

# Black power era discussed

By PAUL WOOD

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URBANA — A University of Illinois seminar on black power is drawing scholars and activists from all over the nation, as well as one who's homegrown.

Terry Townsend, a fixture in local politics since the 1960s, will attend "Race, Roots, and Resistance: Revisiting the Legacies of Black Power," which continues through Saturday on campus.

A complete schedule is available at <http://www.aasrp.uiuc.edu/conference/schedule/>.

Townsend lived and worked through both the civil rights and black power eras.

As the program notes put it, "Succeeding the civil rights phrase of the Black Freedom movement, Black Power remapped the nation's understanding of race, challenged liberal conceptions of democracy, and established the groundwork for multiracial coalitions.

"Black Power's impact on African-Americans was even more striking; it fundamentally transformed African-Americans' consciousness and identity."

Though in many parts of the nation the civil rights movement made strides in the 1950s, Townsend said, it mainly took off in Champaign-Urbana in the Kennedy era.

"The civil rights movement started with picketing of J.C. Penney's in 1963," he said. "They would not hire minorities in retail; you could not be seen on the floor, but being a janitor was OK."

The Champaign Improvement Association modeled itself on King's 1955 Montgomery Improvement Association, and united black and white people in peaceful protest.

"It was successful, and it set the stage for what would come later," he said.

In 1967, Townsend was finish-

ing up high school, and the University of Illinois was creating its Project 500 to attract black students.

One of his neighbors was John Lee Johnson, who died last week at 64.

"We grew up at (the corner of) Ash and Columbia, catty-corner from each other," Townsend said. "As time went by, John and I began to do things together personally and politically."

They experienced Project 500 differently, Townsend being an insider, a UI student, while Johnson never went to college but mobilized the program as an outsider.

Project 500 was not the UI's first opportunities program for minorities; small-scale projects had been tried in the economics department and College of Law, Townsend said.

But those had attracted a handful of students, while Project 500 was named for the number of slots to be opened up.

"Project 500 was the most ambitious program of its type in the nation," Townsend said.

The freshman class of 1964 had all of about 55 black students.

Project 500 had its flaws, Townsend said.

"It was a lopsided recruiting effort. It should have been called the Chicago project; they didn't recruit at all in Champaign-Urbana high schools," he said.

"It was lonely," he added.

Nor were the students always welcomed.

"When you arrived on campus, the first thing you noticed was the faculty members. Some of them wanted you over there, some didn't. Some faculty members thought it was a burden, others donated their salaries to the cause," he said.

Black power took on a more confrontational approach than

its predecessor, Martin Luther King's non-violent civil rights movement, when King was assassinated in 1968.

Townsend led a march of Champaign Central high school students.

The black community called attention to the lack of recreational opportunities and campus programming for minority students.

Not long after the inauguration of Project 500, black students and community members protested at the Illini Union, which ended with dozens of arrests.

"It started with 19 girls unhappy about their housing and financial aid packages," Townsend recalled.

"We were gathered on the Quad. It started raining, and we went inside the Illini Union. It was not a planned sit-in; there were already African-American students inside the building" socializing.

The sit-in was generally peaceful, said Townsend, one of its organizers.

"About the biggest thing that happened was they balled up some curtains to make bedding," he said.

The Chicago Tribune wrote otherwise, describing students swinging from chandeliers. The newspaper eventually apologized for exaggerating the scene, he recalled.

There were four things the black power movement demanded at the UI: an African-American Cultural Center, an African-American Studies curriculum, a black grievance committee and African studies courses.

The grievance committee did not stay around long, Townsend said, but the rest have been around 35 years, memorials to a movement.