



Kansas 1972 Podcast Episode 2: Get Up, Stand Up

SERIES INTRO

This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:

Welcome to *Kansas 1972*. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. So, in celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So, tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on 1972.

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

[SFX protest crowd begins]

Kara Heitz:

When we think of political movements for equal rights in American history, we understandably first think of the African American Civil Rights movement. But this movement went on to inspire many other groups to fight discrimination in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond.

[SFX protest crowd ends]

And Kansans, like everyone else in the country, were grappling with these questions about equal rights.

These concerns are reflected in some of the programs that Humanities Kansas (then the Kansas Committee for the Humanities) sponsored in the first half of the 1970s, such as "Equal Rights for Women" held in Leavenworth, "The Chicano Dilemma" in Wichita, and in Garden City both "The Changing Social Role of Women" and "Ethnic Awareness."

While people who attended these events were discussing these issues in their communities, other Kansans were actively advocating for change.

[Music starts]

In this episode, we'll tell the stories of Kansans who stood up for their rights in the early 1970s through sit-ins, walk-outs, and boycotts. You will hear about a group of women who occupied a building on KU campus in support of women's equality.

Christine Smith:

Thirty-five women and four children were in the house, but there were a couple of hundred women who made it possible for those women to be there.

Kara Heitz:

And the long-term impact their actions had at the university.

Kathryn Tuttle:

I don't think any other single action on the KU campus has had such a profound effect as the February Sisters in terms of actual programs developed, longer term effects.

Kara Heitz:

How Kansans boycotted grapes and lettuce in support of the rights of farmworkers.

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy:

...that boycott was really international, right? And that's happening here in Topeka, in Kansas City, in Wichita, even in Salina.

Kara Heitz:

And how Chicano students at Topeka High walked out to peacefully protest discrimination.

George Vega:

...let's have a demonstration. Let's do something. I thought this would be a great way to get people motivated and energized around being Mexican and being proud of that.

[Music ends]

Kara Heitz:

But first we'll check in on some Sisters. February Sisters to be precise.

SEGMENT 1: FEBRUARY SISTERS AT KU

Lawrence 1978

"35 miles west of Kansas City, Lawrence, Kansas, founded on the Great Midwestern Plain, the town rises from the fertile soil along the Kaw River, home of nationally known Haskell American Indian Junior College and the top Mount Oread the University of Kansas... Today, Lawrence, Kansas is still developing to meet the changing needs of its citizens."

Kara Heitz:

Fifty years ago, just like today, Lawrence, Kansas was seen as progressive community. But for some, the town and the university were not meeting the changing needs of its citizens.

The 1960s and early 1970s saw a number of protests and demonstrations at the University of Kansas, like what was happening on college campuses across the country. At the same time, the women's movement was building upon the frustrations of many women who were questioning the sexism and discrimination they faced in their daily lives.

So, in February of 1972, a group of women who worked and studied at KU added their voices to this era of protest and social change.

Wichita Eagle, Feb. 5, 1972 (DAVID)

"The Associated Press. Feb. 5, 1972. Lawrence, KS - A group of women and children took over the East Asian Studies building at the east edge of the University of Kansas campus Friday

night at six o'clock and issued a list of six demands for women's liberation. Calling themselves the February Sisters, the women gave a typewritten statement to the university ...”

Feb. Sisters' Statement of Action (TORI)

“Feb. Sisters' Statement of Action - As an expression of our frustration with the continuing sex-based inequities perpetrated by this university, this building is being occupied. We feel it is a means of obtaining resources to meet the pressing needs of women...”

SISTERS DEMANDS

Kara Heitz:

So, what exactly were the demands of the February Sisters? How did they go about occupying the building on KU campus? And what did their protest accomplish?

To tell this story, I talked with two women who were part of the February Sisters protest, including Christine Smith (known at the time as Christine Leonard). Christine Smith had attended KU as an undergrad and, in February of 1972, was a university employee working at the library.

Christine Smith:

The February Sisters were a group of women. Thirty-five women and four children were in the house, but there were a couple hundred women who made it possible for those women to be there. They had been working for years, literally, on getting full health care on childcare for students and staff. And Robin Morgan came to town and listened to all of that, and we discovered that there were two or three groups working on health care, and the university was doing nothing. Zero, zilch. So, it was time to do something, and we decided to do something.

Kara Heitz:

So, health care, childcare - these are some of the big concerns of women at KU in 1972. (And we've adequately addressed those issues 50 years later, right?) But these are just a part of the demands of the February Sisters. To understand all their demands, you first have to understand the status of women on KU campus in the early 1970s.

To help elaborate on this background, I spoke with Kathryn Tuttle, who worked in advising and admissions at KU for a number of years, including being the Associate Vice Provost for Student Success. Dr. Tuttle also taught in KU's School of Education and the Honors Program and has researched the history of women in higher education.

