

All we are saying...

'Give Pat a Chance'

Marchers storm board meeting

by Jeff Holman

They came from everywhere-- from Robbinsdale, from Marshall-University High, from KARE, from MSU, and even from Kennedy High School. They were teachers, students, radicals, and parents, assembled on the sidewalk in front of Kennedy March 5 to protest the firing of Pat Stevens.

The martyred, bearded Stevens, looking very much like a man from Galilee, carried a sign as his cross. The sign did not bear the name of Pontius Pilate, but of the Kennedy principal who has initiated the firing. It said "Vinatieri-- he ain't heavy. He's my brother."

This was not the first protest in the name of Pat Stevens, and it would not be the last. The group of about 100 broke up and some went to Burger King, and some went home. Others went to the Bloomington home of Mr. and Mrs. Pat Stevens, to talk and plan that night's march on the school board meeting.

"Don't call me whitey, nigger. Don't call me nigger, whitey," alternated with "Cold Turkey" on the Stevens' stereo console. Black and white students wandered past a huge bulletin board, eating potato chips. The board, which dominated the living room, was full of newspaper clippings on Vietnam, race relations, and Stevens' own dismissal by the Bloomington school board.

"I just called Superintendent Fred Atkinson," Stevens announced. He said that a dialogue session had been arranged with Atkinson for 6:30 p.m. in front of Kennedy High School. He urged students to "show respect" for Atkinson, and not do anything that would reflect badly upon the school board because "it has reflected badly enough upon itself already."

The stereo was dead and had a pin fallen from the bulletin board as Stevens spoke, it could have been heard. This was a man who obviously had the respect of everyone in the room.

"He was making education relevant and the kids were digging it."

What kind of a teacher was Pat Stevens?

He was concerned about Vietnam and race relations, but he "never let it dominate his classes," according to Tim Paterak, who munched a potato chip as he told of his experiences in Stevens' class last year.

"It kills me," Tim said, referring to the school board charge that Stevens had planned to teach a play that was in bad taste. "Last year a kid said 'bullshit' in his class and Stevens told him to 'watch his language'."

"He was making education relevant and the kids were digging it," said Skip Nelson, who was snapping his fingers and grooving to the Beatles. "That's why they fired him."

Skip, one of Kennedy's several black students, complained about apathy at Kennedy. "Mosy of the kids don't even know what's going on."

A student with his hat off was asked if he was taking up a collection for Stevens.

"Shall we take up a collection? That's a good idea," the student said, and bounced like a clown about the room asking for donations for Stevens legal fund.

KARE (Keep Actively Relating Equally) was well-represented in the group of 30 or more in Stevens' house. Stevens is co-founder of the group, which attempts to bring black kids from the inner-city and white kids from the suburbs together. One KARE member supported Stevens' previous charge that his human relations activity was a factor in his dismissal.

"They just didn't like him. He was a threat to the establishment," said the white girl in her early twenties.

The front screen door slammed and Del Holz, a Kennedy speech teacher, breezed into the room. He asked for everyone's attention and urged an orderly procession from Kennedy to the school board meeting that evening.

"We don't have a parade permit-- they can get us on three violations," said Holz. "They can throw us all in jail, and that isn't gonna' help."

At 6:30 p.m. in front of Kennedy High School, Del Holz introduced Pat Stevens to the cheering, sign-carrying crowd. Some already knew him well. Norman Leistikow, Kennedy debate coach, carried a sign. The chairman of Kennedy's English department, Angela Drometer, wore a button in support of Stevens, as did several other Kennedy teachers. A black cross, larger than a man, bore the same question as the buttons, "Why Stevens and Who's Next?" Kennedy students carried signs which said "Bring Pat Back," "School board is accuser, judge, and jury," and "I want to be educated, not trained."

Others who did not know Pat Stevens, knew his struggle. A Robbinsdale teachers' federation held a sign identifying their local and saying, "We support Pat Stevens." "Freedom to Teach" and "Education takes a Giant Step Backwards" were also

visible against the black sky hovering over the Kennedy parking lot.

These teachers were not concerned that another Pat Stevens case might happen in their districts. "It already is happening," commented a middle-age male teacher from St. Louis Park. "In St. Louis Park, one of those anti-sex people demanded to know what textbooks were being used - and who was doing the teaching."

"We are honored to have the Superintendent with us this evening," said Pat Stevens over a microphone on the sidewalk.

"He is a man that I respect. And throughout this whole procedure, I felt he had acted the way he felt he had to. I don't naturally agree with what he has done."

"Bloomington is not rich enough to lose Pat Stevens."

Stevens said that his firing was no longer the important issue, and that his struggle with the Bloomington school board was part of a larger struggle.

"It's the struggle within the suburban community to open its heart and its mind to the rest of the world. The lack of serenity of the inner-city has pursued those who have tried to get away to the serenity of the suburb."

Superintendent Atkinson looked searchingly into the crowd of 400 people and the WCCO television cameras. "I understand why you people are here tonight," he said. "My position, with my obligation and office, is somewhat different than yours."

"My concern is what happens in the future, not only here in Kennedy High School, but in American education.

"We have demonstrated change in our own district, and change often produces confusion and misunderstanding. We've been talking to each other but we haven't been hearing and understanding."

