

Interview with Birch Banks - May 2023

Tell us your name pronouns if you want to share them, class year and major.

Yeah, my name is Birch Banks, I use any pronouns. I'm a sophomore, I'm an environmental policy major with a minor in Spanish.

Okay, cool. I want to just ask you a little bit about your personal history with activism. And maybe before you got to Middlebury, or before this particular campaign. And then when you got to Middlebury, did you find that it was easy to get involved with activism here? Or how did you get involved?

Kind of as long as, as long as I can, like, really remember, I've been doing at least a little bit of activism. Both of my parents work in fields that they find themselves doing forms of activism, like kind of inadvertently, whether it's environmental, or like reproductive justice. And so I've just kind of naturally fallen into that. I remember, like one of the very clear first ones that I remember is the Women's March in 26 [2016], or I guess, 2017, like a couple of people from my class were selected to read poems, I was one of the ones and we were reading underneath the state capitol, and it was like, negative 12 [degrees], but there were still something like ten thousand people out, which was just a kind of crazy moment to be like reading to that many people. And then yeah, just kind of stuck with it. I think mostly environmental activism, like environmental policy is my major, but around reproductive justice, and it's just definitely been a major part of my life up to this point, I would say. It's, it's interesting. I think, my first year I came here really looking to get involved with activism here. And I think I found it in my first year. But I don't think in really the same way that I've felt this year, maybe due to COVID. SNEG, for example, is a big part of what I do here, and we're doing, like a protest now. But we just didn't really get anything done that first year. I came here definitely looking for activism and it took some kind of looking for it, I will say. And I think perhaps I wasn't looking in the right areas. If I heard more about Milk with Dignity Before getting involved with other stuff, I probably would have gotten involved with that. But yeah, then this year kind of comes around, and like with somewhat loosened COVID restrictions, I think it just became a little easier to sort of feel the activism on campus, and especially as I got closer to a lot of people that were like seniors that really feels like it's like a big part of it kind of sharing in that activism and knowledge there.

More in that vein, how did you get involved with “The MAC is Now the CFA” campaign to begin with?

I think I should start by sort of clarifying. It's difficult to call it a campaign per se, because it's not like we're planning on doing more after the fact like if we feel the need, we'll probably like put up posters and stuff again, but it is like the first one was really like the big kind of campaign, I guess. I got involved with it, kind of, a mix of ways. I was very close with one of the people that like, whose idea it was, Phoebe Brown, she kind of had this idea based on in her first year, I want

to say it was perhaps like going into second, the school decided to change it from the CFA to the MAC, and they put posters everywhere, they gave out stickers, and they looked exactly like the stickers that we used and posters that we used. So it was really low effort on their part. And most of the students thought, well, this is never going to catch on, but they're obviously trying to put an effort into this and say how it's supposed to be. And then COVID happened, and just due to that the school was able, just, like, every tour from then on calls it the MAC, in orientation you're supposed to call it the MAC when you're like introducing people to it. And so like the school was really able to just push that name forward as they liked without any institutional knowledge among the student body existing to kind of get in the way of that. And I think I became involved with it, because that's something that really interested me is like, oh, yeah, especially like with my work with SNEG, it feels like SNEG used to do a ton with divest, that sort of thing, and I felt like something had been lost there. So yeah, I think that was kind of the big thing. And also a lot of the issues kind of around Mahaney, the reasons that we dislike having his name on the building, are issues that I care a lot about, and so, it kind of seemed natural. Plus, it's really fun to just print out stuff and cover the campus and see if people actually respond to that or not, and kind of see if it actually sparks a conversation.

I do want to have you talk a little bit more about institutional memory, because the archives that we work for, that's sort of our goal is to make sure that there's this resource where people can look and see this is what people have been doing before me, so that you aren't starting from zero every time someone wants to work on an issue, and I know that's sort of what you guys we're working on as well.

I think ultimately, it is technically like a protest of the name, we don't care for Mahaney or his values, but, if it's a protest of anything, it's just the ability of, like, the administration, for example to just make a change, and, if they can hold out that change for three or four years, the student body will have completely changed, and, if there isn't that knowledge there, so much like stuff can be lost, and we've all acknowledged that at times that can be really good. I'm an active member of the Mill, and, in the past, the Mill was not as like safe or comforting of have a place, and that was really due to some changes that happened within a year's time because people moved out and new people moved in. So, it's kind of a double-edged sword, this like lack of institutional knowledge. But I really think a lot of times it can be a detriment to the student body, because ongoing campaigns, stuff that people should really care about, can just kind of get lost sort of the sea of ongoing just, I mean, there's so much to do here at all times that like, it's hard to remember, oh, yeah, we used to care about that thing back in my freshman year, but now I'm about to graduate, and I don't know, I'm so busy that I'm not gonna like, tell a freshman about it. I think it's hard also for freshmen to necessarily get to know seniors well enough to learn about that stuff and keep it going for another three years, unless, both parties really put in the effort.

Is there anything that you learned while doing this, that you think would be helpful for people who are trying to keep movements like this one alive, or other resources that you know about that are useful for building that institutional memory?

