

The Long, Long Road... A.B.L.E. After Thirty Years

by Audrey Petty, '90

A.B.L.E. Students from Three Decades Reflect

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Alfreda Dortch Williams, '69
During her final year at Knox, Alfreda Dortch Williams was named Senior Woman of the Year. That same year, Williams wrote a powerful essay about her Knox

experience, published in the spring edition of *Catch*.

In "A Story About a Black Skinned Girl's Painful Transition from Colored to Blackness," Williams describes how her early development was shaped by subtle and obvious messages that blackness was "bad." These messages came from family, friends and popular culture. When she arrived at Knox in 1966, she was someone who made every effort to be the friendliest and most outgoing person on campus. According to Williams, these efforts were borne out of a desire to fit into Knox's dominant, white culture. She portrays herself as "ready to turn white at a moment's notice"; ultimately, she would become weary and disenfranchised with the process of assimilation. "No one pointed it out to me, but I began noticing things. Like I was Miss Popularity in the dorm, but many times many of my 'friends' acted like they didn't want to speak to me outside the dorm. Parents' Weekends. I didn't get introduced to a lot of my friends' parents, intentionally."

In her retreat from assimilation, Williams sought out information about Black history and culture. This inquiry resulted in a revelation about her own identity and the state of affairs in the world around her. "I became aware of the racial situation in America." Williams' piece concludes with a rationale for the existence of A.B.L.E. and a defense of its ten demands. "A.B.L.E. is ready to pay its dues to future Black students. We are determined to help them maintain their Blackness and we are determined to open the eyes of the white students here." Williams' thirty-year-old essay is undeniably passionate and angry. The author still stands by every word. "It's what we went through," Williams says.

The group of approximately twenty

"It was the times."

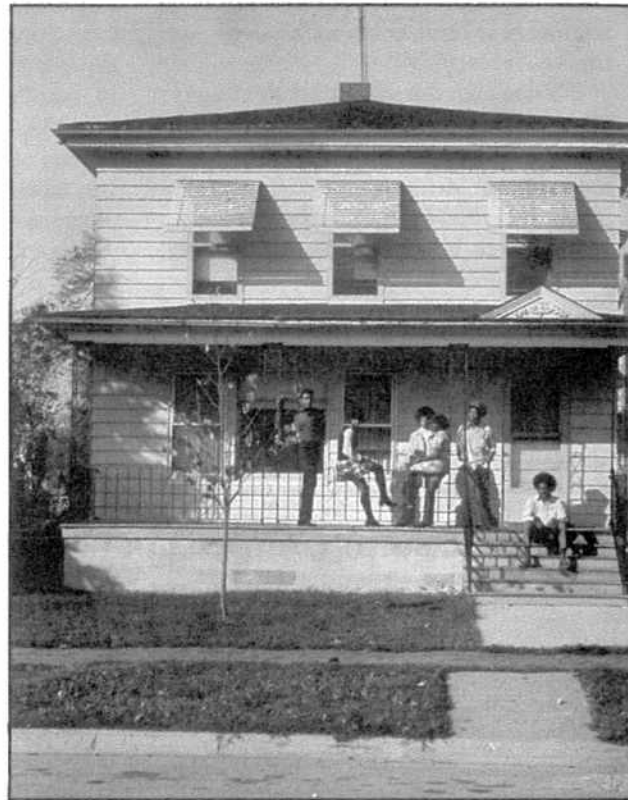
Asked what sparked the Black student activism at Knox College that gave birth thirty years ago to Allied Blacks for Liberty and Equality, Alfreda Dortch Williams, '69, points to the ferment of the 1960s. A.B.L.E. was one of the most significant student movements that emerged at Knox during the '60s. Williams and fellow founding members of A.B.L.E. added their voices to those of African-American college students across the country who were demanding significant social change from their campuses and their nation-at-large.

For those too young to have been part of the '60s, contemporary culture provides a public notion of that decade: indelible images to represent complex and historic moments. Hoses and police dogs unleashed in Birmingham. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. surrounded by a sea of people at the Lincoln Memorial. Burning buses. Burning cities. So many of the '60s images reflect the nation's struggle with race and with racism. Social change came slowly through this struggle, and it came at heavy cost.

A.B.L.E. was formed in May of 1968, in the wake of Dr. King's assassination. Its mission, as stated in its constitution, was to make the college experience more meaningful for and relevant to Black students at Knox College and to promote the cultural and educational awareness of the Black experience in the world. While A.B.L.E. began as a coalition of approximately twenty African-American students, the organization would go on to attract a multicultural membership. This year, Knox celebrates A.B.L.E.'s 30th anniversary and pays tribute to the many ways it has changed and improved the life of the campus.

