



# YELLOW POWER

**DURING THE LATE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S, THE BLACK PANTHERS ROSE TO THE BATTLEFRONT FOR THE OPPRESSED PEOPLE IN AMERICA. MANY ASIAN AMERICANS WERE RIGHT THERE, TOO.**

The Panthers set the stage in the late 1960s and were the unofficial leadership for the American revolt against The Man. A lot of people probably have no idea that this movement included Asian Americans that supported, joined, and participated with Black Panther-inspired groups. Yes, Asian Americans were badass and fought oppression in the forms of drugs, racism, and injustice.

In our quest to make sense of this period, we interviewed a bunch of people who participated in various organizations from LA to Seattle to New York who were part of the worldwide movement during this turbulent and exciting period of protest in America. Most of the people we talked to said that the Yellow Power Movement ended when the Black Panthers were split in the early 1970s. The end of the Vietnam War was also cited as an end to the massive protest, but most of the individuals we met are still active and waiting for the next big revolt so they can kick The Establishment's ass.

Inevitably, some of you will say "But you forgot this..." or "This isn't true," but we don't care, so don't waste your time telling us what we missed. We wrote about what we thought was accessible and interesting. We did the best we could with the people who responded to our inquiries. And then there are those Yellow Chickenshit Charlies who held back or wouldn't respond at all. You know who you are, and we're sure your ex-movement group will thank you for being a pussy.

To our knowledge, this is the biggest, fattest, and most informative collection of articles written in a non-academic magazine about this topic. But take it for what it is—a series of interviews that describe a bigger story of movement and revolution around the world. The individuals aren't as important as the entire picture. If you're an Asian American, a history buff, or a person who gives a shit about society, then these pages are for you.



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FOR THE PEOPLE  
GR [X] (PHO): ASIAN POWER

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Left to Right: Yuri holds a sign in a protest. Yuri making a speech with a big afro'd man. Malcolm chilling at Yuri's pad talking to people. Below: Donald Byrd hanging with Yuri. (Photo: EN)



# ANGEL OF HARLEM

WE ARE KEEPING TABS ON HOW MANY TIMES THESE FOLKS ARE MENTIONED

Mao 2	X 17	Ché 0	MLK 4

## YURI KOCHIYAMA

BY ERIC NAKAMURA

VIDEO: JUDGE FROM BOX 18 (19)



Looking through an old copy of *Life* magazine, you might come across the photographs from Malcolm X's death.

In the smoke-filled Audobon Ballroom, he was slain from 16 shots to the chest, face, and hands. If you look closer at the black and white photograph, you'll see Malcolm's lifeless head resting on the lap of an Asian woman who's wearing cat-eye glasses.

Living by herself in her Harlem projects apartment, Yuri Kochiyama is still active in numerous causes from the Mumia Abu-Jamal defense to protecting Affirmative Action. Rea Tajiri (who made *Passion for Justice*, the Yuri Kochiyama documentary) and I became two more visitors to add to the Kochiyama's long list of friends who range from Malcolm to legendary jazz man Donald Byrd—who happened to be there when we dropped in. As we came through the door, Yuri soon whisked the jazz man out to make space and time for us in her teddy-bear-filled apartment.

### NISEI SOLDIERS LETTERS

Perhaps the first level of her involvement to make life better was to start a letter-writing campaign to WWII Nisei (Japanese American) soldiers. This began during her assembly center days in Santa Anita and followed her into her concentration camp days at Jerome, Arkansas.

**GR: Tell me about your letter-writing campaign.**

YK: I had a Sunday School class. The class grew to about 60 in the Santa Anita Relocation Center and then we were sent to different camps. Then five of the camps started their own groups. In 18 months we were writing to 13,000 soldiers. People would ask, "How did you do it since you didn't have much money?" But you have to remember, we were doing it with penny postcards, so with \$2 that's 200 people you could write to.

**big family with her husband, Bill, whom she met when he visited the camp as a soldier. They later relocated to NYC, and that's where the activism ball started rolling.**

We had a group called the Nisei-Siro Service Organization during the Korean War, from 1950 to 1960. We worked with girls between 16-25, and we said, "Here are all of these Asian American soldiers, they have nowhere to go and they don't feel welcome in the regular dance places." Chinatown came right in and helped

Also, we had demonstrations to get traffic lights on every block. You know if it's down in the white town, it's there on every corner, but not up here.

