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ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE

EXPLORING THE LEGACY OF THE
DES MOINES BLACK PANTHER PARTY

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Black Panther Headquarters Bombed

Black Panther Headquarters Bombed



'THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY IS THE PEOPLE'S PARTY AND WE ARE PRIMARILY INTERESTED IN FREEING MAN'

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE



"In terms of who was right and who was wrong, that can't be determined. It had to play itself out and we're better off for having been through it." — Bill McCarthy, assistant chief of police, Des Moines

By Tom Schmitt
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was another bomb.

"He (the policeman) looked us dead in the eye and said, 'Don't worry, there's not another bomb,'" recalls Abdul-Samad.

Because the police were at the scene so quickly and seemed to know what had happened as soon as they arrived, the Panthers suspected they were involved with the bombing.

"They were at our door 30 seconds after the explosion," Charles Knox, deputy minister of defense told a reporter at the scene. "I've never seen them get anywhere that quick in my life." Another Panther on the scene told a reporter the police bombed the building, "because they are pigs and because they don't dig us, and we don't dig them."

Police Chief Wendell Nichols dismissed the allegation, suggesting instead that the Panthers themselves were responsible, either by accidentally setting off the explosion or that an internal power struggle had led to the blast.

"Whoever planted the bomb put it so that everywhere we should have been was gone," says Abdul-Samad. "The rumors came out that we bombed ourselves. Trust me, that is not my forte, working with something that can take my limbs off."

Abdul-Samad and three others were arrested for interfering with a police officer, but none were ever charged with the bombing.

Soon after the Panthers' building was destroyed, the Des Moines Police Department was bombed, followed by the Chamber of Commerce and a building at Drake University. The police believed the Panthers were involved and at one point said publicly that they knew who was responsible for the bombings and would make an arrest within 72 hours.

Thirty-two years later, the cases remain unsolved.

Des Moines circa 1969 was much more volatile than today. A citywide firefighters' strike was looming; riots, brick throwing and bomb blasts were almost commonplace.

The murder of Martin Luther King Jr. a year earlier had enraged many, and the civil rights movement was divided between those wishing to continue in King's path of non-violent resistance and those willing to arm themselves in defense of their rights.

Until his death, and even beyond, King was considered a serious threat to the American way of life by the mostly white power structure in place at the time. Under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI worked to limit King's influence and to erode the power base they believed he was building.

The Black Panther Party did not initially concern the feds as much as King and his adherents did. But as the organization grew, that changed.

The names Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, founders of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, Calif., in 1967, are known even to many white suburbanites. The vision of these two with bandoleers strung across their chests and weapons in hand is burned into the collective memory of the nation.

This picture frightened White America.

That a Black man would dare arm himself as the Constitution declared he had a right to do was almost unheard of at the time. Many Blacks had tried the non-violent approach that King

Saturday, April 26, 1969. The residents of Des Moines were focused this rainy Saturday on the Drake Relays, a nice respite for a community already pushed to the edge by violence and unrest, which had plagued the city and dominated headlines in previous weeks.

A slight sprinkle was falling, and it seemed like another Saturday night in Des Moines would pass quietly. Charles Knox, deputy minister of education for the Des Moines Black Panther Party for Self Defense, was upstairs at the group's headquarters at 1207 11th St. preparing a lesson that should have started 20 minutes earlier. Also Abdul-Samad was watching television in the basement with three others waiting for nightly lessons to begin.

The next thing he remembers was a flash of brilliant light, followed quickly by a deafening roar. Plaster and bricks flew everywhere around him as he was thrown backward onto a couch.

The explosion was the result of a bomb, estimated by police to be the equivalent of 30 to 50 pounds of dynamite, which had been planted alongside the eastern edge of the Panthers' headquarters.

The blast destroyed the home and damaged at least 48 others in the vicinity. Somehow, no one was seriously injured, but nearby cars and trucks were totaled and a window was blown out at the fire station at 915 University Ave.

"We thought we were dead," recalls Abdul-Samad. "We thought the plaster dust was clouds and that we were in heaven."

They made their way up the basement stairs, half expecting to see the pearly gates on the other side of the door. But when they stepped outside just a few minutes after the explosion and saw police everywhere, Abdul-Samad recalls someone saying, "Nope, we're still in hell."

