

**Reaching 45 years into the Future:
Existing Programs/Practices initiated by the Black Panther Party
By Elbert “Big Man” Howard**

As a former Black Panther, I am often asked, “What *is* the Black Panther Party’s legacy?” I usually answer by listing some important existing programs, practices, and facts that address this question, as follows:

- 1) 45 years ago, Sickle Cell Anemia was not a disease that was well-known and it was not widely researched, as it was a disease that primarily affected Black People. The Black Panther Party established free medical clinics and started screening and treating people with this disease, as well as other diseases which plague our communities, such as hypertension and diabetes. Advisory committee members of these clinics and physicians became involved in the screening, testing and treating of Black people. Now there are many research facilities and Sickle Cell Treatment Centers established in cities across the US – the BPP Free Medical Clinics brought an increased focused interest into dealing with this disease and others. There are medical clinics started by the Black Panther Party still open and operating in the Seattle, Washington area today, as well as clinics in Oakland, California modeled after those early clinics.
- 2) Ambulance Services were started by the Black Panther Party at a time when many ambulance companies would not go into some Black communities, and also, if they did show up, they wanted payment for their services up front from their poor clients. Not only did some chapters of the BPP provide these services, they provided them 24 hours a day, free of charge. One such program still exists. It was started by Larry Little in Winston Salem, North Carolina and is serving the community to this day.
- 3) The Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for School Children Program was initiated because it was obvious that hungry children could not concentrate and/or learn. This program was very widely established throughout the nation - over 200,000 school children were fed by BPP chapters. After attempts to destroy these programs failed, the federal government established similar breakfast and lunch

programs in schools and these programs remain in place today all over America.

- 4) Decades ago, Liberation Schools were created by the Black Panther Party to give Black children a correct view of their role in society and knowledge of the richness of their history. Many children had been labeled by the power structure's schools as "incapable of learning". Public schools and teachers would not and/or could not meet the needs of these students. When the Black Panther Party started their own independent schools, designed to address these problems, the stage was set for the charter schools and alternative schools that exist today.
- 5) Black student unions first came into being in 1966-67 when students at Grove Street College in Oakland established the Soul Student Advisory Council. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were, of course, students there at that time and were very involved with this union and its advisor, Sid Walton. Grove Street College was the first school to get an accredited Black Studies Program. After this, BSUs and similar programs were instituted at universities and colleges nation-wide.
- 6) The Black Panther Party Newspaper was first published in 1967. It grew from a local Bay Area Black community newsletter into a weekly newspaper with a circulation that was over 200,000 copies weekly and a distribution that was both nation-wide and world-wide. The Black Panther Party newspapers are now much sought-after historical documents by academics and others.
- 7) When Black Panther Party members started being imprisoned, the prison system changed forever. BPP members educated inmates about the politics of the system and how the prison system is designed to warehouse people, not "educate and rehabilitate", as its proponents claim. Confinement in prison did not end a Panther's work or political objectives, it was just a beginning. For example, Field Marshall George Jackson was able to reach out to inmates in prisons all over the United States and beyond. To this day, his writings are widely read and studied in prisons and educational institutions. His published books are still best sellers in America, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Now, Mumia Abu-Jamal is known around the world which

has taken up the demand for justice on his behalf. Despite being imprisoned for decades, his insightful writings and commentaries continue to motivate and inspire. There are countless other political prisoners who are less high-profile who have also been incarcerated since the 60's and 70's, who need our support.

- 8) In many of the high-profile court cases that the Black Panther Party had to battle, precedents were set by the arguments their defense lawyers used at that time. One very important one which is widely used today is the use of change of venue in trials because of pre-trial publicity. The argument that newspaper, TV, and other media coverage made it difficult, if not impossible, to find unbiased jurors, was often used by the BPP lawyers.
- 9) Another demand the Black Panther Party had was that they be tried by a jury of their peers, as was set forth in the US Constitution. For the most part, that called for jurors that were selected from poor and Black citizens. In the past Blacks were tried by all-white juries, definitely not a jury of their peers. BPP members knew that jurors were selected from voter registration lists so the Black Panther Party launched massive voter registration drives, not only to support a particular candidate, but to thereby make it possible for poor and Black people to become eligible for jury duty.
- 10) As the Black Panther Party evolved, many members became involved in electoral politics in different parts of the country. In 1971, Bobby Seale ran for Mayor of Oakland, and although he did not win, he captured 40% of the electoral vote. Thus a precedent was set and other Panthers ran for and won seats, such as Herman Smith and Audrea Jones, and William Roberts, who became members of the Berkeley City Council. Larry Little served as an assemblyman in North Carolina, and Bobby Rush, formerly of the Chicago Chapter of the BPP, served as a congressman from Illinois for several terms. Aaron Dixon, formerly of the Seattle Chapter, ran for the State Senate of Washington a couple of years ago.
- 11) Finally, the Black Panther Party, through its amazing history, which has been gathered and presented through lots of hard work over the years by It's About Time and others, has generated a wealth of important historical archives.

Through anniversary events like these and others, such as film festivals, exhibits, and lectures, etc, It's About Time, and other individuals and organizations, such as museums and colleges have continued to sponsor events and presentations.

All of this has created and generated much academic and media interest and has led, particularly, during the last few years, to a plethora of published works and presentations world-wide by academics, ex-Party members, and others. University students and professors earn the letters after their names through papers they submit based on The Black Panther Party's history.

Photographers from that era and artists, like Emory Douglas, finally have recognition and lecture and present their works internationally.

Enlightenment and education, bridging the gaps of misunderstanding and ignorance, the Black Panther Party, through its preservation and presentation of its history, provides important examples of what can be achieved.

This also remains our legacy: we must continue to raise our voices against oppression, for the struggle for basic human rights and justice continues. It is no less than our Brothers and Sisters, imprisoned in the tombs of the concentration camps of America's prison systems, and exiled in far lands, expect and deserve from us. And it is no less than the generations who follow us, expect and deserve.

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