There were two major leaders. There was Martin Luther King who was for integration, and Malcolm X who was for separation, or self-determination. I'm glad we were involved in both, because you have to get a taste of both to get an idea of what was needed in the black community. Malcolm X thought we must sepa-

**"He (Malcolm X) asked, 'What am I doing for my people?' and I had to think of a quick answer and said, 'You're showing direction.' And all of a sudden he just looked up and he smiled and he came out of the circle onto the other side and shook my hand."**

**Prior to Yuri's entry into concentration camps, she didn't care about politics. Living in San Pedro, she lived the life of an average high school student, eating hot dogs, going to the Friday night game, and having fun. The concentration camp experience changed her outlook.**

I came to know Japanese people and I felt very proud of how they took the evacuation and how they worked in camp without letting it overwhelm them. I think as soon as you finish school and you go into the working world, you face racism trying to get a job. I think my first and only job before I went to camp was at Woolworth's. Woolworth's never hired an Asian before. But I saw a Mexican working there so I asked her if they would take me. She was the first Mexican, so she said, "Why don't you try?"

**After being released from the concentration camp, Kochiyama worked for the USO in Mississippi, went to Minnesota, then returned to the camp. After the war, she went back to California and began to raise a**

and we had these young girls organize dances in Chinatown, Midtown, YWCA, and churches. In that way we helped many Asian American soldiers.

### LIVING IN HARLEM

Harlem was such a motivating place to be. Everything was happening. It was 1960, the Civil Rights Movement was coming up North and there was a Black Liberation Movement already going on. I didn't realize there was a big difference between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Liberation Movement, but here in Harlem you could see both and the different tendencies.

I worked with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) for the Civil Rights group, but at the same time I joined Malcolm's group, Organization of African-American Unity. The first group my husband and I joined was the Harlem Parents' Committee and the major issue there was quality of education. In 1953 all of New York City had massive, massive picket lines in front of every school, to improve education.

rate from the power structure, and develop our own group. Martin Luther King was propped up there as a national leader, whereas Malcolm X was demonized as being excessive and anti-American. But I think when you see what was happening in the world—the African countries were fighting to free themselves from colonialism, from the Western powers—you could see why Malcolm chose the direction he did. There was no way black people could really be free by becoming part of the power structure. We felt Malcolm was doing the right thing. Not that Martin Luther King wasn't; Martin Luther King was carrying the mass movement. But there needed to be another kind of movement that would challenge those in power, and the only way you could do it was by being your own leader and by determining your own programs.

**GR: How did you go from an Asian-American community group to working with an African-American community group?**

YK: It was gradual. In the mid-'50s, there was Little Rock, Arkansas, where they were desegregating the schools. We were watching that,