I mean, honestly, it's difficult to think of resources for building institutional memory beyond like something like an archive, but even that needs to be known by the students and needs to have a lot of student input. Like it can't just archive certain things, for example, and I'd say in terms of just like stuff that I've learned from it, I think one of them, and it's not necessarily something that I think everyone should hold as, like an absolute truth, but I do have somewhat less trust for an administration that like, have heard student's concerns about this issue, but just refused to kind of do anything about it. Like, we put those out, and already most of the people that I know, refer to it as the CFA now, like, partially because of that, but also, they kind of already did. But all across campus, I don't necessarily hear that being the case. So it can be really hard to keep an idea like this kind of going. I think, in the case of our protest, if you'll call it that, what worked best is just like overnight, all of a sudden, it's everywhere. Anyone that wakes up in the morning can wake up and see as they're walking through the halls, oh, I guess the MAC is now the CFA. And if you do it in an official enough looking way, people will believe that and I think it shows a really concentrated student effort, which other students really respond to. I think, yeah, just in general, when it comes to activism, like being conscientiously able to really show that you've put in the effort and that a group of people have put in the effort makes a big difference, and like helping you kind of believe that.

I want to hear more about how this also has informed your experience of activism more generally, here, like, have you learned anything through this that has changed how you view the culture of activism?

I think so. On the one hand, I think sometimes at this school activism can feel very constrained. I think there are plenty of reasons for that. I think our schedules alone are a huge restrictor of like how vocal you can get about an issue. Beyond that, I think the administration to their part, has to kind of like keep certain forms of activism somewhat down just because it's a lot of work for them to like, deal with students kind of constantly making demands, so to say, which I understand, but at the same time, it means that like, unless you're really vocal about an issue on this campus, it's really hard to get it kind of known about. So I do think that that's informed my decisions, at least kind of around activism. Like, with the SNEG protest that is set to happen this next Tuesday, that took a lot of work to put into place, and I think parts of like the advertising that we've done for it, were informed by kind of like, it's almost easier to get a message out on this campus by putting up posters everywhere, rather than like putting it on social media, which seems backwards, seems countervailing to how most protesting activism goes on these days. But like, you have to adapt to the situation that you're in when you're an activist, and this campus is a very unique situation, I will say, a lot of people very concentrated together, a lot of people that like don't have a lot of time, but have a lot of curiosity, and those combine in some really interesting ways to like, influence activism here.

Have you personally faced any resistance to “The MAC is now the CFA” or any other activism work you've done, either from students, from the administration, like what has the response been?

Pretty much all of those posters were taken down within a week. The school has its policies about like posters and how you're not supposed to crowd or whatever, we understand that, but at the same time for every single one to be taken down, is, I see that as resistance pure and simple. We didn't like, get any communication from the school about it. There hasn't been any communication kind of around extending a conversation around it even. Like, it's just the school, which honestly, I think is the right strategy for them, if they want this issue to just go away, is to just not refer to it [the project]. If the school like made a statement about it, it'd be very easy to then kind of, continue this activism and like, be like, well, here's what the school said, and here's the various reasons that they're wrong. But they haven't responded, and that's, unfortunately a winning tactic in many ways, especially on a college campus with that lack of institutional knowledge, it can, something like that could just fade away. I know that there is a group of people that are really dedicated to it, but like, I'm only here for another two and a half years, and I'm sure I'm talking to people about it, but like, I have no way of knowing [if] that's something they would care enough about. It's just a name change, you know. I think there's resistance to a lot of activism on this campus. I keep saying the administration, I don't necessarily mean like, there's a specific group that are called the administration, I don't necessarily mean them. I think more just like the governing bodies of this school, board of trustees for example, they can be really big in kind of shutting down activist ideas. With SNEG our current campaign is to try and get the school to switch from JP Morgan Chase. Anytime that you check out a card as a student from like an organization or from a departmental, anything, anytime you use college money, you're using a JP Morgan Chase card, and JP Morgan Chase is the number one worst bank in the world for funding the climate crisis. And so that's something that we're trying to change and for the most part, the school has seemed really responsive, but there are ways that they can still seem equally responsive, but no work gets done, like, all someone has to do is not respond to emails for a couple of weeks, and then no progress has been made in those weeks, and we only have so much time on this campus each year. I think, like, resistance doesn't necessarily mean actively pushing back. Sometimes, almost more insidiously, it can just mean like ignoring the issue. And since you're the larger group, the more powerful group that just kind of keeps things in the status quo, which is in your favor.

Are there any plans for the CFA campaign to kind of escalate or kind of not prevent the administration from ignoring the campaign?