Early Actions and Initial Visions

One of A.B.L.E.'s first public acts occurred when *The Knox Student* published the organization's letter of protest and concern about Black student



The original A.B.L.E. House at 362 S. Academy, in 1973:
(l-r): Leon Williams, '73; Michelle Lilly Briscoe, '76; Gwen Webb-Johnson, '75; Martha Johnson Turner, '75; Victor Kelly, '74; Michael Madison, '73.

enrollment. Williams recalls that her entering freshman class increased the Black student population by 150%—"With ten of us coming in, there were fifteen altogether."

Months after A.B.L.E.'s *Knox Student* letter was printed, the organization's visibility dramatically increased when, in February of 1969, a delegation of A.B.L.E. members walked into President Sharvey Umbeck's office and presented him with the group's most pressing concerns. As Williams recalls, "Someone said this is our list of demands and we stood around the wall in his office and watched him read. He said 'thank you' and we walked out."

A.B.L.E.'s written declaration asserted that Knox had "failed through the years to provide adequate academic and social accommodations for Black students in an overwhelmingly white environment." It went on to make the following ten "suggestions and demands":

1. that the Admissions department make strenuous efforts to recruit and admit at least one hundred (100) Black students to Knox the coming academic year;
2. that Knox provides a Black psychologist in order to help in the adjustment of Black students at Knox;
3. that at least one Black person, under salary, work with the admissions department with the recruitment of Black students;
4. that Black professors be included on the teaching staff at Knox, these professors should be interviewed by A.B.L.E. and our recommendations should be weighed heavily in the selection of these professors;
5. that all Afro-American oriented classes be taught by Black professors;
6. that Knox employ Black white collar workers;
7. that the college make available ample scholarships for Black students in order to increase the number of Black students at Knox;
8. that more books by Black authors be included in the Knox Library, and that these books be made into a special collection;
9. that Black freshmen be provided with Black counselors paid according to the pay scale of other freshmen counselors;
10. that a Black Cultural Center be given to Black Students in order to enlighten

Blacks of their heritage.

This center should include books written by and about Black people, Black art work, recordings by Black musicians, recreational facilities, and equipment needed for the efficient operation of these elements. The regulations and rules to be applied to this center will be determined by A.B.L.E.



A.B.L.E. Formal, 1981.

students who formed A.B.L.E. was already a vital collective before they formalized as an organization. "We banded together. 'Let's do something to protect ourselves.'" Williams and her peers faced racism on a regular basis, on campus and off. Black students were routinely harassed and discriminated against in town. Some businesses refused service to them. "You couldn't go downtown by yourself and you had to be careful on campus." Several Black male students were physically attacked on campus by white townspeople. One of A.B.L.E.'s first missions was to build stronger bonds with Galesburg by becoming acquainted with the town's Black community. The afterschool tutoring program that A.B.L.E. organized provided service for youngsters and provided A.B.L.E. students with a network of friends and contacts in town.

On campus, A.B.L.E. advocated changing the Knox classroom. In addition to demanding Black faculty and more Black students, they made a case for the inclusion of Black Studies in the Knox curriculum. Williams argued in her *Catch* essay that the College had "traditionally omitted from its curriculum courses dealing with Black people and Black culture." She believed that this omission reinforced racist notions of Black inferiority. Williams taught a Black History course with Professor John Stipp during her senior year. On the first day of class, she had the white students get out of their seats and the Black students take them. "I wanted the white folks to think about what it means to be displaced." With that as a departure point, the class went on to read *Before the Mayflower* and other history texts that dealt with slavery. Williams recalls the teaching experience with some fondness. "It was a chance to share knowledge."

When Williams looks back at the A.B.L.E. sit-in, she is skeptical about its impact. When she finally returned for a Knox Homecoming, twenty years after graduating, she was disheartened by the activism she saw taking place in the organization. "Students were still fighting for the same things we were then." Williams believes that real advancement of A.B.L.E.'s initial agenda can only take place once the Black student enrollment has greatly increased. For Williams, A.B.L.E.'s significance lay in what the organiza-

tion did for its members and for incoming Black students: it brought them together. "We had a sense of camaraderie between us that nobody could break. All of these years later, we're still tight." When she gets together with her old friends from A.B.L.E., the reminiscences are bittersweet. "We still talk about the damage that Knox had done to us. It took us over twenty years to recover...all of us became overachievers. Trying to overcompensate. Trying to prove yourself."

