

Charles Arthur Pinkham



Mr. Pinkham and myself, 2019

Born and raised in Berkeley, CA, Charles A. Pinkham attended the University of Berkeley in the 1960s. It was during this decade, on this college campus, that the Free Speech Movement came to a head. He participated in many marches and demonstrations between the years of 1964 and 1974.

Mr. Pinkham was raised in a rather progressive, left-leaning house. His father worked on the campaign of Adlai Stevenson against Eisenhower and, for this, received a large amount of hate mail.

Mr. Pinkham: My dad was pretty radical for his time. He was accused of being the socialist and worse than that a communist for heaven sake. He was accused of being a communist because his last name was Pinkham. P-I-N-K-H-A-M, and he used to get hate mail with the name spelled out capital P-I-N-K in pink letters shading into red.

Mr. Pinkham remains active in civil rights events in Memphis and now works as a private accountant.

Free Speech Movement

Toward the end of the 1960s and into the '70s, the power of youth voice and student protest gained unprecedented prominence and recognition. Following on the heels of the early Civil Rights movement and events such as the Freedom Rides in 1961, which demonstrated the potential of student activism, many college students of the time felt both enraged by the atrocities that were becoming more televised and broadcast and empowered by the ability of student to motivate change that they'd seen in recent years.

The Free Speech Movement took off in Berkeley following the ruling by the California University Council that students could not organize on campus for political reasons and could not lobby for support of any political view. However, military recruiters did not have to follow the same regulations, and the first free speech protest among Berkeley students broke out following this realization.

Isla Vista and Violent Protest



Bombing of the Isla Vista Bank of America, 1970 (Library of Congress)

On February 25, 1970 the Bank of America in Isla Vista, an affluent town near Berkeley, was burned down by student protesters. This prompted a National Guard enforced curfew in Isla Vista and on the Berkeley campus, but Mr. Pinkham found the implications of this event to be much more ideological than physical, citing it as a shift in method of protest movements...

[Speaking of the Isla Vista bombing]

Q: Was that upsetting to you?

Mr. Pinkham: Yes. Yes. Yes. A consistent theme was non-violence. We were following in the footsteps of the Gandhi's and the human Jesus.

Mr. Pinkham, a long time promoter of non-violent protest, notes on the shift he perceived in protests movements of the time from civil disobedience tactics he employed to more violent means of inciting change that followed the incident in Isla Vista. While Mr. Pinkham still clung to his non-violent ideology, others among the protest movements embraced the shocking power of more extreme methods.

Mr. Pinkham: So, that radicalized things. Then there was something called the Symbionese Liberation Army... They banded together and they murdered the superintendent of schools in Oakland. They murdered him. They gunned him down, okay? Not too subtle. And then they kidnapped Patty Hears ... And they just broke in and kidnapped her, and held her for ransom, and asked her father to pay money, millions of dollars for food, and he did. He did! And people were saying, "God, this might be working."

Mr. Pinkham was not impressed by the rapid "gains" of violent protest that attracted many to it and worried that this would become normalized to the more radical and repugnant to less zealous.

Mr. Pinkham: So, I mean, that's pretty violent stuff, and it's abhorrent to murder, gun somebody down. It's abhorrent to kidnap somebody. Completely against all of that. We still believe that we can make changes. Civil disobedience is what I'm talking about. But it got really ugly, even to the extent that some of our colleagues were afraid of it.

Mr. Pinkham also spoke of the one occasion on which he strayed from his non-violent ideology.

Mr. Pinkham: I'm not sure exactly how it came about and I am not proud of this, but I threw a brick through a window and broke a big window, me and some other people. And I thought to myself later, "How could I have done that?" It shows you how you can get swept up in a mob mentality, and what you might do. I was horrified, but at the time I did it and I felt good about it.

Though only a minor act of vandalism, this haunted him for a long time to come.

Draft Deferments

A draft deferment during the Vietnam War was a valuable commodity, and many people were willing to go a long way to retain their own. Many young adult men in the early 1960's would quickly get married as to avoid the draft.

Mr. Pinkham: I was very conscious of the fact of what would happen if [pause] if I left school I may lose my deferment. I will tell you that there was also a sort of a quasi-deferment for students who have graduated and we're married. I got married.

However, the exemption was ended by Lyndon B. Johnson on August 26, 1965, and the possibility of being sent to war was terrifying for many.

Mr. Pinkham: *So I maintained my deferment, and then they started eliminating all of those standings. They said, "Well if you were married and had a child, then." So my then wife and I sat down and I said let's have a kid, and she said "what?!" [laughter] You know, talking about all the wrong reasons to have a child.*

After losing his deferment, Mr. Pinkham repeatedly changed his address on official documents to attempt to avoid receiving his call to appear for his draft physical. This worked for a time, but he did eventually take said physical. He was terrified of being sent to war, but he soon found out there was no chance of that. After the physical, he was dubbed 4F, the lowest priority group of potential draftees due to his eyesight. This came as a huge relief to him, but he was prepared to be arrested for refusing to serve if it had come to it.