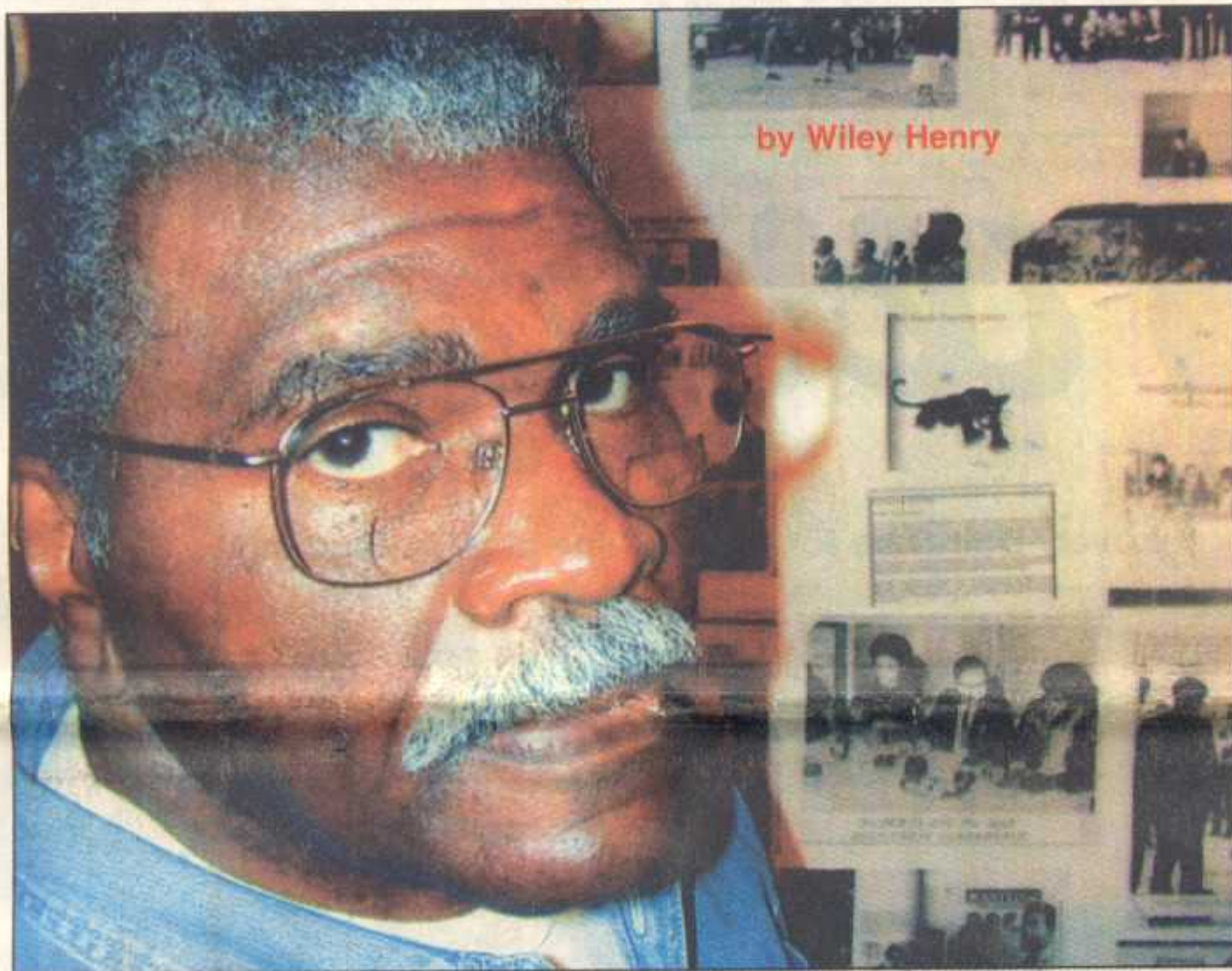


Prowling Panther



Considered the most feared African Americans in the 60s, The Black Panther Party started with a bang, then fizzled. However, its legacy is something that Elbert "Big Man" Howard, an original member, hopes to preserve for future generations.

He stood tall, robust at 6 feet, 1 inch — an imposing figure, to say the least. Thirty six years ago he tipped the scale at 260 pounds when the uncertainties of life in Oakland, Calif., nearly cost him his life at the hands of those in uniform who swore to serve and protect.

He was prepared nevertheless, like a fierce, prowling Panther ready to pounce at any time. But then Elbert Howard, with guns in ready mode, didn't look for trouble; trouble found him. He didn't pounce unless he was provoked.

"If somebody put their hands on you, it is your duty and obligation to see to it that they don't live to do it again," Howard says.

He was a Black Panther — "Big Man," as he was called — who often fought alongside other Panthers in perilous gun battles in their quest for political, social, and economic equality. Their methodology, however, agitated those who preferred the status quo, particularly the police they

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LEAD STORY

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patrolled.

"Everyone should be prepared to defend himself. It's a constitutional right to bear arms; It's a human right," says Howard, who traded gunfire with police and was often carted off to jail. With bullets swishing through the air, he stood his ground, he says.