An officer in front of the house told the Panthers they could not go back inside. Abdul-Samad told him that people were still in the building and they wanted to get them out in case there

preached. It was highly effective, but required a person be repeatedly beaten and jailed while offering no resistance.

The Panthers had had enough of that. It was their right to dignity and self-defense that led them to take up arms. The party's purpose was to work toward self-determination and create a community that was self-sufficient and proud of its roots. Given the resistance this idea had met with in the past, they expected violence, and rather than taking it lying down, decided to fight back if and when the need arose.

Abdul-Samad was a junior at Tech High School in 1968, a good student hoping to graduate and run track in college. But like many young blacks at that time, Abdul-Samad was becoming more aware of his heritage and was taking an interest in what it meant to be black in America.

"I was reluctant to join [the Black Panthers]," says Abdul-Samad. "I wanted to graduate high school and run track."

But he was kicked out of Tech after he organized a rally in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. He transferred to Lincoln, the fourth black student at the school, and was later thrown out, accused of starting a riot after a basketball game. The schools he had longed to stay a part of had turned him away. He began working with the Panthers, distributing the party's weekly newspaper, and was eventually promoted to lieutenant.

"It was the Black Panther Party that was responsible for me becoming politically aware," says Abdul-Samad. "I tell people, I'm a Panther at heart. I'll always be a Panther."

Abdul-Samad relates his story from his office on the upper floor of Creative Visions Human Development Center at 13th Street and Forest Avenue, just a few blocks from where the Panther headquarters once stood.

Drugs are plentiful in this northside neighborhood where abandoned and decrepit homes line the streets.

Unemployment here hovers around 18 percent, compared with less than 3 percent for Des Moines as a whole. The community is primarily African-American and considered "the bad part of town" by much of the white populace.

Creative Visions is an oasis in this neighborhood. Colorful murals adorning the brick walls speak of black pride and the importance of community and self-determination. Creative Visions is in this neighborhood to help the people who live here in whatever way it can, whether providing drug education or a safe place for young people to gather.

The building was used more than 30 years ago for a breakfast program for schoolchildren run by the Black Panthers. The Des Moines Panthers fed thousands of children, black, white or otherwise, and did it solely with funds and donations from the local community.

"We were really the ones who started the idea of feeding children and we did it with no funds," says Charles Knox, who was deputy minister of education for the Des Moines Black Panthers. "We were able to do many important creative things then."

The first preschools in this community, says Knox, were the result of the Black Panthers' work. He credits the Panthers with advancements in conflict mediation and the formation of radio station KUCB. The Panthers also ran free clothing and educational programs and distributed a weekly newspaper.

"We were taught to set up programs and to turn them over to the community," says Abdul-Samad. "That's what democracy is to me."

These are the things that Knox and Abdul-Samad recall when thinking back on those days. But police at that time had a different opinion. They viewed the Panthers less as a philanthropic organization than as a terrorist group.

"We viewed them basically as the enemy," says Bill McCarthy, an officer at the time and currently assistant chief of police in charge of the patrol division. "We viewed them as people who were restrictive in their membership and motivated by hate and involved with illegal activities."

Police blamed the Panthers not only for blowing up their own building, but for the police station and chamber of commerce bombings, as well as for earlier blasts at a power station and a black community center.

And it's difficult to blame the police for these suspicions. The Panthers, with their "anti-pig" rhetoric and penchant for firearms, cultivated a public image of rage and rebellion against a corrupt and racist system. They read Mao's little red book, preached revolution and encouraged the black community to arm themselves. The Panthers' 10-point party platform called for the release of all black men held in prison and for an exemption from military service for all black men.

"We are stuck with that image of a violent group that will never go away," says Knox. But he worries that the underlying message and work of the Panthers is more often than not lost in this image.

The primary goal of the Black Panthers, says Abdul-Samad, was self-determination for the black community. They believed that African-Americans best knew the circumstances they faced and were thus most qualified to deal with those problems. The main focus of the 10-point platform was the call for such basic things as freedom, employment, housing and education, but the white community and the police usually saw only the angry black man with a weapon and often formed their opinion on that image alone.

As chief of police in Des Moines from 1968 until his retirement in 1978, Wendell Nichols determined the manner in which the



"I remember when blacks couldn't go into the theater. That's because that was what the most popular voice of Des Moines said at the time. I can understand why they became militant."