Kathryn Tuttle:

It's important for younger women to understand the context for women, faculty, staff, and students at KU and other campuses, frankly, in 1972. For example, at KU there was no access to birth control at the Student Health Center that was funded by student fees. And sadly, there was a misogynistic doctor in charge of the center who was always moralizing about, you know, “We're not going to be handing out this birth control to these immoral women.” So it was that kind of a context. There was no childcare. The federal government had required an affirmative action plan by all higher education institutions related actually to title seven, which was employment. This was before, I mean, Title Nine did come that year, but this was about employment, and they'd required universities to have this plan. Well, KU dragged their feet. And so, they didn't have a plan, as you can imagine. Also, there was a lot of pay inequity, and there were women faculty who were only... women were only a little under 11 percent of the faculty, and their salaries were even for faculty, women faculty, about \$13,000 less than men. So, we

have all these things coming together: health care, childcare, affirmative action, and equity. So that time was ripe, and there had been a big protest in 1970 that was nationwide as well around some of these issues. In 1971, there was a big International Women's Day where there was a walk. You know, women gathered along campus. At KU we had something called Women's Coalition, which was kind of a loose federation of women students, some faculty, some staff, and they were kind of a prime force behind getting Morgan Robin there.

Kara Heitz:

You may have noticed that both Christine Smith and Kathryn Tuttle mentioned Robin Morgan's visit to campus as a catalyst for the February Sisters' actions. Morgan is a feminist poet and activist who edited the 1970 book "Sisterhood is Powerful," an anthology of what was seen at the time as radical feminist thought. She visited KU's campus on the evening of Feb. 3, 1972, the day before the protest.

February Sisters Christine Smith and Jolene Anderson describe what happened during and after Robin Morgan's talk. Like Smith, Jolene Anderson received her undergraduate at KU. In February of 1972, she had attended a semester of graduate school at KU and was working as a preschool teacher in Lawrence.

Jolene Anderson:

I went with my daughter, who was almost three, because February 4th, 1972, was her third birthday, and it was extremely consciousness-raising to be there. And because they kept having to make the room bigger. It was one of those rooms that had partitions you could slide. They kept having to make it bigger because they didn't realize the consciousness of the university. At that time it was white male superiority, period. No questions asked. That's just what it was. So, to have a radical feminist come to town? Well, maybe 20 people. Well, it ended up several hundred. Yeah, not sure how many, maybe 300. I mean, it was packed.

Kara Heitz:

While Robin Morgan's talk definitely provided a spark, it was really the reception after the talk that "lit the fire."

Christine Smith:

And yes, it was a reception. There were like cookies and stuff. I think the Dean of the Women's Office, probably. I always accused the cookies. Yeah, always. But there were no men there, and men complained that they had not been allowed in. And I was not aware of that, but I was aware that it was only women, and it just turned into a meeting. And just this the same thing. Well, we've been talking about women's studies too, and so have you, and it was the same kind of thing. But it got to, "and what we are going to do about it?" which the potluck had not gotten to that point yet. And Robin was there, but she was leading the meeting. She wasn't urging people on. She just listened. And when all of those women got into one room together and Robin said, "What's going on?" and we told them we realized that there were two other groups that were working on health care, and that's how it started.

Kara Heitz:

After the reception ended around midnight, a number of people headed to the Women's Coalition office to make a plan. One group was assigned to find a place to occupy on campus and figure out how to secure it. Another group was tasked with writing their demands. Informing the chancellor and the larger student body about their demands was the job of yet another

group. And because they had no idea how long the occupation would last, there was a group charged with arranging food supplies and childcare.

Christine Smith and Jolene Anderson talk specifically about Anderson's critical role in the protest.

Christine Smith:

It was incredibly well organized. We had an official babysitter. I mean, how nice.

Jolene Anderson:

I can't remember for sure, and because it was cloudy, but somewhere along that line, I think it was like in the middle of the night, that I got the call asking me if I would be the official babysitter. And I was told, you will have to care for up to 20 children for up to 10 days because we might be in jail. And I was like, "I'm on it," and I was. I had planned. I had recruited other people. I mean, we were ready, and it was 12 hours.

Kathryn Tuttle:

It was incredibly well-organized. I mean, I think, you know, I'm a little partial here, but I think these women, they've been raising their kids, they've been working, they've been doing all these things, and they had it down to a tee. I mean, they had their outside group, they had their inside, they had the food, they had the babysitters. I mean, when you look at the organization, it's just amazing. And they were prepared to stay for weeks, I think. So, kudos to the women who put this together.

Kara Heitz:

In less than a day, the group was ready to carry out their plan. They would occupy the East Asian Studies Building beginning the night of February 4th. So, why exactly the East Asian Studies building? It's actually pretty simple. A sympathetic faculty member, who still to this day has been kept anonymous, gave the group a key to the building. The location was also ideal, as it was just off-campus and adjacent to residential buildings. So, people coming and going in the area at night would not look too suspicious. Participants received a phone call in the evening on the 4th, with instructions on gathering in small groups at staging sites. From there, the groups would converge on the building and settle in.

Christine Smith:

I got my call while I was still at work Friday afternoon from Mary and said, "We're supposed to go to Stonehenge, which was the hippie commune and wait and they'll tell us, we don't know. Bring clothes enough for a week." And then then we got a telephone call and said, "We'll come and pick you up. How many people are there? How many cars do we need to bring? How much luggage." That sort of thing. And I want to tell the story about Martha. Martha was a black student at the time. And she went somewhere and waited. And when they said that it might be a week, she was the first person in her family ever to go to college, and she just she just was afraid to make that step. And, certainly she was a February sister too. So, I assume there are other women also that waited but didn't come into the house. And once we all got into the house, and, like I said, no idea...was it six o'clock? Seven? I don't know when we all got there.