All Panthers were encouraged to carry firearms. "I had a Remington shotgun automatic, a 9 mm pistol, and a 12-gauge Winchester pump I kept on the rack inside my pickup truck," Howard recalls. "I gave the pump to 'Little' Bobby Hutton (shortly after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed). The next day I heard on the news that he (Hutton) was dead."

Today, at 65, the former Panther still espouses civil rights, he says, although exercising extreme caution to stay within the confines of the law just as he tried as a 30-year-old student who met his fate on the campus of Oakland City College.

While studying English, sociology, and political education, Howard befriended Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, then budding revolutionaries whose unorthodox methods to achieve equal rights would soon stir the consciousness of African Americans and ignite violent confrontations between law enforcement.

"They were well advanced in political ideology," says Howard about his friends. "We used to get together after class to discuss politics and revolutionary philosophy — Chairman Mao Tse-tung (China), W.E.B Du Bois, and Cuba's (Fidel) Castro. Huey paralleled all of this to what was happening in the Black community."

But then, "We were the children of Malcolm X," he adds.

Howard is not the same man he was when Newton and Seale formed The Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oct. 1966. Now 20 pounds lighter, with graying hair and mustache to replace his dense beard and Afro of the 60s, Howard unquestionably is a Panther at heart. He no longer wears the dark shades. His eyes — dark, still piercing — now reflect light through rim, prescription glasses.

One of the six original members — Newton, Seale, Hutton, brothers Reggie and Sherman Forte, and Howard himself — Big Man helped to ignite a firestorm that quickly spread across America, leaving in its wake the bullet-riddled bodies of both police officers and Panther members.

Age has slowed his stride, but Big Man's mind is ever crisp, for he hopes to educate today's youth about the [real] Panthers — good and bad — and their contribution to history. "I have to put all of this stuff down," he says. "I'm an old man now."

Howard will publish his memoirs once he finds a publisher, and carefully record the Panther's infamous legacy: boasting 40 chapters and 5,000 members. "We did more than just carry guns," he quickly points out. "We fed, clothed, people, built



This 1968 *Newsweek* cover shows Panthers at their international headquarters in Oakland, Calif. From left: June Hilliard, assistant chief of staff; Donald Cox, field marshal currently exiled in France; and Elbert "Big Man" Howard. Huey P. Newton's photo is in the background. *Courtesy photo*

words, eloquent, yet peppered with bitter truth are testimonials about a movement that prevailed, then fizzled, then imploded in the late 70s.

The government, Howard says, sowed seeds of discourse and planted informants that eventually whittled away at the Panther's stronghold in America. Its symbol, the crouching Panther, only purred after the party's influence waned.

Big Man no longer dons the black leather jacket, black pants, black boots and black beret tilted to one side. They are relics now. He tossed them in 1974 after leaving the party (Newton and Seale left too) for the business world of spiffy white shirts, patterned neckties, and dress pants or suits.

"I couldn't tell them about my background; they probably wouldn't have hired me. I had to make a living to support my family," says the former deputy minister of information and first editor of the Panther newspaper.

He kept the nickname, however, and trained at Kmart stores



During a press conference in Philadelphia in 1970, Howard (left) confers with Afeni Sahkur, mother of Tupac Sahkur, and Ray Massi Hewitt (UPI/Corbis-Bettmann)

getic militant nonetheless. His smile and pleasant disposition say otherwise.

In retrospect, Howard is still angry, but not enough to jeopardize his aging years and family — Grace, his wife; daughters Tynisa Howard, 23, of Forestville, Md.; and Kisha Johnson, 25, a Memphis poet who likewise subscribes to the Panther's creed: "You shoot at me, I'm shooting back," Newton once remarked.

Tynisa, a hairstylist, did not know her father's past until she saw producer Spike Lee's "School Daze" at a movie theater and saw him in a montage of photos. Kisha also grew up unaware of Howard's exploits or extracurricular activities.

"It's amazing to be close to someone who had that kind of impact in the struggle for the Black nation," she says.

The fire that first engulfed her father's spirit on the college campus has never been extinguished. This time he is employing different methods to achieve his aim: human rights for the world's people. He is on the lecture circuit now, just talking.

On Feb. 13, at Southwest Tennessee Community College, the Macon Cove campus, Big Man lectured on Panther history to an audience of 10 students. "I was a little disappointed," says Pam Powell, coordinator of student activities. "He is very diverse. I was brought up in the 60s — love, peace, and war. I didn't know what the Panther's did. It was a learning experience."

Howard, securing speaking engagements here and there, has learned some things too, that the party wasn't as "vicious" as The New Black Panthers. "They don't stand for what we did," he says. In an open letter from the Huey P. Newton Foundation, it reads: "There is no New Black Panther Party." Newton was killed in 1989.

About 50 Panthers were either killed or died since the party's inception. Seale, the party's chairman, is selling Panther paraphernalia and his book "Barbeque'n with Bobby Seale." Bobby Rush is a congressman from Chicago. And Billy X Jennings is the publisher of "It's About Time," a Panther newspaper. Angela Davis teaches and lectures, and others have traded in their revolutionary garb for the mainstream too.

With straight faces and clenched fists decades ago, each Panther may have mellowed now. Through dangers seen and unseen, toils and strife, Howard, too, has survived the tumultuous era. For him, memories now abound.

Says Big Man: "Maybe God has kept me around for a long time for a reason — to tell the story."