## MALCOLM X ASSASSINATION

**GR: How did you get so close?**

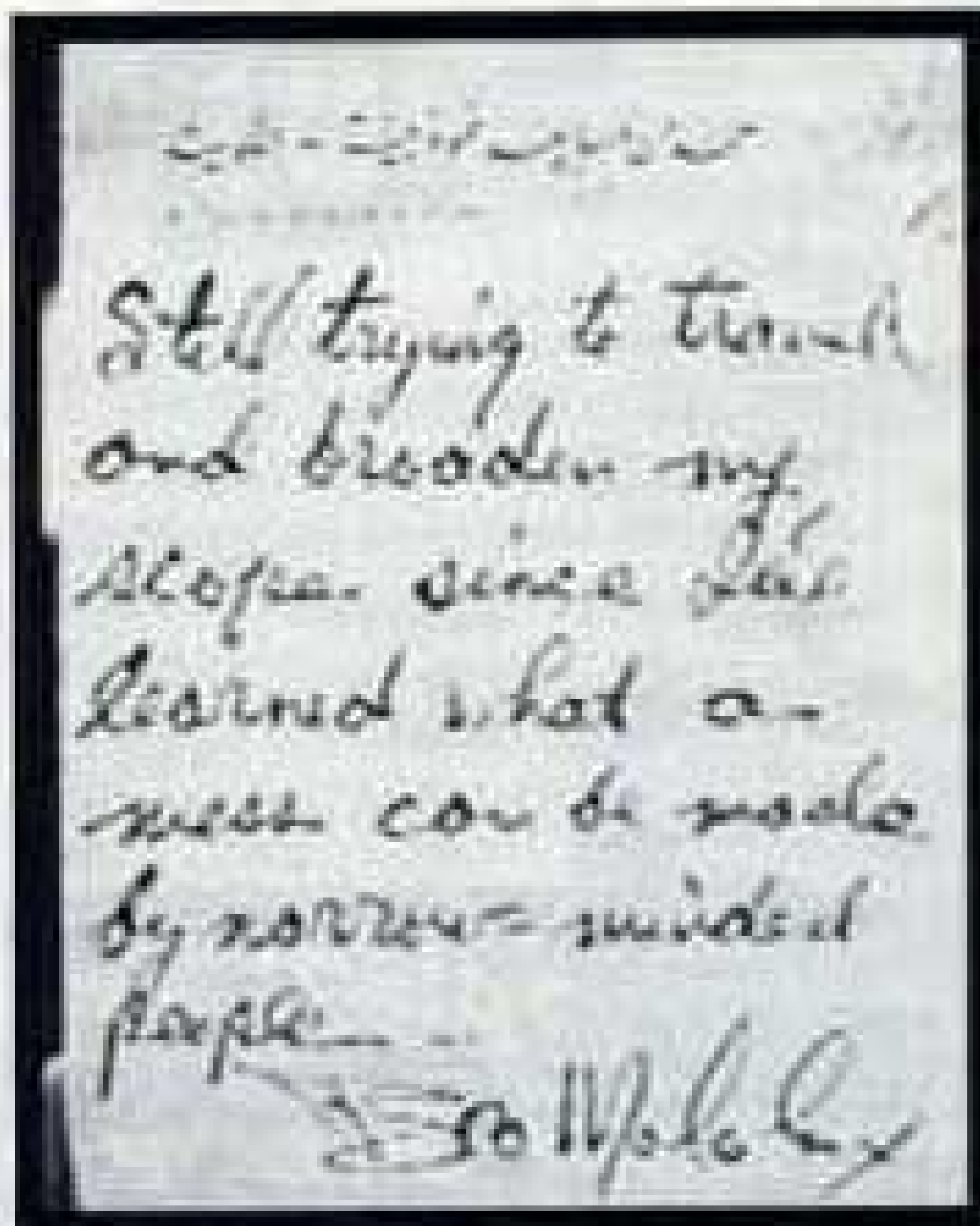
YK: It happened right across from where we were. Two guys jumped up and one said, "Get your hands out of my pocket." Every eye looked at them. Then two or three guys in front went right up to Malcolm and he was a clear target.

I ran up on stage as soon as he got shot, when all the shooting started and the smoke bombs and all that were going off. People were screaming and yelling. This guy came right past where I was and I thought, "Gee, this guy knows how to get to the stage," so I followed him right up there and I put Malcolm's head on my lap. When I went to see him he had about 13 shots. I was hoping he was going to make it, but he didn't make a sound. I don't think he could have survived it. It was all over.

The hospital sent a rep who said that Malcolm had passed away. You could just feel how it hit the people. When I got on the subway, they announced over the loudspeaker that Harlem Leader Malcolm X was just shot down in the Audubon Ballroom. I'd gone with my 16-year-old son Billy, it hit him hard.

Since that assassination, so many things are still unanswered. The people put on the stand weren't even at the Audubon. They did 27 years except one who's still in. The one caught there is quietly in one of the these small prisons in Harlem. They only got him because one of Malcolm's bodyguards got him. He asked his bodyguards not to have weapons so as to not frighten children and their mothers. I think he thought something was going to happen. Everyone thought something was going to happen.





and were encouraging Asian Americans to keep an eye on what was happening in the South. So it was a transition, but as we saw the Civil Rights Movement getting major play by the media, we felt that was one of the most important things happening in the country.

**HAVING GUESTS**

We had speakers. Every time someone interesting would come in, like people who had been down South, we would invite them. And then we would invite them to our homes. It wasn't difficult to locate people like that because the newspaper would give their phone number and address.

**GR: Did you do that in the '60s and the '70s?**

**YK:** Oh, from the time we first got married, I guess. We've had literally thousands of people stay with us. But this is a good way to meet people. In my condition, now that I've had the stroke, I can't go out that much, and so I have a good excuse: "I'm sorry, I can't walk well enough to meet you outside. Could you come here?"