After Knox, Williams went on to earn an M.A. in social services administration from the University of Chicago. She spent more than twenty years working in social services in the city. She is currently balancing her professional life between volunteer work, teaching continuing education courses at Aurora University and serving as campaign coordinator for 29th Ward candidate Darnetta Tyus. Williams is also mother of a college educated daughter—one whom she insisted on sending to a historically Black college, Tuskegee Institute.

Chris Chaney, '80

For Chris Chaney, joining A.B.L.E. was not an option. It was a requirement. Before the first meeting took place his freshman year, several Black upperclassmen came to his room to recruit



Chris and his roommate, Sanders Moody, '80. "They said, 'We're asking you now, but you gotta go.'" Chaney laughs and adds, "I didn't have a problem with it being mandatory for us because I did have a sense of ethnic pride, and we were a generation who experienced some forms of racism directly. We could remember."

Like Williams, Chaney came to Knox from Chicago. He spent a good part of his childhood living in a racially divided neighborhood. "When you walked along the street that divided the two communities, you'd be called names. You could go across the street to support businesses, but don't go beyond those places, because people would hassle you." Chaney's parents reconsidered their plans to send him to a Catholic school "three blocks into the heart of the white neighborhood" when it became clear that the director of the school would resist his entry. "I



A.B.L.E. members, 1979-80: First row (l. to r.): Al Garmon, '82; Belinda Ragin, '82; Loree Woodley, '83; Chris Chaney, '80; Second row: Charlotte Smith Jones, '80; Jennifer Thompson, '80; Pam Lile, '84; Chris Wynn, '82 (dec.); Third row: Cynthia Milsap, '81; Ivy Dilworth, '80; Robin McClinton, '83; Vickie Johnson Fair, '83; Rochelle Redmond, '83; Brian Coleman, '87.

was that the College needed to do more to support Black students. "If we encouraged a lot of students in from the inner city and didn't provide support, by going halfway, we could be doing some damage." In addition to recruiting students, the College needed to establish and maintain support systems to accommodate them.

Other faculty maintained that the ideal of integration would be compromised if the College established a separate place for Black students and Black culture. "That was the national debate at the time. When Stokely Carmichael made demands for Black Power, many liberals feared that that was just playing the separate but equal game."

The third argument articulated was that the approval of an A.B.L.E. House would open the door for every group to have individual housing and that this pattern would ultimately fracture the campus. After open and lively debate of these issues, the faculty voted to support the A.B.L.E. students and their request for a cultural center.

In the weeks to follow, Knox senior administrators responded to the demonstration through meetings with A.B.L.E. members, initially to determine a list of priorities for the demands. The organization ultimately refused to separate them on those grounds, insisting that they were equally important and interconnected. As then-A.B.L.E. member Isaiah "Skip" Sanders, '71, remarked in an interview with *The Knox Student* (3/7/69), "You can't bring 100 Black students here and have nothing for them when they arrive, and by the same token, you can't have a Black cultural center or a Black psychologist without a significant number of Black students."

Although not one demand was more important than another for A.B.L.E. members, not all of them would be met. Within months of the sit-in, however, several items were addressed by the College. Two African-American professors joined the faculty in the following fall. The library committed \$1300 to the purchase of books by Black authors, and A.B.L.E. members selected a house from among three locations offered by the College.

Robin Metz, now the Philip Sidney Post Professor of English, was in his second year of teaching at Knox when the A.B.L.E. members made their demonstration. Metz recollects the ensuing debate that took place amongst the faculty. This debate focused on the benefits of a campus house for A.B.L.E.

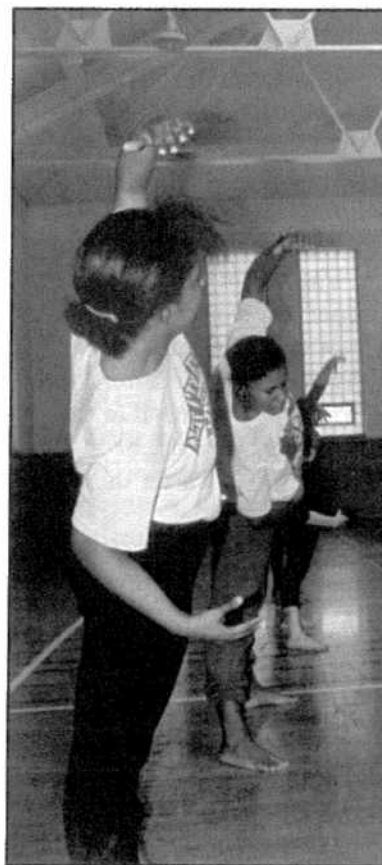
In Metz's view, the three arguments that emerged were all "tied to the idea that we would want to embrace all peoples here." One argument (first espoused by Richard Alexander, an English professor who taught the College's first course in African-American literature)

