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Black Panther reunion to inspire, instruct youth



Photo: BRADLEY ENGBAUS

Former Seattle Black Panther Party members Aaron Dixon (left), Ron Johnson, Jake Fiddler, and Leon 'Valentine' Hobbs are gearing up for a regional BPP reunion and community forum May 13-14 at Seattle University and the Garfield Community Center. The gathering will feature political activism and historical workshops, a BPP film festival and photo exhibit, and a line up of distinguished speakers including Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale.

By ERIK HANSEN

In the spring of 1968 a small, motivated group of African Americans active in the Garfield High School and University of Washington black student unions connected with the fledgling Black Panther Party while attending the funeral of Bobby Hutton in Oakland, California.

The young, unarmed BPP member was tear gassed and shot to death by police. Having traveled south to San Francisco State University for the second annual West Coast Black Student Union Conference, the Seattleites changed their plans when they learned about the memorial services for Hutton.

A week later party co-founder Bobby Seale was in Seattle helping set up the first chapter of the BPP outside of California. Within the first month after opening their headquarters on 34th Avenue and Union Street more than 300 black men and women had joined the party.

Now, nearly 37 years later, Seale is coming back to Seattle to participate in the first regional Black Panther Party forum and reunion on May 13-14 at Seattle University and Garfield Community Center.

"The Black Panther Party was necessary then, and organizing factors are necessary now," asserted former Seattle Chapter BPP lieutenant of information Ron Johnson, who joined in 1974. Johnson, along with his fellow BPP members Aaron Dixon and Leon 'Valentine' Hobbs, are spearheading the activist-driven Seattle reunion. "We're just trying to instill in the young people the principles we lived by then. It wasn't black-on-black violence and poor people against poor people. We had principles of unity,

bringing people together."

Power to the people

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s moved against racist and oppressive federal and state-supported laws, and the momentum helped launch the politically progressive social and environmental movements of the 1960s, especially in the major cities along the West Coast. In Seattle, the BPP members wasted little time in addressing the serious issues of poverty, hunger, and police brutality that were rippling through their Emerald City neighborhoods at the time.

Wearing their distinguished and street-savvy black leather jackets over powder-blue shirts topped off with black berets, the Seattle Panthers organized armed patrols of their communities as well as the police force. This strong, public assertion of their right to arm themselves was, for the most part, portrayed as a negative social element in the media, both then and now.

"Schools and the majority of the media do not teach youth about the party's survival programs," Johnson noted. "The only thing they hear about is that we wielded guns and we brought about terror in the community. That's a projection the system has imparted about us. We figure it's only right that we give historical context and give definition [during the reunion and forum] to what really went on so the youth can have both sides of the story."

While the guns had a tendency to nab a lot of dirty-laundry headlines, they did serve a purpose. During the late 1960s, black students at Rainier Beach High School suffered attacks and threats at the hands

and mouths of the white students, but the school's staff had refused to intervene.

In the winter of 1968, 13 armed BPP members entered Rainier Beach High to protect the black students. During the action there were 30-40 police in front of the school.

This militant side eventually made a positive impact on the way the community and its officers interacted with the local African American population. Unprovoked, racist threats and applications of force, some of it deadly, began to subside.

"I'm not going to lie to you and tell you we weren't scared. They were trying to kill us, and we had people that were dying; but we were not going to allow them to just kill us and not do anything about it," recalled Dixon, who noted that more than 35 BPP members were killed before the party ceased to exist in 1978. "We wanted to defend ourselves. The weapons were just tools for us to survive and to teach people that they did have a right to defend themselves."

In today's post-9/11 Dixon feels a different approach toward gaining political and social power is now needed. Ultimately it was one of the philosophy's lying at the heart of the late 1960s to early 1970s armed patrols.

"The guns are not something that's needed now because we're so outgunned," stated Dixon. "Technologically there's no way that we could stand up, and I don't think it's about that anyway. We used to say that the spirit of the people is stronger than the man's technology."

Johnson and Dixon assert the militant

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