**ON MEETING MALCOLM**

**GR: When did you meet Malcolm?**

**YK:** During the Summer of '63, one of the biggest things in Civil Rights was getting construction jobs for blacks and Puerto Ricans. We used to go to Brooklyn where they were building hospitals, and I used to take the four little ones, they were 4, 6, 8, and 11, and we would hold hands and go on the subway to the demonstration. Eventually, by the end of that summer, more than 600 people were arrested, including my 16-year-old son. Then the hearings began. In October of '63, Malcolm came to the court, and that's where I met him.

I remember when he walked into the foyer of the court, all the young blacks ran down and they circled him and they were shaking his hand, but since I wasn't black, I didn't feel like I should go down there. There was that article a few months before in *Life* magazine where a white gal came into Harlem and saw Malcolm at the Shabazz restaurant and said, "What can I do for you Malcolm?" and he just said, "Nothing," and she went away crying. I thought "Wow, that could be me making the same mistake." But as I saw all those blacks around him, I kept thinking, "Gee, doggone it." I wanted to meet him so much and I asked one of the court leaders, "Do you think there's any chance of meeting him?" and he said, "Why don't you try and see? All he can do is tell you to go away." So I went slowly down there until I was 15 feet away, watching them, and then all of a sudden, just in one instant, he looked up

almost looking like he was wondering, "What is this old Asian woman doing?" But I thought it was now or never, so I went right over there and said, "Malcolm, can I shake your hand?" "Of course," he said, "For what?" and I said, "Oh, I want to congratulate you." And he said, "What for?" I said, "Well, for what you're doing for your people." He asked, "What am I doing for my people?" and I had to think of a quick answer and said, "You're showing direction." And all of a sudden he just looked up and he smiled and he came out of the circle onto the other side and shook my hand.

But I said something stupid—I didn't know anything about civil rights or the black liberation movement—I said, "I admire the things you say, but I disagree with you about some things." To show what an open guy he is, he said, "What do you disagree with me about?" I said, "Your harsh stand on integration." And he said, "Well, I can't give you a two-minute stand on the pros and cons of integration. Come to my office and we'll discuss it." I couldn't believe it. I said, "You mean I can go to your office and talk with you?" He said, "Yes, but you probably won't know where I am." I said, "Oh yes, I live in Harlem on 126th Street and your office is on 125th." And so he said, "Get an appointment with my secretary." Of course, it never happened because the next month he made that statement about the "chickens coming home to roost," when Kennedy was killed on Nov. 22, and then he was taken out of the Mosque, so I thought I'd never see him again.

**HIBAKUSHA IN HARLEM**

When the Hiroshima-Nagasaki Peace Study Mission started to come in, they wanted to meet Malcolm. When they found out that we were Japanese living in Harlem, they asked us if we could get in touch with him. So I started writing letter after letter, not knowing if he was even receiving them or if he would even come if he did. And then—I couldn't believe it—on the day we had the reception he came. He came here June 6, 1964, and half-a-year later he was killed.

**GR: What did he talk about that day?**

**YK:** There were three major things. One, he thanked the Japanese Hiroshima-Nagasaki Hibakusha for coming to Harlem, because Harlem was holding its "World's Worst Fair." Harlem activists got one of the worst streets in Harlem and they just opened it up for people to come and look at. There, you could see clogged bathtubs and toilets that wouldn't flush.

**GR: They put them out on the street?**

**YK:** No, no, no! You go right into those buildings, and you see all those broken windows that the landlords didn't fix, all the garbage on the streets, and the Hiroshima-Nagasaki group had only been to the nicest lunches, church events and schools, but had never gone to Black communities. Especially not these poor communities, and so I thought it was great that for the first time they saw something different.

**GR: They spoke English?**

**YK:** No, they had translators. They knew very little English. He (Malcolm) thanked them, he said you have scars on your body, but you have seen scars in our community, you know these broken-down places and all. And he said, we were hit by a bomb too, and that bomb was racism. Then he mentioned how much he admired Mao, because Mao tackled three problems: feudalism, corruption in the government, and foreign incursions. Then on the Vietnam War (which hadn't started yet—this was 1964), America was sending advisors to Vietnam. Here, all the people were Civil Rights activists, he said if America decides to go to Vietnam, you progressives should be protesting it, and it's too bad he didn't live long enough to see how big that protest became. He also made remarks like, "The reason that Japan has never been attacked is because Japan never had anything to offer other countries, they didn't have resources." Vietnam had resources, all of the other countries that Europe went into had resources, but Japan did not. It just showed how much he knew about the world. He said, "What I gained out of prison was reading everything I could get hold of." And he knew so much about Asian history. Everyone was so impressed by him.