The first A.B.L.E. House was located on Academy Street just south of South Street. Although the structure of the A.B.L.E. House would change (moving from the Academy location to other buildings on Tompkins Street), the idea of it—as a cultural and social center—would remain in place. Over the past thirty years, it has served many purposes—haven, hangout, war room, classroom, concert hall, library, museum—all of which reflect what is at once the changing and abiding needs and aspirations of A.B.L.E. members.

A Persisting Influence

A.B.L.E. hit the ground running back in 1969. After presenting their demands to the administration, members organized to assist in recruiting African-American students from the Chicagoland area. Many members went back to their high schools to interview students and encourage them to apply. Alfreda Williams, then president of A.B.L.E., taught a Black History

A.B.L.E. African Dance Workshop, 1991-92. L-r: Keshia Teverbaugh Gipson, '95, and Laquetta Garvin, '94.



course with Professor John Stipp. A.B.L.E. also extended its efforts from the campus by getting to know members of the town's African-American community. Many students already attended Galesburg's Black churches, but the group felt that community relations could be greatly improved, so A.B.L.E. began a tutoring program for elementary students at the Carver Community Center. This link to the Galesburg community still exists today, with events like the annual September Open House/Barbecue taking place at the house.

The first generation of A.B.L.E. also made significant strides to enhance the cultural life of the College by bringing speakers such as Jessie Jackson and Dick Gregory to campus. A.B.L.E. sponsored parties at the house that brought together Black students from neighboring campuses. Today, A.B.L.E. continues this tradition with the annual A.B.L.E. formal. They also organize visits to Black Cultural Centers at other Midwestern colleges.

Another tradition begun in A.B.L.E.'s first year was the variety show performed by A.B.L.E. members. *Black Kaleidoscope* featured poetry, drama, song and dance created by A.B.L.E. students as well as prominent African-American artists. For several years, the proceeds raised through this event were earmarked for an A.B.L.E. scholar-

ship fund for African-American students. *Black Kaleidoscope* is now called *Production Night*, and it continues to draw an impressive crowd from the campus and the Galesburg community.

Clearly, many of the initiatives begun in A.B.L.E.'s inaugural year have continued in spirit throughout the past three decades. The organization has brought diversity to the campus through its sponsorship of cultural activities

would have to be escorted to school. I remember my parents debating. "Would the policeman sit in the classroom with him?" My parents decided against it, so they sent me three blocks the other way to the school all the Blacks attended. And it was overcrowded."

Chaney decided to attend Knox for three basic reasons: he wanted a good education, he wanted to be close to home, and he had family in Galesburg. The presence of family in town contributed significantly to his college experience. "At times, it gave me opportunity to get away from the campus." He shared Sunday dinners with his aunt and his cousins, made spending money from baby-sitting his second cousins, and quickly became acquainted with other members of Galesburg's Black community. Like Williams, Chaney remembers how town-gown relations could be less than ideal. "We never had a feeling of being better than them, but sometimes that was the attitude we got from some of the Blacks in town." Because of his strong ties in the community, Chaney served as a bridge between two worlds. He described A.B.L.E. parties as a place for cultural exchange. "We [Black Knox students] were not small-town Blacks. We were not suburban Blacks. We were all inner-city Blacks." At parties, they were able to share their music and their dances with their Black friends from town.

For Chaney, the A.B.L.E. house was "a haven." It was a place where Black students could relax and "be themselves." Like other A.B.L.E. members, Chaney was very active in events across campus. He recounts that A.B.L.E. events were never well attended by non-A.B.L.E. members. "Our events were not well supported by the campus at all. That's why you can not find much pictorially (in the newspaper). That's something we did. It was only important to us."

