

A Panther's Life

Indeed, we are all—Black and white alike—ill in the same way, mortally ill. But before we die, how shall we live? I say with hope and dignity; and if premature death is a result, that death has a meaning reactionary suicide can never have. It is the price of self-respect.

Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible. When reactionary forces crush us, we must move against these forces, even at the risk of death.

—Huey P. Newton

TENS OF THOUSANDS of ghetto souls came in to contact with the Party daily. Elementary school students attended the morning breakfast programs, adult poor came for the free clothing and free shoes programs, ill came to the Party's People's Medical Centers across the nation for sickle cell anemia testing, and treatment for high-blood pressure, sexually transmitted diseases, and other fairly simple ailments. To this number must be added those many people who bought the Party's newspaper, *The Black Panther*, on ghetto street corners, in bars, in beauty parlors, and outside high schools.

Who were these people called the Black Panthers?

Much has been written about Party leadership, its so-called stars: the photogenic Newton, the charismatic (Eldridge) and brilliant (Kathleen) Cleavers, the ambitious and talented Elaine Brown, the long-suffering Geronimo, and the like. As leaders, many of these people formed the Party's public profile and came to typify a Black Panther in much of the public mind.

Most people, indeed most Panthers, never came into intimate contact with such people, for they usually traveled in rarefied, higher strata than did the average Panther.

The average young man or woman in the Black Panther Party was between seventeen and twenty-two years old, lived in a collective home with other Panthers, worked long and hard days (and sometimes nights) doing necessary Party work without pay, and owned nothing. Except to their neighbors, and, of course, the ubiquitous police (and their snitches), most Panthers lived in relative obscurity and rarely, if ever, got their picture in the paper (in either the bourgeois press or the Party press). Friends, comrades, and lovers were primarily other Party members.

With very little exception, other than the folks who participated in the various programs, most Panthers spent every waking hour with other Panthers. The people looked up to and admired were the leadership, but close, loving relations, of true care and concern, were with fellow Panthers. They were our confidants, our counselors, our comrades—those we could be easy and relaxed around.

The average Panther rose at dawn and retired at dusk and did whatever job needed to be done to keep the programs going for the people, from brothers and sisters cooking breakfast for the school kids, to going door-to-door to gather signatures for petitions, to gathering clothes for the free clothing program, to procuring donated supplies from neighboring merchants.

The average Panther's life was long, hard, and filled with work. A Philadelphia-born member of the Oakland branch was struck by the deep poverty she found among Party members in West Oakland:

Many of the brothers were hunters so they cut up the deer meat in the back of the office. I almost fainted. The Panther men in particular laughed at my reaction, but after it was cooked, I refused to eat the meat. Knowing that I was very hungry some of them chased me around the office and playfully urged me to sample the spicy scented deer. Ironically, as we fed hungry children breakfast, and later gave out bags of groceries to the poor, oftentimes Panthers themselves had little food and certainly little money. We lived mostly off paper sales. We sold each Panther paper for twenty-five cents and kept ten cents for ourselves.

While that division of the paper sales money may have been the case for her chapter, it differed in other places. In some chapters, where Panther members lived communally and ate Party dinners, it was argued that the additional dime should be donated to the office, for the Party met all of the essential needs of its full-time members. That was certainly the case for the Philadelphia office.

People could be affiliated with the Party in the following ways:

Party supporter: This person might buy a paper or attend a rally organized by the Party, but was not member.

Community worker: This person might donate time to Party efforts, as some non-Panthers would assist in the breakfast program, for example, or assist the Party in administering Party programs. Often, this person would be unable to secure parental permission to formally join the Party, but would help in some form; as students who sold the paper at their school, for example.

Panther-in-training (PIT): These were probationary members, who were expected to memorize the 10-Point Program and Platform; they were expected to obtain a copy of the Red Book by Mao Tse-Tung and to learn from it the Three Main Rules of Discipline and to memorize them. These PITs would also be required to attend a given number of Political Education (PE) classes, to learn more about the Party. If a PIT failed to attend required PE classes, he or she would be counseled and if unresponsive, could be dropped from consideration for full membership.

Black Panther: These persons were expected to use any and all of their skills or expertise to help build and protect the organization and further its aims and objectives as determined by local, regional, and national leadership. They were traditionally full-time Party operatives, who spent virtually seven days a week conducting Party business.

Being a Black Panther, for many members, was never a single thing; indeed, it was many things, at different times, in different places. Panthers were taught to eschew what was called careerism and to shun compartmentalist thinking. This meant that one should not perceive any given rank as one's own, nor to look at things from a narrow, linear perspective, but from a broad one, asking, "What is in the best interest of the Party?" Individualism, like careerism, was seen as a negative, bourgeois trait that was criticized. The highest achievement was for a brother or sister to think in collectivist terms, as in *we* not *I*.

This way of thinking fostered humility, self-sacrifice, and discipline in Party ranks. It promoted the best interests of the collective, rather than arrogance and egotism, which threatened cohesion and working relationships.

In this environment, the Party became the central focus in the lives of thousands of Panthers across the nation, and an extraordinary morale and sense of unity of purpose were engendered. Thus, there were few things more exciting than meeting a fellow Panther from another part of the country.

Although there is considerable linguistic diversity in Black America, these regional forms of speech did not divide Panthers, but acted as bonds of affection between brothers and sisters. The deep, southern drawls of our North Carolinian or Virginian comrades drew smiles from Pennsylvanians or New Yorkers in the Party. Similarly, when we met Panthers from New Haven or Boston who wanted to drive a "cah" to the "bah," we found ourselves rolling on the ground, giddy with laughter, and really with a kind of amazement that Black people—Black Panthers—really talked like that. In many of these informal settings, Panthers learned from other Panthers how life was lived in different parts of this vast nation.

That joy, however, was tempered by gritty moments of terror. The slaughters of the sleeping Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in a Panther pad in Chicago on December 4, 1969, had sent a disturbing message to Panthers all across the nation; we will kill you in your sleep with impunity.