— Wendell Nichols, Des Moines Chief of Police 1968 - 1978

Black Panthers were dealt with and was ultimately responsible for all police action at the time.

Nichols now lives in a modest Urbandale apartment, and spends many of his days on the golf course. The hard-nosed police chief who went head to head with the Black Panthers in one of the most tumultuous times in American history now walks in a cautious shuffle, his Hush Puppies tennis shoes barely leaving the thick living room carpet.

But Nichols is still very much a cop. He remains steadfast in his conviction that the Panthers were a dangerous organization intent on revolution and bloodshed. Nichols knows only that he had a job to do then — keep the peace and arrest criminals — and that's what he tried to do. The peripheral stuff of that era didn't affect his decisions, and do not change the way he views those decisions now.

"The black problem started around 1961," he recalls, "when they shut down University and threw rocks at passing cars. Relationships between black people and the police were not good. No matter what we did to placate them, we couldn't do it."

Nichols recalls going to the area where much of the violence was taking place with a Washington mediator, who hoped to ease tensions but was instead hit in the temple with a large rock.

But Nichols says he understood African-Americans' frustration and anger and did everything in his power to improve relations between the cops and the black community while refusing to back down from the job at hand.

"I remember when blacks couldn't go into the theater," says Nichols. "That's because that was what the most popular voice of Des Moines said at the time. I can understand why they became militant."

It was common, says Nichols, for policemen and their families to be threatened. They were regularly called pigs and their faces were spit upon. One police officer had his home firebombed, says Nichols, and many others were assaulted with rocks, bottles and other projectiles.

"I sent as many people to school as I could so they could learn to be less hostile, even when they were faced with hostility," says Nichols. "The attitude in the police department needed to change some, there's no doubt about it."

"Officers would stop people and you'd hear them call people niggers. I said, 'The next time I hear the word nigger, I am going to fire somebody,' and I think that helped."

"I didn't think it was right to discriminate against people, but I think a lot of people thought that's what we were supposed to do. The police are hired by the people who run the city and they have to follow their rules. It takes a pretty strong man to walk that narrow line. But if you're going to be a police officer, you are going to be a police officer all the way and you're not going to look at what color a person is."

But, he adds, it was difficult to calm a police force that was receiving so little support from the community.

"No matter what, the police were always wrong," says Nichols. "The resistance to arrest by blacks was incredible and that led to a lot of trouble."

But the Panthers remember things differently.

"We wanted to protect our community against the racism that was there," says Abdul-Samad. "We had guns and we would defend ourselves if we had to."

Knox, speaking from his home in Chicago, adds that the police were to blame for most confrontations.

"We always had problems with

police," he says. "There were bombings all over the place, and we're supposed to have done all of them."

Abdul-Samad says the local media were largely responsible for the public's misconceptions about the Black Panthers, and these misconceptions led to the bombing and the end of many of the programs they started in Des Moines.

"If it wasn't for the adversarial position the media took against the Black Panther Party in Des Moines, this city would have been miles ahead of all others," says Abdul-Samad. "We could have been a model city."

He says the Panthers have often been misconstrued as violent, racist or Communist, none of which he says is true.

"They labeled us Communists and said we hated America," says Abdul-Samad. "A lot of young people were involved and they said we were brainwashing the youth. The free clothing program and the free food program were never given the attention they deserved."

But if the popular image of the Black Panthers was wrong, the Panthers were at least partly to blame. Their rhetoric at the very least implied a desire for violent confrontation with the "pigs" and sometimes called for it outright. But whether these calls to arms were put out in self-defense or were a cry for revolution depends on whom you ask.

But Knox says what the majority thought of the Panthers meant little as long as those they hoped to serve understood their message.

"There was some misunderstanding," he says. "But not by our community, and that's what was most important."

A group of nuns gave the Panthers a car and another Catholic organization provided them with the house that became their headquarters. Father Sam Palmer was an associate pastor at Basilica of St. John's at the time and part of a not-for-profit group called Concerned Christians, which provided the house to the Panthers as a meeting place.

"We let them in the building with the idea that they could do some outreach to the kids in the community, trying to get kids off drugs and such," he says.

Palmer remembers the summer of 1969 as tense and says the Catholic Church was trying to keep a presence in the area. Despite the rough times, he says, "people needed to stay rather than run."

