

Education was at the heart of his hunger strike, Nosworthy says

Nearly two months after his hunger strike, Allan Nosworthy tells about his experience

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Iowa State diversity activist Allan Nosworthy said his hunger strike was not an act of terrorism but an attempt to increase understanding in the hearts and minds of students concerning diversity on campus.

In a recent press conference with an ISU journalism reporting class, Nosworthy said he thinks changing hearts and minds is the first step.

"Seeing [the issues] through with action has got to be the last, as long as that doesn't involve shooting people, taking hostages, or making one's partner feel miserable É I don't think I'm a terrorist," he said.

Nosworthy, an ISU graduate student in creative writing and founding member of The September 29th Movement, went on a hunger strike in September. While he was campaigning in support of his eight requests to increase diversity on campus, he was voluntarily hospitalized six days into the strike.

His strike and his requests, including changing the name of Catt Hall and the creation of an Asian studies program, encountered mixed reactions from the student body.

"It was a shot in the dark," Nosworthy said of the strike. "Either people will or won't support you É I would not advise anyone to put your life on the line without knowing who will support you."

He said he found jokes and pranks about him secretly eating ding-dongs and pizza during his strike humorous. But he also said, "It wasn't meant to make people react so emotionally."

Nosworthy said a hunger strike is not necessarily the best way to facilitate change, but "one of the final ways." He said The Movement has always taken an educational stance through rallies, marches, discussions and opinion letters, which were all factors contributing to his strike.

Nosworthy said the purpose of the strike included the use of civil disobedience to test the administration's reaction to a sincere commitment to diversity.

"Deep down, I didn't think it was going to move this university to do anything," he said. "But I had to prove that."

Nosworthy said he knew changes could not happen overnight, especially when "the administration's bottom line is [money]" instead of understanding.

He said one of his most important goals is to find a way for students to relate to his perspectives. Asked how he hopes to make his ideas tangible to the ISU community, Nosworthy said, "Here I am."

"If I had the time to sit down one by one with 25,000 students [in order to explain diversity issues] É I'd do that," he said.

Nosworthy added that simply understanding the need for diversity is not enough. "Our generation needs not only to mentally understand information É but to act on it."

Nosworthy suggested the administration could work toward diversity by acting on the eight requests made at the time of the hunger strike.

"I want to make one thing clear," Nosworthy said. "I used the word 'requests' on purpose. Request suggests that you're willing to work with somebody to achieve a goal," as opposed to simply giving them orders.

The issue at the heart of The Movement is the request to change the name of Carrie Chapman Catt Hall. Nosworthy thinks this issue is so crucial to the group because, "In our society, symbolism is a staple. What happened at the naming process was that certain groups were excluded. That's what the name symbolizes."

He said he does not want to force the university to rename the building, but he wants people to "look into their hearts" and understand the dynamics of the situation.

"Will the name of Catt Hall be changed because a big hammer got dropped on Beardshear or will it be changed because people's hearts and minds are changed?" Nosworthy said. "That's a question I don't have an answer for."

Nosworthy also proposed increased diversity curriculum as a way ISU could improve campus diversity.

"ISU is not alone" in the current state of its diversity programs, Nosworthy said. "But there are other schools ISU can look to" for models of effective diversity programs.

As for the future of The Movement, Nosworthy said, "The fruits of what I've done might not be experienced by me.

"A lot of the issues we've put out there would take years to build and see through. Our work is cut out for us now."

Nosworthy recalled how The Movement began over two years ago with only three core members.

"Three people caused so much mess," he said. "Man, how did we do it?"

Nosworthy said he now sees his responsibility to The Movement as finding others to carry on his work. He said he "would rather work with three people who are consistent and dedicated than 2,000 who come in and out.

"I want people to come to their own understanding of why these issues are important and how they are connected to North American history," he said.

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