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Medical Team at Columbia

Interview with Sylvia Sternberg from New York
City who was a member of a volunteer medical
team duri

Linda Lanphear

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The following is an interview with Sylvia Sternberg from New York City who was a member of a volunteer medical team during the student uprising at Columbia University in spring, 1968.

Question: describe the medical team you worked with. How did people get involved?

Sylvia Sternberg: At Columbia the people were volunteers.

A group called The Medical Committee for Human Rights got started when the students at Hamilton Hall put out a call to a doctor who everyone knows is involved in radical activities. The students said that they would like to have someone come around because they did not know how long they would stay in the buildings. So a few of the doctors and medical nurses went down to the buildings during that week and checked people out for colds and cuts. And then on the night of the bust those people called other people and it grew into a greater thing. But still there were only about five MDs; not even five because some were just medical students. Most of them didn't even know each other because they were all from different groups. Peo-

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ple got involved with working on the medical team when they heard about the incidents over the radio and just felt the need to go down.

Question: They weren't related to Columbia University then?

Sylvia Sternberg: Well, a few were but a lot were not and this presented a problem because later on the gates were closed to all outsiders and people could not get in. Even if they showed identification that proved that they were medical personnel it didn't count; you had to be a part of the university. And also, the doctors had other commitments making it necessary for them to leave and come back, and, of course, they could not do that either.

Question: How were you supplied?

Sylvia Sternberg: As far as supplies go, it was all kind of liberated material from where people worked. We were, on the whole, very, very under-supplied; people only carried around pieces of gauze to stop the bleeding.

Question: Did St. Luke's hospital cooperate at all?

Sylvia Sternberg: No, it was very strange. Some students were sent there by the police and the hospital staff made lists of who went in and the lists were given to the police. Not only that, but students were harassed by doctors there and when students returned to the university they would refuse to go to the hospital again because the doctors would give lectures and moral admonitions to nervous, injured students. And so finally, as the word got around, students would refuse to go to the hospital at all and more and more came to us.

Question: Where was your medical team located on campus?

Sylvia Sternberg: Nine of us were just on the grounds with blankets laid out and it was very unorganized. There were only about eight really medical people doing anything. But during that night other people joined them and by morning they were

Question: Did the medical team ever help the police?

Sylvia Sternberg: We took the position of being apolitical even though nobody really was, everyone was very far from being apolitical; but if we had come across a cop who was injured we would have treated him. One cop was treated when he came running up, very frantically, screaming that he had a human bite in the stomach. But the point is that we had to be very careful because we knew that the university officials and the police were keeping an eye on us. We really had to walk a tight rope because doctors were already being hit over the head and if we had not been careful there would have been no chance for us.

in Ferris Booth Hall and in Philosophy Hall where they could finally get their supplies organized.

Question: Were there many doctors from the university health service?

Sylvia Sternberg: No. Later on we called the University Health Service to ask for assistance; in fact I made the call asking for stretchers and other first aid material, and the nurse just said that the Health Service is open from 9:00 to 5:00 and any student can go over there during that period. So I asked her what happened at night when students were bleeding and there was nobody to help them and she just repeated the same thing about being open from 9:00 to 5:00 and said that she couldn't speak with me any more because they were helping a student then.

Question: What about the university medical center?

Sylvia Sternberg: The medical center was in a very bad state because there was a student movement at the center and they were going to go out on strike in sympathy with the other students. At the medical center it was just quiet and no doctor would cooperate.

Question: But I mean, what did the students have in mind by going on strike? Couldn't they have occupied the center and used the facilities?

Sylvia Sternberg: That wasn't possible because many of the students have duties in the Medical Center and there was a big question as to what they would do. They were able to lull it through and later they came down and had a demonstration. The administration at the Medical Center started having faculty meetings which they never had before, discussing how to keep the students together and they finally decided to allow the students to have a student government and a representative to meet with the curriculum committee. They made these kinds of concessions because they were really very frightened.

Question: Did many people from the community help out?

Sylvia Sternberg: Yes. There were people bringing in food, particularly at Hamilton Hall where a lot of the black community was bringing in food and medical supplies. There were a number of priests and nuns from different groups bringing in food and they were stopped, which nearly caused a riot. A priest and nun went to hand out food at Low Library and the cops chased them away. The jocks on the other side of the fence were trying to barricade Low Library too and literally starve the people out.

Question: A characteristic part of American propaganda is about what communists do to priests and nuns. Can you imagine newspaper headlines telling about American cops beating up priests and nuns?

Sylvia Sternberg: As a matter of fact, Rabbi Goldman, the Jewish chaplain at Columbia, was beaten over the head and was really messed up by the cops. Then a very terrible scene occurred on the south lawn. There was a nurse who was taking care of patients there, two of which were Rabbi Goldman and a boy whose eye was bleeding profusely due to the fact that he had been wearing contact lenses at the time he was hit and one lens had broken in his eye. It was really feared that he would lose his vision. The nurse had both the boy and Rabbi Goldman lying down on some blankets and, for some reason, the cops decided to run across the lawn and, of course, push all the students before them. When this happened the nurse started screaming that the people lying down could not be moved, whereupon some students got around them and started to scream things like "First Aid Station!" and "Nurse!", but the cops didn't listen at all and finally students lay down over the boy and Rabbi Goldman to prevent them from being hurt any more. It was terrible because the cops didn't stop at anything, they paid no attention, they honored nothing.

Question: During the attacks like the one you described, was the tiny medical crew able to do anything at all?

Sylvia Sternberg: Well, at this particular stop there was only one nurse, the rest were spread all over the other areas, so very little could be done until the cops left. Afterwards, the people could be moved inside the buildings and receive treatment, and in cases like the one boy, an ambulance could be called. He did not lose his vision but certainly came very close; it is slightly impaired. But the worst scene of all took place when the cops moved out into the street and brought in horses. In the street there could be no medical people at all, even though this was an especially dangerous area because the horses were trampling people. Horses were just running into people and the terrible thing was that you could not run any place because there were cops everywhere. The cops would say, "Get down the streets" and beat people to drive them down the street. So you would run down one street and cops would hit you over the head; then you would run the other way and run into more cops who would beat you over the head. But the fatal mistake was when a person fell. If you tripped it was all over because the cops would just get you and beat you. When you saw the head lacerations you knew that it was not from just one hit. There were a few concussions. You could see that they were just hit over and over again.

In the following days the medical team got more organized in Earl Hall, which is the chaplain's offices, and the ministers helped us a-great deal. They set up a station where people could come in 24 hours a day, and there were people coming in 24 hours a day. There was always a doctor there, and that worked out very well because we could send out teams from there to help students and people soon learned that Earl Hall was the student First Aid Station. Some seminary students also set up an ambulance service. They had a Volkswagen bus which they were able to park near campus and bring people to us. They were also able to get stretchers and other materials which we were not able to get before. Our main effort was not treatment of people but initial first aid.