Jolene Anderson:

We started having kids by five.

Christine Smith:

Yeah, it was five. I think when we went to wait at Stonehenge and the interior of the doors and every door, except the one we were sneaking in in the back, had chains on them and padlocks. And Mary really liked that, it made her feel safe. I thought it was a little paramilitary, but yeah, it wasn't so oppressive. And we at that time decided we were the February Sisters, and we did work assignments, and decided we would only use first names. And as soon as it was secured, they notified the chancellor, who is having an all-male Bridge party and didn't believe it. It had not been done.

Jolene Anderson:

He thought it was a prank call.

Kara Heitz:

While the Sisters were ready to stay for the long haul, it was only about 12 hours after they entered the building that the group received an initial response from the administration. I guess the Chancellor finally figured out this wasn't a prank. Imagine that? Women actually engaged in civil disobedience. Huh.

Christine Smith:

OK, well, I don't know how long we'd been there, a while, and we got a phone call. There was a lady on the phone in the receptionist office the entire time that we were there, and I suspected that she was in contact with the Women's Coalition office. So that the chancellor called together FacEx, the Faculty Senate Executive Committee, and they said, "Well, we'll come and talk to us, and we'll talk to you then." So, we selected two people from the house, and they went up and down the fire escape because every other door was chained shut. And together with two women who were not in the house, went to see FacEx. And a while later they came back and with them was Betty Banks, Elizabeth Banks, a professor. And they said, "Well, it's the same crap. Oh, we didn't know anybody was upset about this. We've never heard of people needing childcare ever before." But Elizabeth, who was faculty who was there, kind of said, "Well, they really they want you out of there before daylight because they don't want the media to take pictures of you coming out of the building," you know? So, we said, "Well, this isn't this. We need more than this. We're not willing to go out with just this crap."

[Music starts]

From the February Sisters' Statement of Action (TORI)

February Sisters' Statement of Action, Non-Negotiable Demands

1. We demand an Affirmative Action Program planned and directed by a group of women ...
2. We demand a free Day Care Center financed by the University ...
3. We demand that a woman be designated to fill the currently vacated position of Vice-Chancellor of Academic Affairs ...
4. We demand an end to grossly unfair employment practices which not only use Civil Service as a means of keeping women's wages frozen (as responsibilities are raised), but also foster massive disparities between wages for women faculty and male counterparts on the basis of sex alone ...
5. We demand an autonomous Department of Women's Studies to be controlled and chiefly taught by women.
6. We demand a Women's Health Program. Through this program the following services would be available: free Pap smears, pelvic examinations, and ready access to birth control devices without charge, all given by a competent gynecologist ...

[Music end]

Christine Smith:

So, in the course of talking about what we wanted out of that negotiation team, I said, "Be sure and tell them that it's not just students, there's staff people here, there's a faculty wife here. There's town people, there is a high school student in the house." And because they think that students will be gone in two or three years and the problem will go away, and we have to remind them that there are people here who know who will be here longer. And so that's how I got on the second negotiating committee, just so I could say that. And I did. And when I said, "There's a faculty wife," every member of FacEx, all male, of course, had this moment when they wondered where their wives were. You could tell it was palpable. It was the highlight of the meeting.

Kara Heitz:

So, why was the KU administration so willing to negotiate so soon after the occupation began? Why did the Chancellor not want the media attention around the February Sisters' protest?

Kathryn Tuttle explains.

Kathryn Tuttle:

Now remember, the context here too is we actually had a chancellor, Chancellor Larry Chalmers, who was supportive of students protests against the Vietnam War and could be seen as sympathetic. And finally, a few years ago, we actually had a building named after him because when he left, the feeling wasn't so pleasant, I guess you would say, you know, there was a lot of feeling that there had been a reaction against KU because of the burning of the Union and some of the other things that happened in 1970.

Kara Heitz:

1970 was a year of significant student activism and protest at KU, including actions by the Black Student Union, the anti-war movement, women's rights groups, the environmental movement, and the gay liberation front. The new student senate reflected student demands for more representation at the school. But casting a dark cloud over all of this was the Memorial Union fire on April 20th of 1970. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and to this day, no one has been charged with the crime. But the curfews and state of emergency declared in Lawrence contributed to a lingering atmosphere of tension on campus.

Kathryn Tuttle:

So, you know, that's the other part of the context. I think there was a little weariness. You know, OK, first, we've got civil rights and now we've got women's rights and it's just going on and on. And I don't think, this is my personal opinion, I don't think Chancellor Chalmers was so supportive on women's rights, and it was really again the context at the time. We have to remember that, you know, when Christine Leonard Smith went up there as part of the negotiation party, you know, virtually everybody at the table was a man. I mean, we had a woman Dean of Students, and we had other women faculty who were trying to make a big statement. But it was a man's world.

Kara Heitz:

The middle of the night discussions with the administration went well enough that the February Sisters agreed to leave the East Asian Studies house before daylight.