Frank Russel, a St. Louis Park teacher, declared that "We are here to see that Pat Stevens is reinstated as a teacher in Kennedy High School."

"Bloomington is not rich enough to lose Pat Stevens," he told the cheering crowd.

Curt Anderson, a Kennedy student, said that "stevens was a true friend, I truly miss his presence at KHS."

Del Holz asked the group to sign a petition and march down to the school board meeting "because we love, respect and admire Pat Stevens. And said Holz, "because we are concerned about what's got to happen to education in Bloomington."

Forward and onward they march on a two-mile field exercise from Kennedy High School at 98th and Nicollette to the school board meeting at 96th and Penn. They marched past the business district at 98th and Lyndale, past Snyder's Drugs and Henry's Hamburgers. They carried their own signs past the neon ones.

They stopped at intersection and let motorists cross.

There were twice the number of cars on the street than on a typical night in Bloomington. Some motorists heckled the demonstrators while their children motioned peace signs through car windows.

The line was about two blocks long, mostly two by two, and well-policed by student "marshalls" wearing white armbands. They stopped at intersections to let motorists cross. They sang and chanted all the way to the board meeting, "A ll we are saying... is Give Pat a Chance" and "Bring Pat Back," and, to the chagrin of some, "Hell, no, Pat won't go."

Parents and teachers walked with students. "My whole family supports Pat Stevens," one woman said.

"I'm a teacher, a parent, thing," said another woman, "and I support Pat Stevens."

One "marcher" even came in a wheelchair. Caravans of students waved and bypassed the marchers in old trucks.

More seasoned demonstrators also made the scene, including David Pence and members of the Minnesota Student Union.

The singing stopped at the intersection of 98th and Penn, when a Bloomington police car turned on its siren and whizzed up to the sidewalk. The cop got out of his car, blew his whistle to stop the traffic, and motioned the demonstrators onward. Some of them breathed a sigh of relief.

The kids made a circle in front of the building

which had been Bloomington's first high school, now and used as the district offices.

"Who do we want?"

"Stevens!"

"When do we want him?"

"Now!" they yelled. Skip Nelson, standing by the door, waved his arms like a preacher and begged the group to yell even louder for their martyred leader.

"Why can't we get in?" somebody asked.

"Let's liberate the building!"

Suddenly the door was opened and a wave of demonstrators over an the building. They stormed up three flights up steps. They were like an army that had come to conquer the school board's ancient fort.

They filled up the hallway in front of the meeting room and chanted their messages to the board members inside. They clapped and stomped and sang their songs.

Frank Russel, the marchers' representative, was admitted to the school board meeting as demonstrators sat and listened through the speakers strung out in the hallway.

"We do not customarily put such documents in our minutes."

He began by asking board members if they saw the editorial in the Minneapolis Tribune, and if it could be read into the minutes.

"This is the personal opinion of an editor," was the reply from a board member. "It is not the opinion of the Bloomington school board."

"We do not customarily put such documents into our minutes."

Russel presented a petition calling for immediate and full reinstatement of Stevens. The board asked who signed it, and whether the signers were residents of Bloomington. Russel said that half were residents, and the other half concerned people. The board asked more question and eventually refused to consider both halves of the petition.

Russel next attempted to present six questions which related to the rights of teachers to teach controversial subjects, be in human relations project, etc.

The school board wanted them in written form to be reproduced on a xerox machine. They said they would study the questions and consider them at a later date. It took the school board about six minutes to dismiss the Stevens case and proceed with regular business.

One item of regular business included the voluntary withdrawal of several teachers from the Bloomington system for various reasons. A board member said ironically that he "would like to add that we regret losing their services."

The hallway broke up in mockery and laughter. They had not seemed to have regretted losing the services of another Bloomington teacher.

Registration cares, handicapped children, and the hiring of several new teachers occupied the next ten minutes. Frank Russel had apparently decided to leave.

"Thank you again Mr. Russel, and thank your group who showed up," a board member said.

There was more chanting and songs for about ten minutes. Tim Paterak led the group in "Hell, no, Pat won't go." David Pence tried unsuccessfully to convert the chanting into "Hell, no! We won't go."

Radical efforts to keep the demonstrators in the hallway were doomed when Tim announced that Mrs. Stevens has said we've made our point, let's go."

Most left, though many left reluctantly. This would not be the end of the fight.

Several Kennedy students sat on the floor with students from other high schools and prepared a leaflet to hand out at Kennedy. They said they were disappointed that students had not realized the "power" they had.

The school board meeting continued with its vision of progress. At least, one Kennedy student, Ann Casey, was willing to sit through the meeting. One of the topics considered was redistricting of the elementary schools.

A student from another high school attempted to speak about Stevens at the meeting, but he was ruled out of order.

at about 10:00 p.m. the board meeting concluded and the participants started down the steps. The wife of a gray-haired man who seemed to be in his forties asked a long-haired demonstrator why he couldn't go home and take a bath. When she was rebuked by the demonstrator, the man offered to fight him.

One student had ran down the steps just before the meeting end and said, "they wanted somebody from Kennedy to speak now about Stevens." But nobody from Kennedy was available in the hallway.