

Free Doc Long, by Oscar Smith, ME'72

Most of you are probably wondering “who is Doc Long?” and “why did he need to be freed?” I know too well the answers to these questions.



Doughtry "Doc" Long was not a fictional character like "Cool Earl" or others whose names were prominently displayed in Philadelphia graffiti. Doc was employed by Penn as Associate Dean of Students in 1969-1970. He is a black male, a graduate of Columbia, and a Vietnam veteran. He needed to be freed because he was arrested for plotting to burn the Astroturf on Franklin Field during the Penn Relays in the spring of 1970.

Let me back up a little bit. I loved the Penn Relays. I like track and, back in the day, the Penn Relays was the largest, and arguably, the best track meet in the world. It was also a “last fling” for some Penn students before finals. My favorite event was the 4 x 440 Relay. While there were several different flights for many of the contests, the Championship of America (COA) division had the best teams in America competing. I had heard about Larry James (aptly nicknamed "The Mighty Burner), of Villanova, taking the baton in the final leg 7 yards behind and winning by 8 yards in 1968. My first year, in 1969, the 4 x 440 final wasn't as dramatic but Villanova still won. The Penn Relays are the only time I remember rooting for Villanova.

In addition to track and field, Penn Relays is a party weekend for black folks. A lot of college kids are in town to watch the Relays and look for a party. A classmate of ours had visited the school during that weekend and thought every weekend on campus was like that. He was disappointed. 1970 Relays weekend had started out well. There was a very nice party on Friday night at the Black House, which was located in the rectory of St. Mary's Church on Spruce Street.

There was going to be another party on Saturday. My plan was to go downtown, buy a new shirt for the party, and then go to the Relays. I was up early; only in college would I consider 9:00 early. The store to which I was headed didn't open until 11:00, so I decided to stop by the Black House to kill some time. I was there for a few minutes when I looked out the window and saw a lot of police surrounding the house.

I wasn't fond of Philly cops. Frank Rizzo, later to become mayor, was the commissioner and he ruled the city with a tight fist. I first learned of the Philadelphia police force when I was a senior in high school. A member of the class of '71 wrote in my high school newspaper about his experiences with a Philly officer who had stopped him and was reluctant to accept a Penn matriculation card as identification. The summer before my freshman year H. Rap Brown

spoke at my church in New Orleans. He said that the New Orleans police were second only to those of Philadelphia police in meanness. Since I already knew how nasty the New Orleans police could be, the Philly cops must be really mean. During my first week of freshman year I was walking to my brother's apartment at 42nd and Chester when I was stopped by some policemen for no apparent reason. I still had to show them ID and explain to them what I was doing in the area. Accordingly, when one of the people at the Black House, who had been detained before, said that we should do what the cops told us to do and not to make a stink, I was inclined to agree with him.

There were four or five people at the house. We were all taken down to the Roundhouse. There we were put into separate interrogation rooms. We were not arrested, but detained.

We got there at about 10:30 AM. I thought that if things went all right I could see most of the Relays. I didn't see a detective until about 2:30 PM. He told me that Doc had been arrested the night before. He said that the raid on the Black House was to find evidence against Doc. He thought that it was particularly significant that they had found empty wine bottles that could be used to make Molotov Cocktails. I thought that, if finding empty wine bottles after a party was a key part of your case, you didn't have much of a case.

After telling me why we were taken downtown, the detective asked me if I knew about the plan to burn the Astro turf. I told him that I didn't. He asked if I would take a lie detector test. I told him that I would.

At the time my opinion of the lie detector test was based upon what I had seen on TV. I was not aware that questions had been raised about the validity of the results. Nor was I aware that the Fraternal Order of Police will not pay for the legal representation of a member if he/she has taken a lie detector test. I just wanted to get out of there and thought that this was the best way of doing that.

It was about 6:30 PM when I took the test. About 7:30 the detective told me the results. The test had verified that I was telling the truth when I said that I didn't know about the plot. I asked if this meant that I would be released. He said "yes, but not right away." That was the last time I saw him.

About 8:30 PM a lawyer, David Rudovsky, came to the interrogation room. He was hired by Penn to represent Doc and me. David now has his own firm and is considered a dean of Philadelphia litigators. Then he was a relatively young lawyer. After talking to me for a few minutes, he left the room. When he came back, a few minutes later, he told me that I was

free to go. By this time it was after 9:00. I no longer felt like partying, so I just went back to my apartment.

However, I was not finished with Doc. I was subpoenaed by the prosecution as a witness for them. I don't know what they expected me to say, since I had passed a lie detector test saying that I knew nothing about the plot. Anyway, I spent the first two days of the trial sitting on a bench outside the courtroom. When you are a potential witness you can't be in the courtroom, as you might be influenced by the previous testimony. I was never called to testify. After the prosecution rested I was dismissed.

A couple of days later as I was walking across campus, I saw a heated discussion between a black guy and a white guy on Locust Walk a little east of 36th street. There were about a half dozen black guys behind the black guy and a similar amount of white guys behind the white guy. One of the white guys I knew from engineering classes. He was standing to the side. I went up to him and asked what was going on.

The last house on fraternity row (TEP) had a white washed portion of their side wall. People would put notices on the wall about different activities on campus. The unwritten rule was once the activity was over the notice could be overwritten. Someone had written on the wall "Free Doc Long". The white guys were all members of a frat and they wanted to overwrite the existing message and put their own message on the wall. The black guys, led by Rogers Johnson, wanted to keep the existing message.

But this was not just any frat. This was the football frat and these guys were huge. The term "no neck" best described them. These men's shoulders were so big it looked like their heads were placed directly on them. The biggest guy, 6'5", 280 lbs., was the one having the discussion with Rogers. All of a sudden Rogers hit him on the jaw with what I hoped was his best shot. The guy just looked at Rogers. I thought to myself "this doesn't look good for Rogers."

Just then Dave Wideman came running up. Dave has been mentioned in a previous memoir about his loving to play basketball at Gimbels and his ability to take a "five fingers" discount at WAWA. What wasn't said was Wideman liked to fight. At 5'10" and 225 lbs., he was pretty good at it. So when Dave arrived after the punch had been thrown, I expected the worst. I was mistaken. I don't know if it was the size of the guys or the fact that Wideman played football with them, but Dave turned into a negotiator. His compromise was that "Free Doc Long" stayed up for a couple of days more before the fraternity brothers painted over it with their message. Because of Wideman's intervention, everybody went home with their bodies intact.

Doc was acquitted of the charges against him and was freed. He went on to teach English in the Trenton, NJ school district until he retired a few years ago. During the time when he was incarcerated and on trial his wife was pregnant with their first/only child. They divorced about 3 years later. Doc also has become a well-known poet and has been recognized by the Dodge Poetry Foundation. His work has been published in many well-known journals.

As for me, I still am not fond of cops, which is probably inevitable for a black guy who grew up in the South when I did. I do think that they have a tough job that I could never do. And I have sensed a change in the police's attitude toward me as I have become old and gray, but I am aware that they have guns and not to scare or surprise them.