Christine Smith:

The women who were in at the coalition office, not in the house, called a group of women that they called. And so, when we got back to the house from the negotiation team, there were like 50 women in the front yard, and they wouldn't let me stand there where they made me go up to the fire escape back into the house. And then they opened the front door, and those women came in and went all through the house and picked up luggage and kids and food, which they gave to charities.

Kara Heitz:

The Sisters waiting outside the East Asian Studies building served another important purpose - helping to shield the occupiers from retaliation by the administration. Remember, these women were not just students, but many were staff members.

Again, Kathryn Tuttle.

Kathryn Tuttle:

When they ended the occupation, many women came to the front of the building so that when the occupiers left, they blended in with the other women and they were seriously concerned about losing their jobs, you know, being expelled from school. And so, in that way, there was no way to determine exactly who it was. And I think Christine may have told you that she doesn't know everyone who was in the building, you know, so we don't really have a finite list of the February Sisters. And for many years, I think people were a little hesitant to speak out because they still had those concerns. But also, I think, they were very careful when they were in the building. I mean, they didn't want destruction. They cleaned up, you know? So, you know, to me, the occupation itself was a really a great example of a women led women organized protest that was done with a lot of care and then follow up.

Kara Heitz:

In the weeks following the occupation, members of the February Sisters, as well as other Women's groups on campus, got down to work, trying to make their list of demands a reality.

Christine Smith:

And then there was an endless number of meetings. Women were put on the search committee for Vice Chancellor. Women had to go and talk to the student government about daycare. And so, the next really two months were just like constant meetings.

Kara Heitz:

So, what ultimately did the February Sisters achieve with their well-planned protest? What came out of those subsequent months of meetings and negotiations? It turns out, quite a lot.

The immediate impact of the Sisters' actions was discussed less than a year later on *Feminist Perspectives*, a radio show produced in the 1970s by the KU Women's Center. In this clip from the episode "1972 Year in Review", we hear Janet Sears, the Assistant Dean of Women at the time.

Feminist Perspectives, 1973-01-01, 1972 in Review and Hopes for 1973

I think of any action that took place on campus in the past year that raised the consciousness of many people in relationship to women's issues was what became known as the February

Sisters... And out of that have come from several different things when it could be most closely related, I think, with the formation of the Hilltop Childcare Center.

In August of this year, Hilltop Childcare Center opened its doors and now serves 50 children from three months to five years. And I, for one, am very happy to see this development as I have a daughter at Hilltop. But I think it's not enough to meet the childcare needs of the community of the university community.

Kara Heitz:

So, the biggest success was the opening of a daycare facility on campus. And Hilltop still exists to this day as the Hilltop Child Development Center. Also, in 1972, the first female Associate Dean was hired, an Affirmative Action Board was established, and the Women's Studies program was developed, which is today the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. More health programs directed toward women, including greater availability of birth control at the campus clinic, also came about fairly quickly. But other changes took more time. The first female vice-chancellor was not appointed until 1978, and issues of equal pay, while certainly much better than 50 years ago, still persist today. But all in all, a pretty amazing set of accomplishments.

I asked Christine Smith and Jolene Anderson if they felt satisfied with the results of the February Sisters' actions.

Christine Smith:

Yeah, I'm satisfied with that because I think compromises you have. That's how you make progress. And we had a daycare center next fall. I mean, that's that in of itself was kind of worth it.

Jolene Anderson:

Sure, and Women's Studies.

Christine Smith:

...and Women's Studies. And this is now one of the oldest departments in the country.

Jolene Anderson:

And probably the biggest thing, and to me this is a lesson for all of us politically now, it brought groups together for a common goal or several common goals who had been working separately and were unconnected from each other.

Christine Smith:

But that sense of community, the sense of accomplishment, the sense of being together, doing it together. That's all the freedom I need.

Kara Heitz:

While the talk by Robin Morgan was the initial catalyst for the February Sisters, the Sisters themselves became a catalyst for all sorts of changes at KU to address gender inequalities and other concerns for women. And Christine Smith and Jolene Anderson have both continued their activism and political involvement to this day, inspiring new generations of February Sisters and their allies.

Lawrence 1978:

Lawrence, Kansas, what do you think? I think they're very progressive, very up to date and the leadership is going to make it the best town in Kansas. We have everything and more, and yet if there are small gaps that need to be filled, they're just a short ways down the pike.

Kara Heitz:

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the February Sisters' protest, the KU Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies is hosting a number of events in April. For more information, go to: wgss.ku.edu.

[Music starts]

Of course, Lawrence was not the only place in Kansas with an active women's movement in the 1970s. For example, a lot was going on in Wichita, including the establishment of one of the first departments of Women's Studies in the country at Wichita State. You can find out more about this story on our website. And tune in to the next episode of this podcast, when we tell the history of the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment in Kansas in the 1970s.

[Music ends]

Kara Heitz:

But now, another story about standing up for your rights, this time from the Mexican-American community in Kansas.

SEGMENT 2: CHICANO MOVEMENT IN TOPEKA

NYTimes, 05-03-1972, "New Boycott of Lettuce Announced by Chavez":

"United Press International, May 2nd, 1972. Another nationwide buyer boycott of lettuce was announced today by Cesar Chavez, whose United Farm Workers Union has previously sponsored boycotts of lettuce and grapes. Mr. Chavez said the reason for the boycott was that the lettuce growers would not recognize the right of their workers to have a union."