Not currently, I will say. I think most of the people that were in that group are very content with like, doing it once and sitting back and seeing the response. I personally am the kind of person that like, if I care about something, I'm going to try and keep it going. I think at least at the moment, like the lack of response really makes it hard to because this, if we try to like say something more about it, the school can say, well, maybe students are saying it, there's no way of

keeping track of that. I personally feel like partially it's been successful, like there are a lot of students that refer to it. And a lot of students, it wasn't our intention, but a lot of students that think it was a school decision to make that change. I can see why they would think that. We were able to replicate the stickers that they made with like five minutes in Canva. So like, yeah, obviously, the school didn't put a lot of effort into it the first time. So currently, there aren't really plans for it, I will say. It kind of depends. Personally, I'm interested in like doing it again in a year and seeing what the response is then, or like half a year even, like maybe next semester, but that is fully dependent on kind of like getting a group together. I know I can find a group to do it again, but like getting a group together, and also like, would the student body respond to that? Or would they feel like, "oh, I already use the CFA, that's weird that they're putting it up again." I think that's the tricky part of it, at least as long as nobody else escalates, we we're not really able to escalate. I mean, we're all just so busy that we don't really want to, you know.

I'm curious, do you know, the like, number of posters that were printed and put up?

Not off the top of my head, but I want to say somewhere around 300.

And that's in one night?

Yes. There were three printings in total done. We started off with 100, realized that wouldn't be enough to kind of do what we wanted. And there were either 125 or 150 stickers that we bought. And that was all done with like several seniors had all of their printing budget left, and were like, I can just print off 100 of these. And the stickers were really easy to purchase. So, I think for the most part, yeah, somewhere around like a couple 100 posters. And there's a lot of like space on this campus, but it is easy to put them up everywhere. Especially when you have like a plan to do

Can you talk a little bit about that plan? Like how did you approach [it]?

Yeah, so Phoebe, Alexis, and a little bit I, we were in Phoebe's apartment, just kind of we were doing a bit of planning for it, and I wasn't there for all of the planning, but as far as I know, it was mostly like, take a map of campus, segment it into areas, look at how many people we have, groups of 2 to 3 work best, send those out, groups of like, I think it was like 6 people assigned to each kind of region of which we made. I want to say there were around like 5 or 6 regions that we distributed campus into and just like every time that you got done with a building, check it off, text the group chat this building's done. The plan for it was like 2 to 3 posters on every wall that can put posters on it. And also just put them in the most random places that you can, because that's where students are going to see them, and that's also where they're least likely to get taken down, was kind of the idea. And then with stickers, the idea was don't cause property damage, and try and put them like, I put out a bunch of stickers, for example, on the desk of a library where they often put stickers out, I just interspersed them in there. And they were all gone the next day, and I'm assuming students just took them and like put them on their laptops or stuff, that was kind of the idea of those, sticking them in places like, posters and stickers, putting them places where they're visible, but don't necessarily have to be like, only in the set spots, because

only putting posters in the set spots is a pretty surefire way to like, people see those walls of posters and they'll either look at them or not. And when you don't have like a go link or anything, when your message is just the poster you really need see, people to see it, but yeah, no, just concentrated effort, get as much of campus as possible. And like, I think we did it in about three hours.

I'm curious how many people did you have helping you?

13. I would say most of us were really helping. This was like, really, this was Phoebe's idea through and through, Phoebe, Isaac, Alexis, like people that have seniors, super seniors, that sort of folk that like knew about this issue enough. I didn't learn about the issue until this semester really, like I knew a little bit about it before and then told by like theater-folk and I referred to it as the CFA, but I didn't know that we were like planning on saying anything about it until J-Term, when I got to know folk like Phoebe a bit better.

Birch, do you have any other, while you're here, any other activist efforts that you want to talk about, anything you want to draw attention to?

I mean, I would love to draw attention to the demonstration, March 14th, for SNEG. The slogan is "Stop Dirty Banks." We're just going to be trying to raise awareness around the fact that like, if you keep your money in certain banks, it's effectively creating as much carbon as like the average American does in their everyday life. And we just want to raise awareness around that, raise awareness around the fact that like, as an institution, Middlebury is inadvertently supporting that, despite the efforts, and like, how difficult it is to, you know, most banks somewhat support the fossil fuel industry through lending or that sort of thing, and so it can be really hard like as, trying to be a conscientious consumer. I know a lot of us here, like we try and purchase from products that are like conscientious for the environment, but like, whether you like it or not, money that you keep in a bank is going to fossil fuels. So that's kind of what the demonstration is going to be about. And that's March 14th, from 4:15 to 6 outside of Wilson.

Is it kind of both asking students to think about where they keep their money and the school as well?

Yeah. So this, this one specifically is more focused on students and raising awareness with students about this issue that they can then take to their families, take back to their communities. We're inviting a bunch of people from the town of Middlebury too, so like trying to also link community there. It's part of a larger movement that's happening, which is called 32123. Really worth looking up if you have the chance. Bill McKibben's group, Third Act, which is about senior citizens going and trying to make a difference about climate change, and a big way through which, which they can do that is financial. And so this whole, what is going to be a nationwide protest, we're doing it a little bit before, 32123 is the date, March 23, 2023. We're doing it a bit before that, because that's during our spring break. So what we're doing there is technically a part of this larger movement that I really hope gets some like national attention and

I have a feeling with Bill McKibben leading it and with like, what I have heard about planned protests it probably will. That's, that's definitely the big one. There's always a million issues that I could try and like, raise awareness about but I feel like that one's relevant.