After graduating from Knox, Chaney began working for the Chicago Transit Authority. He is now a manager in the Bus Operations and Maintenance Division of the C.T.A. For several years, Chaney was president of the Black Alumni Association of Knox College, an organization started in the late 70s. "When I was president, my goal was to build the network, recapture these lost Black alums, try to keep them updated, but also serve as a mentoring group for Black students on campus." Chaney has recruited Black students to Knox and has gotten to know up-and-coming

A.B.L.E. members through his visits to Knox and Association activities. (The Association sponsors an annual summer picnic for alums and students in Chicago.) He firmly believes that alumni-student networking is crucial to the effort of recruiting and supporting African-American students at Knox. He also stresses the importance of documenting the history of Black students at Knox, so that current students have a sense of being part of something larger. "The students who come to Knox need to know about A.B.L.E.'s heritage. Firsts like Eric Z. Williams [who served in Admissions and in the Dean of Students office] and Jessie Dixon on the faculty [Assistant Professor in the Modern Language Department]. Ziggy [1920 graduate Adolph "Ziggy" Hamblin] may have been a lone ranger. He may have been out there by himself."

Robert Johnson, '90



Robert Johnson was recruited by Knox admissions officer Eric Z. Williams, '85, one of the "firsts" that Chris Chaney salutes. Johnson recognized the need for A.B.L.E. as soon as he arrived on campus as a

freshman. "I never really realized how important it was to articulate, preserve, protect and advance Black causes and Black culture until I got to Knox, because my previous experience had been coming from a Black environment. In the absence of blackness, you become a lot more aware of it."

In his time at Knox, Johnson came to treasure the solidarity that A.B.L.E. fostered amongst Black students. This solidarity provided him support and comfort. "If you are the minority and you are constantly bombarded with images and questions and situations that are not self-affirming...it takes its toll at some point. It was wonderful to have an organization and individuals in that organization who are like-minded, positive and intelligent (contrary to all of the stereotypes the media and other institutions put out there)." Johnson also valued A.B.L.E. as a space where students of all ethnic backgrounds could celebrate and learn more about Black culture. The organization's members included a significant number of non-Black students. A.B.L.E. gave

(such as concerts, dances, movie nights and soul food dinners) as well as its insistence upon an ongoing dialogue about race, culture and diversity itself.

Activism Revived

On April 11, 1988, nearly twenty years after Alfreda Williams and her peers mobilized to make demands on the college, a delegation of A.B.L.E. members interrupted a meeting of the Knox faculty to present issues that they believed required immediate response. This protest was sparked by several incidents on campus, including the impermanence of the A.B.L.E. House. The organization's house on Tompkins was slated for summer demolition, and as housing plans were being drafted for the following school year, there was no clear indication that a new A.B.L.E. House would be designated.

Mary Crawford, '89, now an assistant professor of chemistry at Knox, was president of A.B.L.E. at the time. "When Black students wanted a house, we were [called] separatists... and that was so far from the truth." Every member of its Executive Board was active in other campus organizations and activities. A.B.L.E. co-sponsored speakers and dances throughout the school year. They made efforts to be visible and active members of the campus, and they wanted to see more evidence of the college's commitment to diversity. Crawford describes the anxiety and urgency she and others felt about making an organized protest. If no difference was made, Crawford planned to withdraw from Knox. "I felt that we were all taking a chance... we didn't know how it was going to be perceived."

Within a short time, she began to see some positive change. The College secured a new location for A.B.L.E. House. The group's proposal to rename the Executive Arms apartment after Adolph "Ziggy" Hamblin, '20, a distinguished African-American Knox scholar and athlete, was approved. In addition to observing these responses to A.B.L.E.'s concerns, Crawford recalls



Illinois poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks, after a reading at Knox in 1991.

the fortuitous arrival of Fred Hord. His interview for a position in the English Department came a week after the 1988 sit-in.

A.B.L.E. in the Nineties

Professor of Black Studies Frederick Hord has a vivid memory of his first encounter with A.B.L.E. "I saw some of the [A.B.L.E.] students during my visit. Meeting them was really part of the whole interview process."

When Hord learned of their activism, he thought "thank goodness, folks are alive here."

Hord joined the faculty ranks in the fall of 1989. His scholarship and teaching in African-American Studies has added depth and dimension to the College curriculum, and his commitment to A.B.L.E.'s mission has provided members with a powerful ally and mentor. In his first year at Knox, Hord was appointed the director of Black Studies, which has evolved from a con-

centration to a major during Hord's tenure. He also established the Association for Black Cultural Centers in 1989. A.B.C.C.'s statement of purpose defines its commitment to the reclamation, critique and perpetuation of the culture of people of African descent. This growing organization, headquartered at Knox, boasts over two hundred institutional members and affiliates in forty-five states.