"I didn't see any guns," says Palmer. "In all the exposure I had to the Black Panthers, I never saw weapons. When the house was bombed, it was a real surprise. There was nothing confrontational going on there."

"They were trying to do some good things."

Others remain unconvinced.

McCarthy, the current assistant chief of police and an officer during the late '60s in Des Moines, says his opinion of some of the people involved with the Black Panthers has changed, but he still believes they did little, if anything, to help the community.

"They weren't reaching out to the community as a whole," says McCarthy. "I think the breakfast program and free clothing program were public relations stunts. They may have done some good, but they were mainly PR stunts."

"I think there were good people that came out of it, but nothing good per se. You can't motivate people by force and exclusiveness; that's the one thing we've learned in the last 50 years."

Bob Wright Sr., a Des Moines police officer in the 1950s and head of the Iowa NAACP from 1960-68, doubts that the Panthers had much of a positive impact on the city.

"We (the NAACP) were inclined not to be involved with the black Panthers," says Wright. "We usually don't criticize anyone. But in retrospect, I don't think they did a lot of good."

"The NAACP thought we should work within the system to alleviate the problems that existed, getting the wheels of justice turning within the system."

But the Panthers believed that the system itself was the problem, and that to support it was to deny their cause.

"A lot of the talk was that we had to be prepared to resist, but that was ridiculous," says Wright. "You can have pistols and guns, but the police have tanks and stuff if they want to move into the masses. I never thought they'd have much of an impact on this community, either positive or negative. I think they were visualized by the press as more of a threat than they were."

But McCarthy believes otherwise and says to have dismissed the Des Moines Panthers as irrelevant would have been dangerous.

"This was a legitimate group that we know was sometimes in a position to influence the party nationally," says McCarthy. "This was no second-rate group."

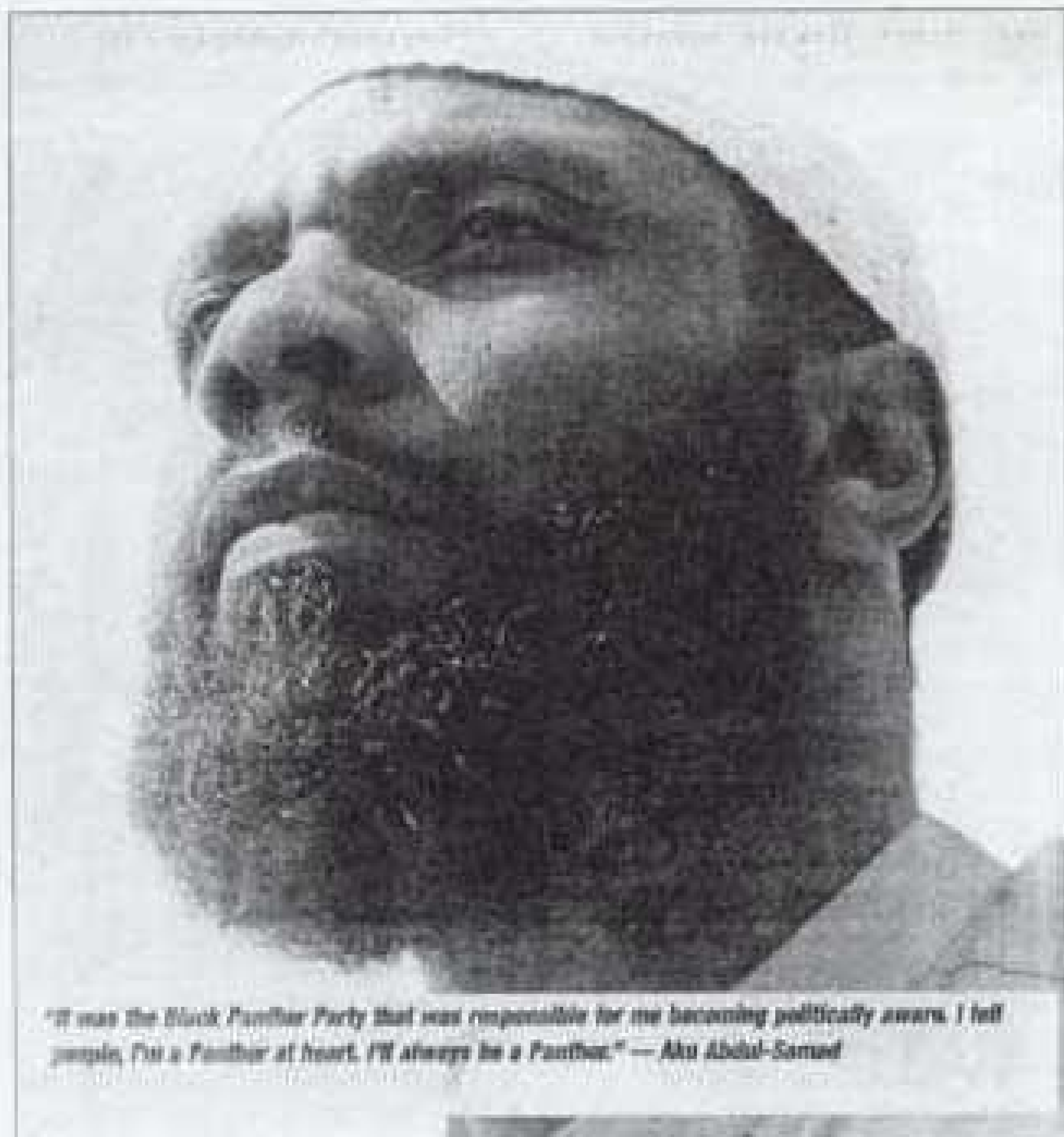
Abdul-Samad says documents received through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) show that the FBI took the Des Moines Panthers seriously, too.

