep alive the memory and the worth of anything that I love. So the Froebel still lives.

**ED:** Nina Earnest is one of our producers. Ronald Cohen, Casey Pfeiffer, and Vernon Smith helped her tell this story. Cohen is Professor Emeritus of history at Indiana University Northwest. Pfeiffer is a historian at the Indiana Historical Bureau. And Smith is a state representative of the Indiana legislature.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**BRIAN:** We're going to turn now from Gary, Indiana to the city next door. Chicago is the hometown of Naomi Harvey Turner, a Lakota activist and co-president of Chi-Nations, a council for native youth in the city.

**NAOMI HARVEY  
TURNER:** And Chi is for Chicago, but it's also, I believe in Ojibwe means "many." For all the different tribal affiliations of members within the youth group. And we started off just trying to make a safe space free with the talk because there is a lot of issues with people not listening to youth, to us.

**BRIAN:** But members also spent a lot of time traveling around Chicago and the Midwest, making connections with other native youth councils, running presentations on native culture, and marching in climate change protests. Many of these activists were in high school.

**NAOMI HARVEY  
TURNER:** It was definitely hard. I would be missing for a week or two because I was in New York or I was in DC or some other res. And my teachers were definitely supportive of me, but I would come back with a workload. Sometimes, it's hard. I've had people whisper rude comments of why are you doing all this? It doesn't matter. And for those people, I realize that a lot of the kids that I went to school with in high school were from the hood or from the projects. So what they saw was that no matter how much they've tried, nothing would change.

I definitely understand that. You know, definitely things haven't always changed for the better. But I think that you should fight anyways.

**BRIAN:** You ended up at a protest in Standing Rock, North Dakota.

**NAOMI HARVEY** Yeah. What happened was that DAP, the Dakota Access Pipeline, wanted to build an oil pipeline originally in Bismarck, where their population is majority white. And they decided that it was too much of a hazard to build it there, so they decided that they were going to build it on an Indian reservation, a Standing Rock Reservation.

A lot of these pipelines, they break. And when they break, the oil will go into the water. And harming the water would also harm indigenous people because water is life, [INAUDIBLE]. It's very important to our traditions. And so when you poison the water, you poison the land, you poison the animals, you poison the plants. And so, people are already struggling on these reservations to live, poisoning the water would practically kill them.

**BRIAN:** When you went there as part of your youth council, were you aware that the protests in many ways was started by young people in Standing Rock?

**NAOMI HARVEY** Yeah. I was definitely aware. We were camping with the youth. And it felt really good to be surrounded by youth, seeing them build TVs, and they helped us build our tent, and created a stove for us. And we were sitting around a fire talking to each other, we had moments where we were making food for each other, building stuff with each other. And I think that was very important because it shows how powerful youth are, how much we can actually do if we had that kind of support from people. People that actually see our power and our potential and helped educate us and help us even be aware of our power and our potential.

**BRIAN:** And what was your actual experience of the protests themselves? Was it what you expected?

**NAOMI HARVEY** I think it was and it wasn't what I expected. So definitely on the media, it showed very intense fights between the water protectors and the DAP people. Showing water guns and rubber bullets, and stuff like that. When I was there, it was safe. I mean, there was definitely some tense moments. I was down on the front lines, and you could see DAP security up on the hill. And there were water protectors in the river, standing with their hands up.

I also remember at night, floodlights. There was no complete darkness, that lights were always on you and there were always helicopters in the sky.

**BRIAN:** So it was even brighter than Chicago out there in the middle of North Dakota.

**NAOMI HARVEY** Yes, definitely it was a lot brighter. I mean, Chicago has its lights, but the way that those flood lights were positioned, it was like shining right on you. They were all actually there to remind us that they're watching us, that they're still there. So there's a lot of mental warfare going on, I

would say.

And another interesting thing that I experienced is that there wasn't really a place for us to wash up. And so we went to the hotel on the reservation and actually got kicked out, which I thought was very interesting because we're here fighting for the people on the reservation, fighting for the very water that the hotel is using.

**BRIAN:** So you really experienced some of the cross pressures that anybody who joins a protest experiences, I think. How long were you there, altogether?

**NAOMI HARVEY** Just a week.

**TURNER:**

**BRIAN:** How did the experience change you?

**NAOMI HARVEY** How did it change me?

**TURNER:**

**BRIAN:** If it did it at all.

**NAOMI HARVEY** I mean, it definitely did. It made me-- in Chicago, I have experienced racism, discrimination.

**TURNER:** And then I've also-- I have to write about it too, studying that as an activist and a scholar. But there's a certain thing you can't know until you experience it seeing the way that people have to live on the reservation.

The fact that the water protectors made a point to every single person in that camp that we are not getting violent. This is about praying, this is a sacred space. And they went up to the front lines with their hands up just praying. And there were people on the other side seeing their very existence as something dangerous, as a threat now.

**BRIAN:** You've said that you would be willing to die for the cause. That's quite an extraordinary thing for an 18-year-old even to have to think, let alone say. Why would you be willing to die for the cause?

**NAOMI HARVEY** I mean, one aspect is that definitely in Chicago and many big cities, you see people die for no reason. And so, I don't want to get hit by a car, I don't want to get shot by a stray bullet. But also, that once again, people see my very existence as a threat. And so, I decided that if one day I have a daughter or a son, and if my death let them be able to pray and live. And my

ancestors died and fought for my very existence and for my ability to practice my culture. So why not do the same for my own descendants?

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**BRIAN:** Naomi Harvey Turner is co-president of Chi-Nations youth council and a student at DePaul University in Chicago.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**JOANNE:** That's going to do it for us today, but you can keep the conversation going online. Let us know what you thought of the episode or ask us your questions about history. You'll find us at [backstoryradio.org](http://backstoryradio.org), or send an email to [backstory@virigina.edu](mailto:backstory@virigina.edu). We're also on Facebook and Twitter @backstoryradio. Whatever you do, don't be a stranger.

**BRIAN:** This episode of "Backstory" was produced by David Stenhouse, Nina Earnest, Emily Gaddick, Ramona Martinez. Jamal Milner is our technical director, Diana Williams is our digital editor, and Joey Thompson is our researcher. Additional help came from [INAUDIBLE], Sequoia Kirylo, Courtney Spawna, Aaron [INAUDIBLE], Korean Thomas, and Gabriel Hunter Chang. Our theme song was written by Nick Thorburn. Other music in this episode came from [? Ketsa, ?] Paddington Bear, and [? Jazar. ?]

Special thanks this week to With Good Reason, and as always, the Johns Hopkins Studios in Baltimore.

**ED:** "Backstory" is produced at Virginia Humanities. Major support is provided by an anonymous donor, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the provost's office at the University of Virginia, The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation, and the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. Additional support is provided by the Tomato Fund, cultivating fresh ideas in the arts, the humanities, and the environment.

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[INAUDIBLE].