Professor Hord's commitment to Black cultural centers has been felt

and appreciated at Knox since his arrival. His contribution in time, energy and material resources to the A.B.L.E. House have helped to transform the house into a center for Black culture—the desire for this transformation was articulated in A.B.L.E.'s 1988 set of demands. Hord has donated over \$15,000 worth of books pertaining to African, African-American and African-Caribbean cultures to the Center's library.

In 1994, the house underwent significant renovation and renewal thanks to the College's funding of a proposal drafted by Hord and A.B.L.E. leaders. Today, 168 W. Tompkins is graced with poster art of work by African-American painters, photographs of important events and figures in African-American history, as well as African baskets, sculpture and woodwork from Zaire, Liberia, Ethiopia and other African countries. News of events at the Center can be found in *Indaba*, the A.B.L.E. newsletter and literary journal, now in its tenth year of publication.

In the years following Professor Hord's arrival, the Knox faculty has become increasingly diverse (there were several years when he was the only African-American faculty member). His current colleagues now include five African-Americans, as well as a Caribbean and a Ghanaian professor. This year, Knox also has an Africanist on its faculty. In addition the College today counts five African American among its professional administrative staff. Such diversity distinguishes Knox from many of its liberal arts college cohorts. And such diversity reflects the changing times—times that surely changed because of the will and vision of such activists as Knox's A.B.L.E. pioneers. Since 1969, Allied Blacks for Liberty and Equality has succeeded in making the college experience more relevant and enriching to Knox students of all ethnicities.

Audrey Petty, '90, is an A.B.L.E. alum who currently teaches English and black studies at Knox. She is at work on her first novel.



Black alumni from the 1950s through the 1990s gather outside A.B.L.E. House to mark the kickoff the 30th Anniversary celebrations at Homecoming 1998. (L-r): 1st row: J. Bradley Williams, '53; Tammy Hill Ballard, '88; 2nd row: Vida Cross, '88; Nyrere Billups, '99; Mary Crawford, '89; 3rd row: Gregory Jamison, '99; Teisha Campbell, '99; Audrey Petty, '90; Lori Martin, '94; Debra Banks, '73; Bridgit Charandura, '98; 4th row: Dunston Simpson, '99; Iris Randall, '01; Caroline Hamblin Tucker, '53; Michael Kelly, '97; Harold Bibb, '62; 5th row: April Beard, '02; Dalia Soliman, '98; Kathryn Palacio, '02; Tahany Solomon, '98; [not identified]; Rashid Muhammad, '97; Derrick Leaks, '00; 5th row: Chris Chaney, '90; Jamal Muhammad, '99; Edward "Chip" Martin, '83; Tony Franklin, associate dean of students.

students who had no prior contact with Black people "a chance to interact with them in a nonconfrontational atmosphere and to open up dialogue. I always felt that we knew about the majority. They didn't know about us."

During the late '80s, there was a lot of interplay between A.B.L.E. and other student groups. Some of this occurred because A.B.L.E.'s own leadership was involved in student government; it is also attributable to A.B.L.E.'s co-sponsorship of campus events. Johnson believes that, most importantly, A.B.L.E.'s visibility was due to its own efficacy as a student alliance. "The goal of all student organizations is to articulate the concerns and the ideas of the students and to effect change as a result of those ideas. It cannot be disputed that that's what A.B.L.E. did at that time. And I really think A.B.L.E. served as a model because all the other student groups and those that were formed at the time, wanted to link with A.B.L.E."

A.B.L.E. made news and made change in the spring of 1988, when a delegation interrupted a faculty meeting to present a list of demands. Johnson was vice president at the time. He remembers the seriousness and the urgency he and fellow members felt about making their views known. Their demonstration was conducted "in a manner that was clear, unequivocal and demanding." Johnson is proud to have been part of a movement with a legacy. He cites the A.B.L.E. Center for Black Culture, the addition of Black professors to the faculty, and the appointment of a Director of Minority Affairs as fruits of A.B.L.E.'s labor. News of the organization's activism spread to students outside the radius of the Knox campus. "When we led that protest before the faculty, we started to attract a lot of people from different schools. Bradley took notice. Western [Illinois University] took notice. Black people started coming to Knox to find out what we were doing." For Johnson, being in A.B.L.E. meant being part of history. He sees himself as part of a continuum and imagines that current African-American students are not so different from his younger self. "They need mentors and they need [to know] people who have been through Knox."

After graduating from Knox, Johnson went to law school at the University of Illinois. He now lives in Chicago, where he works for the law firm of Brothers and Thompson P.C.