Valerie Mendoza:

So, my first introduction really to the United Farm Workers and grape and lettuce boycotts was when I was a kid in the 70s.

Kara Heitz:

That's Valerie Mendoza, who works in Academic Affairs at Washburn University and has a family connection to the boycott efforts in Kansas in support of Chavez and the United Farm Workers.

Valerie Mendoza:

I remember my grandparents, my grandmother in particular, telling me, you know, we can't eat that. We don't buy that because of the boycott. You know, and I can't remember right now if it was lettuce or grapes, but it was something I wanted to eat, right? And you know, and it's really interesting because just recently I found going through some of her things that we still had around a button, a pin with the UFW logo on it. So, both my grandparents and my parents were really involved in supporting that effort.

Kara Heitz:

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the emergence of a multi-faceted movement in support of Mexican American rights that encompassed Mexican Americans and other Latinos of highly diverse backgrounds, classes, politics, and geographic locations. In Kansas, the Chicano Movement inspired Mexican American students to walk out of Topeka High in April of 1970 to protest limited opportunities and discrimination. But our story today starts out with another part of this larger movement - the fight over the rights of farmworkers in California.

Chavez at UCLA, 10-11-1972, speech against prop 22 which would limit ability for farm workers to unionize:

“Isn't it tragic that the same men and women who harvest, who plant and cultivate and harvest the greatest abundance of food that the world has ever known, when it's all said and done, when the land is lay fallow to rest, and they look at themselves and they have no food for themselves? And this is really tragic. And so, they're saying to you through me as we feed you and feed you for generations, ‘Please help us feed ourselves.’”

Kara Heitz:

That's Cesar Chavez, labor leader, civil rights activist, and co-founder of the United Farm Workers speaking in 1972. To help understand the context of Chavez's activism, I spoke with Miriam Pawel, a journalist and historian, who has written extensively on the United Farm Workers and has also authored a biography of Cesar Chavez.

Miriam Pawel:

So, Cesar Chavez was he was born in Arizona. His family lost their land, and when he was 12 years old, he became part of the migrant stream coming to California in 1939, the same year that the Grapes of Wrath was published. So, to give people a sense of what conditions were like, and, you know, spent many years working in the fields himself. And then Chavez learned how to become a community organizer, really starting in 1952, and spent 10 years working for an organization called the Community Service Organization, which is really the first grassroots organization for Mexican Americans that was formed in California. I mean, essentially, historically, and still to a large degree, farm workers have been excluded in this country from almost all of the health and labor and welfare protections that we give legally to other workers. They had no right to organize. They could be fired at will. They had no minimum wage or days off or anything like that. So, the conditions were really very physically grueling. And also, I think something that really drove Chavez as much as the physical conditions was the lack of respect and dignity were farmworkers who really sort of treated us employment. So, he began to organize what became the United Farmworkers. He started it in 1962.

Kara Heitz:

Inspired by the nonviolent tactics of Gandhi in India and the African American Civil Rights movement, the United Farm Workers labor union under Chavez began organizing primarily Mexican American farmworkers in California. And they also involved sympathetic supporters nationwide through boycotts.

Their first major initiative in the 1960s was the grape pickers strike and associated consumer boycott of grapes. This five-year strike is what brought Chavez and the United Farm Workers to the attention of people across the country, indeed across the world.

And even in Kansas, people supported their cause.

“Grape Pickers Seek Local Support” (*Wichita Eagle* 1968):

“The Wichita Eagle, September 26th, 1968. A movement to help 10,000 striking grape pickers in California's lush San Joaquin Valley has come to Wichita. Also, the mayors of KCK and KCMO have endorsed the boycott. They passed resolutions asking Kansas-Citians to refrain from buying grapes.”

Kara Heitz:

The grape boycotts received a lot of news media attention at the time. And this helped garner the support of a coalition of students, religious leaders, people coming out of the African American civil rights movement, and others who saw this as the next big civil rights battle in the US. And supporting the United Farm Workers was pretty easy for the average consumer who wanted to do something to support the cause. Just don't buy grapes. But others, including some Kansans, were interested in doing more.

Ruth Holste letter to the UFW, Hays KS:

“I am from a small midwestern town and have just been recently informed about the grape boycott. I have become very interested in it and would like to organize a group to help with it for this area. I need information on how to organize this type of group and samples of leaflets that could be distributed. Any other information would be appreciated. ... Hays needs to be informed! Signed Ruth H, Hays, Kansas.”

Letter from UFW to Vega, 10-02-1968:

"Dear George, it was good to talk with you. From all you said, I think that you are going about setting up the boycott operation in Topeka in the right way. I am enclosing complete background materials on the boycott and the strike which are pretty much self-explanatory. If you have any other questions or need documentation for a particular argument, please do not hesitate to call me."

Kara Heitz:

In Kansas, there are references to organized grape and then lettuce boycotts in Wichita, Topeka, Kansas City, and even Salina and Atchison. And this activism would help spark another aspect of the Mexican American rights movement in Kansas.