**GR: Did he come alone?**

**YK:** No, but it was done in such a way that we didn't even notice who his bodyguards were. He had three, but then the place was jam packed. We couldn't get everyone in here. Everybody was filled in the kitchen hallway, jammed. When he spoke, you could almost hear a pin drop because everybody kept so quiet when he spoke. The Japanese said we don't want any translation since we don't want to stop him at every sentence. They said they could catch on to him plus they thought they could get him through his vibe. He was so gracious. The white people were surprised. He was as warm to



them as to the blacks. There were no radicals, no Muslims, nationalists...

**GR: Was that after he broke off?**

**YK:** It was only three months after, and there were so many rumors that he was going to be killed, that's why everybody told us Malcolm won't come to your place, he doesn't know you, why would he come here? It was so dangerous, but he came.

**GR: What did you think of the movie?**

**YK:** Spike followed the book and spent a lot of time when Malcolm was young and jitter-bugging. He didn't put in the parts with the African leaders that he met. You know why? The book has chapters missing. One is the chapter on Africa, one is on sister Ella. It's sad that before sister Ella died no one saw her. She has both of her legs amputated. She was a half sister and more like a mother or sister to him. His real mother was in an asylum. Before he was killed he was happy that he got her out of there. I think they got along so well that she and Betty never got along.

**GR: When did you get involved with the later Asian American Movement?**

**YK:** I joined Asian Americans for Action shortly after I Wor Kuen (IAWK) started. The Nisei were really ahead because they have been active from way before. They were active since

the '30s ... not only against the Vietnam war, but against the U.S.-Japan SEC Treaty. Every year they renewed it, so we would speak out against it. When the Hiroshima or Nagasaki dates came, we would do a program about it. It was mostly anti-war and peace movement. We took a stance for the workers.

After spending a couple of hours at Yuri's place, and being her last visitors of the day, we took off having learned a lot. She showed us the postcards that Malcolm X had sent to her husband while he traveled the world to find his roots and to study. One of the postcards read: "Still trying to travel and broaden my scope since I've learned what a mess can be made by narrow-minded people." And he signed most everything "Brother Malcolm X."

But aside from her relationship with the late political leader, Kochiyama has gone on to work with almost every group which she feels she can make a difference. Her husband passed away and she has endured a stroke, but today she is as active as ever in current events and she still travels to conferences to fight the power.

### THE DOCUMENTARY VIDEO!

If you are interested in learning more about Yuri Kochiyama, then buy a copy of the *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion For Justice* documentary.

Video by Rea Tajiri (1993). It's 56 minutes long and all video grabs in this article are from it. This video offer is for individual home use only. For broadcast rights in a classroom, please inquire.



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## ON THE PUERTO RICAN STATUE OF LIBERTY TAKEOVER

**GR: You helped the Puerto Ricans take over the Statue of Liberty?**

**YK:** In 1977 the brothers ran up there and put up the Puerto Rican flag. The whole thing was to get Andres Cordero out of prison. He got out in six months, and the others got out in a year. Five Puerto Rican nationals did 25 years. We had to do something that would get the media to put enough pressure to get the five out of prison. The Puerto Ricans thought of it; I think they were called Puerto Rican National Rights Group.

**GR: How did you become involved?**

**YK:** They asked 29 of us and there were a couple of whites and blacks. I was the only Asian. They told us to get to the ferry at a certain time early, and said no one should recognize each other or talk to each other. We had to get out of the boat quickly. And we had to be sure nobody could beat us to the Statue. In front of us was a bunch of Catholic School children and a bunch of Japanese tourists. They had to shove everyone out of the way. The kids didn't know why. We started to run and then everyone started to run. The Japanese didn't know what was going on. We all ran into the Statue and closed the door on everybody else. The guys told

the people working that we aren't going to hurt you but you better do what we tell you. Then the guys ran up the stairs to put the flag up. The rest of us took all of the furniture in the statue and piled them in front of the doors and windows so no one could get through. We held it for nine hours. Then we heard the boats coming. The police came and we could hear the helicopters. They broke the door down and the furniture came toppling down. It was exciting.

