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[Shantytown Revisited](#) | REMEMBERING THE SOUTH AFRICAN DIVESTMENT PROTESTS OF 1985 AND 1986

ONE APRIL DAY IN 1985, AS TULIPS bloomed in front of Day Hall, students gathered at the building to demand that the University divest its holdings in companies doing business in apartheid South Africa. "About 200 people showed up for that first protest and more than 100 got arrested," remembers Matthew Lyons '86, one of the organizers. "There was a sense we'd tapped into something, struck a chord." For Lyons, the event was a personal watershed as well. "I had spent most of that year feeling quite isolated and alienated from the student culture around me--the fraternity scene, the general party atmosphere," he says. "All of sudden, there was this whole other culture, politically minded and with a sense of shared goals."

It wasn't the first time that Cornell students had asked the trustees to divest, nor would it be the last. But the scale of the protests that spring was dramatic and unexpected: over 1,000 would ultimately be arrested for sit-ins at Day Hall. The arrests at Cornell followed closely on the heels of protests at Columbia and Berkeley, and anti-apartheid demonstrations soon spread to campuses across the country.

On April 20–22, faculty and former students will come together on the Hill to commemorate the protests of 1985 and 1986. According to English professor Paul Sawyer, one of the event's organizers, there will be a photo exhibit and a series of events centered around the divestment movement and other moments in the history of Cornell activism, from the Straight takeover to Redbud Woods.

For many of those involved, that surge of activism twenty years ago had a profound influence on their lives. Lyons, an archivist at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, is also an independent historian who studies social movements and systems of oppression. **Kelly McGowan** '85, who was a spokesperson for the divestment activists, now consults with organizations serving disenfranchised communities. "They were definitely formative years," she says. "South Africa was such a glaring example of injustice, a movement that needed support. It was a unique and rare opportunity to really make a difference."

McGowan is part of a group of roughly twenty alumni who met during the movement,

have remained active in social justice issues, and stay in touch with each other. Among them is Joan Meyers '88, who is at the University of California, Davis, finishing a dissertation on worker-owned cooperatives. "Having friends doing good work supports us and keeps us going," Meyers says. "The anti-apartheid movement brought us together."

Matthew Lyons also maintains friendships forged in that era. He was politically active before the divestment protests, he says, but joining that movement shifted his focus. "A lot of the people I felt connected with believed that, well, the next step is looking in a serious way at racism and class oppression in the U.S. I'm talking mainly about white activists--activists of color had been doing that all along. It wasn't that I hadn't been concerned about racism before then, but I hadn't made it a focus of my work."

The movement also changed how Lyons approached activism. "It was a different style of protest than I'd been involved in before--the sit-ins, being ordered to leave Day Hall at the end of the day, being dragged out," he says. "People participated in spur-of-the-moment ways--you didn't know what was going to happen. There was a sense of the energy of the crowd. It was a spontaneous, open-ended style of activism."



Scenes from a Shantytown: Divestment movement encampment on the Arts Quad, 1986

One innovation of that spring was Shantytown, a collection of shacks that students built to symbolize the living conditions in South Africa and serve as an information center. Students at Berkeley erected a similar encampment around the same time; according to Lyons, the publicity inspired imitations around the country. "That was probably our doing--getting Shantytown into the culture," he says. "We helped to pioneer that."

Early on, Matthew Lyons had asked his father, David – then a professor of law and philosophy at Cornell – to join the student protests. "His response was that he liked to

save himself for emergencies," Matthew recalls. "So I said, 'If I call you from Day Hall and say this is an emergency, will you come?' He said yes, and he did." Matthew Lyons, Meyers, and McGowan were each arrested multiple times for remaining in Day Hall after closing time, and David Lyons was among the first of about twenty-five faculty members to be arrested. All charges against them were ultimately dropped, as were the charges against nearly all of those arrested for trespassing that spring; no one was convicted.

David Lyons, who now teaches in the law school at Boston University, says that he and other Cornell faculty members were struck by the divestment coalition's emphasis on equality. "We were so impressed by them, having as our benchmarks the student political organizations of the Fifties and Sixties," he says. "They were such an egalitarian and reasonable and non-hierarchical, non-sexist group." The divestment movement had widespread support across the campus community: large numbers of students participated in the protests, a faculty referendum overwhelmingly supported divestment, and unionized staff voted unanimously in its favor. The Board of Trustees, however, was less receptive. Soon after the 1985 sit-ins began, then-President Frank Rhodes told a group of protesters that the trustees believed investing in socially responsible corporations doing business in South Africa was the best way to aid non-white South Africans.

In 1986, faced with escalating opposition, the trustees relented somewhat and adopted a policy of selective divestment. That year, the University held about \$146 million of stock in companies doing business in South Africa; by late 1988, the figure had dropped to about \$42 million. In January 1989, despite weekly divestment pickets the previous fall, the trustees declined to reduce the University's South African holdings further. The question became moot in the next year, as the South African government fell and the apartheid system was dismantled.

Though the protesters could claim--at best--only a partial victory, Matthew Lyons remembers the spring of 1985 as a pivotal moment. "Here was an opportunity to be part of this larger movement that may at least in some small way help to free South Africa," he recalls thinking. "It was a charge to be part of those protests. It may or may not have had a large effect on the greater issue, but it did on those who were involved."

--Kathleen Kearns '85 with research assistance from Annie Kearns '09