Topeka State Journal, 4-16-1970, “Mexican-American Students in Protest”:

“Topeka State Journal, April 16th, 1970. About 125 Americans of Mexican descent walked out of classes at Topeka High School this morning and marched to the Board of Education building and City Hall to present their accusations of discrimination and list of grievances.”

Kara Heitz:

One of the organizers of that walkout was George Vega. The letter from the UFW to George was to his dad.

George Vega:

When I was in high school, I remember seeing my dad had literature from the Farm Workers' Union for a long time. Apparently, he contributed to them. And in return, we got literature and I was keeping up with what was going on and I was sharing it with Tony. We were really interested in what was going on. And in fact, my dad took me to Kansas City, where we met Cesar Chavez at a meeting where he spoke.

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy:

You know, when we talk about Cesar Chavez in schools, it's like, Oh, yeah, that was happening in California. It's like, no, that boycott was really international, right? And what's happening here in Topeka, in Kansas City, in Wichita, even in Salina ...

Kara Heitz:

That's Neill Esquibel-Kennedy, who is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Kansas in American Studies. She researches the history of Mexican and Mexican American communities in Kansas, and interviewed George Vega as part of that project.

In the early 1970s, after graduating from high school, the young George Vega went to California to work directly for United Farm Workers in their boycott efforts.

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy:

What I find interesting about George's story is when he goes out to California, even though people across the country are supporting this boycott. You know, he gets asked, you know where he's from? And he's like, "Oh, I'm from Kansas." And I ask, "What did they say about you being from Kansas?" And he went, Oh, they're like, "Oh, there's there's Mexicans in Kansas?" And so even that, you know, being in California, being, you know, surrounded by a bigger Chicano population that gets lost too, that there's other places besides California and Texas and the American Southwest that have strong Mexican communities. You know, history hasn't been made. Their history just trickles down to the Midwest, to Kansas. And I think George's story kind of highlights the opposite that history is being made in Topeka, Kansas, by Chicano teenagers in the late 1960s.

Kara Heitz:

So, how did George Vega's interest in the United Farm Worker boycotts develop into his involvement in the Chicano student movement? We can see the seeds in an article Vega co-wrote with his friend Tony Campos entitled "Local California grape boycotters to picket Safeway markets" for the June 21, 1969 issue of the Topeka Messenger (a newspaper that primarily directed at the African American community in Topeka). The article notes that the grape boycott movement in Topeka has begun but has not yet blossomed. A local leader in the Mexican American community is interviewed, and remarks that support for the United Farm Workers strike has mostly come from Anglos in Topeka, particularly members of the clergy, but there is not much support from the Mexican American community for the boycott. However, the article also comments that some Mexican American youth in Topeka have answered the call of supporting the boycott. Of course, this included a young George Vega himself. So why was the Mexican American community in Topeka, at least the older adults, not supportive of the grape boycotts? To help better understand some of these intergenerational differences in the Mexican-American community in the late 1960s and 1970s, I spoke with David Robles. Robles is an assistant professor in the American Ethnic Studies Department at Kansas State University and studies the history of the Chicano Youth movement.

David Robles:

So, we have the Mexican American generation, right? 30s, 40s, 50s, right? You start to see, you know, how some of the younger generations in the forties, you know, start straying away from these quote unquote American values, right with the zoot suits and, you know, changing the language, right? But it wasn't until the 1960s where you have this direct challenge to these ideas of assimilation. Individuals such as, you know, had George Sanchez, you know, these Mexican American civil rights leaders, right? They were looking at the political side of things. They were looking at how to change policies. You know, how are we going to make our

communities, you know, thrive with these policy changes? We have to work from the inside to make these changes to the outside. But in the 60s, you have classes that were tired of that because it was moving too slow. Right? And a large guy knows, you know, and I'm not saying that everyone did, but many of them felt that you needed direct action rather than indirect action, right? You need to create the changes right then and there. And that's this is where you start having these conflicts right with the, you know, Mexican American generation and Chicano generation. They couldn't see eye to eye on how to go about certain issues or political issues, educational issues, economic issues.

Kara Heitz:

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy explains how this generational gap worked specifically in the Topeka Mexican-American community.

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy:

There's a generation gap between people who assert themselves as being Chicano and maybe their parents or even their fellow friends or cousins who may have me and like, No, I'm not a Chicano. I'm an American who is also Mexican, you know, prioritizing their Americanness over their ethnicity or thinking that if you downplay your racialized identity, you more easily fit into the fold. The term Chicano is very fraught, even within the populations of people who would be considered Chicano. In Topeka, these are primarily second-generation Americans. Their parents were born in the United States. Even sometimes their grandparents were born in the early 1900s in Kansas. And so, you're talking about people who might not even speak Spanish or if they do, they don't speak it very well. Yet their identity is pushed on them that they're Mexican. They're constantly reminded in, you know, their job opportunities or in high school that they're Mexican. Even if they've never set foot in Mexico, they can barely talk to their grandmother in Spanish. They're still pigeonholed as Mexican, and that really creates constraints on their futures. And they feel that, and they want that to change for not just themselves, but for their future generations.