One memo was from the FBI to President Nixon informing him that infiltration of the Des Moines Panthers had not been achieved because the group was too close-knit.

Another document was a transcript of a conversation between Abdul-Samad and two other members in a car while returning to Des Moines from Omaha. The car had been bugged and the entire conversation recorded by the federal government.

This type of activity on the part of the feds was not unusual. Under the FBI's counterintelligence program, the FBI set out to infiltrate, disrupt and destroy the Black Panther movement and other groups it perceived as dangerous.

"J. Edgar Hoover once labeled the Des Moines Black Panther Party the most dangerous element in the country," says Knox, who still keeps the FOIA records he received.



"It was the Black Panther Party that was responsible for me becoming politically aware. I tell people, I'm a Panther at heart. I'll always be a Panther." — Akiba Abdul-Samad

But even those critical of the Black Panthers now admit that some good came from the movement.

McCarthy has worked with Abdul-Samad in recent years and the two have developed a relationship based on mutual respect.

"I think he (Abdul-Samad) has proven over the years that his word is his bond," says McCarthy. "While we don't always agree with him, we respect him."

Wright believes the Panthers helped influence people who might otherwise have thought they could disregard the rights of black men and women. He says the situation for blacks has improved, but still has a long way to go.

"Blacks are still confined to the same five or six districts as they were 30 or 40 years ago," he says. "We've had some success getting African-Americans elected to office, but I don't think we've had it turned around enough in terms of providing jobs and opportunities."

The breakfast program started by the Panthers is still around. Dozens of kids are given a healthy breakfast every morning at Trinity United Methodist Church. Volunteers with Children and Family Urban Ministries now serve breakfast, but they credit the Panthers with starting the program.

Abdul-Samad founded Creative Visions in Des Moines and Knox now lives in Chicago and works with the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities.

"We're doing the same work in the community that we've always done," Knox says.

Even after 30 years of fighting the good

fight, Knox says little has changed for the black community.

"While there appears to be progress, there's still terrible suffering," he says. "If things had gotten better we'd have worked our way out of jobs."

But McCarthy sees hope for the future because of the struggles in the past.

"You have to view this in the proper context," he says. "The normal course of events was insanity. It seemed like we, society, were coming apart at the seams."

During those times, he says, there were National Guardsmen and up to 200 officers posted in Des Moines to control rioting.

"I think our generation has certain baggage and no matter how we want to do the right thing, we see the world through that prism of the 1960s. But the younger generation sees better the importance of equality. Things are getting better."

"It's something we have to think about every day to get it right, and that's our task to do that because of our past."

Both the police and the Panthers, McCarthy says, wanted the same thing, peace and equality, but the methods each side employed to reach that goal were vastly different.

"We were prisoners to our own perceptions and the events of the time and it had to play out. Even with the baggage, I think we are some of the most enlightened people, those who fought that battle on both sides."

"In terms of who was right and who was wrong, that can't be determined. It had to play itself out, and we're better off for having been through it." ●