Kara Heitz:

So, George Vega is part of this younger generation in the late 1960s and the 1970s who embrace a Chicano identity, who want to engage in direct action to visibly fight discrimination. The first major event in the Chicano student movement nationally began in March of 1968 with the East Los Angeles Walkouts, also known as the Chicano Blowouts. These were a series of protests by Chicano students in Los Angeles over unequal conditions in public schools, with thousands of students participating. And these walkouts served as a catalyst for similar protests across the country, notably in Denver, Colorado, and South Texas. David Robles discusses some of the reasons that Chicano students were protesting.

David Robles:

You had a lot of issues with corporal punishment for speaking Spanish in the classroom. You had a lot of these curricular tracks for these students that led them to more a locational jobs and rather than going to college. Other students wanted Mexican American courses. They wanted to see themselves in the history context, right? Because all they read about was, you know, George Washington, you know, Abraham Lincoln, and they didn't see themselves there right? When he would talk about, you know, events such as, you know, the Mexican American War, it was just glossed over, right? They also wanted, you know, faculty that represented the student demographics in these campuses, right? And so, there was a lot of issues going on. ...it was just this cascade of activism. And it's very influential because a lot of these students who protested for this change ended up, you know, making this change. You know, I, if I recall

correctly, a lot of these students who protested in East L.A. There were they became administrators in the education system in L.A. Right. They wanted to make that direct change.

Kara Heitz:

So, what happened at Topeka High? How did the walk-out happen, and what did it accomplish?

Here is George Vega telling his story.

George Vega:

When we were juniors in high school, two seniors came to us, Raul Guerrero and Joe Guerrero Jr., Joe lived right across the alley from me and Raul lived in Oakland. They came to it to a Tony and me, and they said, "We want to start Mexican club here at the school, but we don't want it to be just seniors. We want it to keep going. And so, we feel like we need you guys to help us get started because we want to bring in juniors and also sophomores into this club so that after we're gone in just a few months, it's still going to go." They were pretty smart guys and they were very nice guys. So, my Junior year was the first year of a Mexican club at Topeka High, and it was called MAYO, Mexican American Youth Organization.

Kara Heitz:

George and his friend Tony Campos became involved with the Mexican American Youth Organization as juniors and started doing things like attending Topeka High student council meetings. But during their senior year, students started sharing with each other their own experiences with discrimination.

George Vega:

When we were seniors, one of the guys who was, I think, a junior felt like he had been discriminated against by a coach, and the coach made a comment that was inappropriate, racially inappropriate. So, a group of guys who were leaders in the Mexican group there at Topeka High came to us and said, "Did you hear what happened?" And they talked to us about it, and somebody else stepped forward and said, "Well, I think I'm getting a worse grade in my English class because this teacher doesn't like me and won't work with me." I had my own issue when I was in the ninth grade. The Topeka High counselors came to us and said, "We want you divided into three groups. Those of you interested in college preparation courses, we want you to sit over here. We want to talk to you. Those of you are interested in business courses, we want you over here. And those of you who are interested in vocational type courses, we want you to sit over here, and they will talk to each group." So, I started walking toward the college prep group and one of the counselors stepped in front of me and said, "That's the college prep group, are you sure you don't have the right group?" I was so offended. I never I have never forgotten that. All my career I kept reminding myself, "I'm going to prove that this stupid woman that I did belong in that group."

Kara Heitz:

With all these stories coming to the forefront and inspired by Chicano students across the country calling out discrimination in their own schools, George Vega and Tony Campos decided some kind of action was necessary.

George Vega:

So, these guys have come forward. I had my own issue. And what we talked about was, "Let's have a demonstration. Let's do something." And Tony and I thought this would be a great way to get people motivated and energized around being Mexican and being proud of that, but also

saying “We're not going to take this crap anymore,” you know? And so, we organized a walkout. What we wanted was people to go to class and then stand up in the class and just walk out. I think most people this didn't go to class. I think they went outside and waited. But then the night before my dad got us all this poster board and markers, and we created all kinds of signs that we were going to carry. And my dad said, “I'm going to drive alongside you guys because I know the police are going to be inappropriate and I'm going to take pictures of them to prove that they were acting badly.” I guess he thought I was going to get beat up by the police, and I don't know. But he was there. He was very supportive and went and we marched from the high school in a long line. About a hundred and fifty kids walked out of there.

Kara Heitz:

The Topeka School Board was meeting not too far from Topeka High that day, so the group marched towards their location.

George Vega:

So, we marched over there to give a list of demands to the to the school board and asked the superintendent of schools. We had a list of 10 things and they included like, we wanted counselors. We wanted more teachers. We wanted the curriculum to be changed. We wanted textbooks that reflected our contribution. I mean, we were asking for all these kinds of things.

Kara Heitz:

This was a textbook example of a non-violent, peaceful protest. But not everyone was happy with how they organized the walkout, even among some of their friends and allies.

George Vega:

We had intentionally left Blacks out of our march. They did not know we were walking and we kept it a good secret. It was a good secret. They didn't know. And so, they were shocked and dumbfounded that we had marched and then we didn't include them. But the reason for that was that the conversation about race was always about black and white. It never included brown. And we said, “If we include them, it's going to be about black and white again. And we don't want that to be, this is our thing because we want this to be about us.” So, we left them out. I tell it several of the Black students the next day were really mad. I mean, they were just, you know, “you should have included us,” you know, “we had the same issues you do.”

Kara Heitz:

I asked Neill Esquibel-Kennedy about this tension between African American and Chicano student movements.

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy:

I think that goes back to Brown versus Board, the kind of sidelining of Mexican segregation. What gets law is a very black-white divide, which is what, you know, often gets pushed in, you know, U.S. history that race problems in the U.S. are a black-white problem, and everything in between is just, you know, here or there or just, you know, marginal parts of the story.

Kara Heitz:

But it's not a marginal part of the story, especially in the Kansas context. In the decades prior to the 1954 Brown versus Board of Education decision, African Americans were not the only group placed in segregated schools in Topeka. Mexican American students were also segregated but this policy was justified for slightly different reasons, such as language and cultural differences from white students, and even discriminatory assertions about hygiene.

So, while the end result of both African American and Mexican American segregation was basically the same - poorly funded schools, inadequate facilities - the stereotypes were working in different ways. And Mexican Americans also faced racist assumptions about only being good for manual labor and therefore didn't need a lot of education. Of course, African Americans were also facing similar prejudices, but again it's not exactly the same story. And with Mexican Americans, there is the added pressure of cultural assimilation.

So, fighting discrimination can be, and has often been in American history, about solidarity among different groups of people. But something can sometimes get lost with coalitions when so much about race in the US has been seen through the lens of a black-white divide.

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy:

And so that's why even though coalition building is such a moment such a part of the moment during the late 60s, early 70s, there's also moments where you know the reason it's Black power is to signify Blackness, right? To uphold Blackness as identity that is one to be proud of. And from the American Indian Movement to Chicanos to also, you know, yellow power, people took up that mantle has also been like as a as a, you know, reaching out and being like, "We're with you, we're in solidarity. And we're also taking these really the language of that and using it to be in solidarity, but also to point out that we are proud of our identity." And so that decision to make the walkout just Chicanos instead of having all non-white students participate is to highlight that hidden history of Chicano discrimination, right? And that's why they decide to point out that Chicanos are here and we're going to stay here, and it's not just a white, nonwhite issue, that there are specific problems facing the Chicano community that not necessarily every other racialized community are facing.

Kara Heitz:

George Vega and the other students who walked out of Topeka High that day did make their voices heard about the specific struggles and needs of Chicano students at the school. And the school district actually did attempt to address some of their demands.

George Vega:

After that, there were some changes. I mean, I think they're they change the curriculum a little bit. They went looking for new textbooks and they also started finding ways of getting kids onto the cheerleading squad and student council and stuff like that, where there were some spots that were exclusively for people of color. And even though some of the white kids later told me, "I didn't like that," I didn't care. I wanted to see people on their on those squads that represented the whole school and not just the few. It was the beginning, in my opinion. It was the beginning of some things that needed to be needed to change in this community, and I think that it was for the better.

Kara Heitz:

So, what about the legacy of the walk-out, over 50 years later?

I myself am a graduate of Topeka High, class of 1993 (yes, I know I'm old), but I had never heard this story of the Topeka High Chicano student walk out of 1970. I do remember vague references to quote "racial unrest" in the 1970s at the school, but nothing about this kind of peaceful activism. So, it turns out Neill Esquibel-Kennedy is also a Topeka High graduate, albeit a couple of decades after me. A few years ago, she participated in a series of events about Mexican American history at Topeka High sponsored by the school, including her interview of

community elders like George Vega. I wanted to know her perspective, as a historian of the Topeka Mexican-American community, as an alum of the school, and as someone who identifies as Chicano, what she thought of the history of the walk-out and its legacy today.

Neill Esquibel-Kennedy:

You know, I went to Topeka high, graduated in 2013, and I did not hear about the Chicano student walkout. I actually didn't really hear the word Chicano until I went to college. And then I was like, "Well, this is actually what I want to identify with." And so, I think the demands of understanding your own history, your people's history, but also the local history is still very much a demand that is taking place at Topeka High. And that's why I believe they did the zoot suit production and did all the cultural events around it. Had the panel of elders, had the fashion show, had me do a lecture at the Public Library because they understood this was a missing part of really the education of their students. And so, I think how far we've come since 1970 is up for debate. You can say that, you know, "Here I am a Chicana Chicano student from Topeka High at KU, getting my Ph.D.," and say, "Oh, look, there's progress," when we ask about how far we've come. You can make an argument for whatever you want, but the truth of matter is I still don't know about this history. And so, I went really digging for it. And that's on purpose. And so, we have to ask, why are these histories hidden?

Kara Heitz:

Why are these histories hidden? An excellent question. And one that we need to be asking, over and over again. Whose stories get told and whose don't, and why? There is no easy answer, of course, but having these conversations and untangling these legacies is part of the important work of the public humanities.

CONCLUSION

Kara Heitz:

And hopefully, you've learned more about the history of some specific Kansans who, five decades ago, stood up for equal rights and equal opportunity through sit-ins, walk-outs, and boycotts.

Next episode, we'll be telling the story of the fight over the Equal Rights Amendment in Kansas in the 1970s.

SERIES OUTRO

Kara Heitz:

Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:

Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK's pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.