

## THE PANTHER COMES TO SEATTLE

This is what we all had been waiting for whether we realized it or not.

Revolutions were unfolding all over the world. People like Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba were international heroes and Huey was posed to join that list, and we were poised to make history and we could feel it eerily creeping behind us.

Back home from my week in Oakland, I felt energized with a purpose. I was now armed with a mission to organize the Seattle chapter into a disciplined wing of the Black Panther Party. How things would transpire, I had not the faintest idea. I was just a passenger on the train and it had just so happened that I was assigned to be at the front of this particular car. I could only hope that my eyes and some wisdom would lead us in the right direction.

First and foremost was finding a storefront office in a central location. We were fortunate to find such a place at 34<sup>th</sup> and Union in Madrona, only three blocks from my parents' house across from Madrona Park. The storefront was across the street from Miss Ruby's house and Mrs. Jackson's record store where Michael Dean and I had spent much of our high school years listening to the latest Motown sounds and spending our hard-earned money on the latest hits. Madrona was still the same quiet working-class neighborhood. But that was all about to change.

The storefront that we had our eyes on was part of another connecting storefront that was owned by Brill Realty. Mr. Brill, the owner of the building, was never

particularly friendly to anyone in the neighborhood, especially not to young people. When Willy Brazier, Chester Northington, Curtis Harris, and I approached the squat, bowlegged, pale Mr. Brill and asked him about renting the vacant office, he responded, "No, I will not rent to you," in an abrupt, dismissive manner. We left quietly as well as confidently. Later that night, a Molotov cocktail was thrown into the storefront, causing superficial damage. About a week later we approached Mr. Brill while he was repairing the building. This time he promptly agreed to rent to us.

Within days we opened our storefront office, getting several desks and chairs donated, as well as a mimeograph machine. Word spread like wildfire through the Central Area and Rainier Valley, and we began taking applications of new recruits. In those first two months we took over 300 applications.

As I had seen in Oakland, the party attracted people from a wide spectrum of the black community. Most were young, black high school kids. Others were in their twenties and a few were older than 30, like Ron Carson, a smooth-skin brother who ran a local Poverty Program. He was known to carry several pistols, and was not one to bite his tongue. Another cat was almost forty years old. This being Seattle, it was not unusual that a handful of the new recruits were Asian—like 15-year-old Guy Kurose and Mike Gillespie and Mike Tagowa, a Vietnam vet. These guys had all grown up in our neighborhood and identified with young blacks in many ways.

Most of the new recruits signed up for a variety of reasons—some for a sense of belonging to something that instantly gave their life real meaning and purpose; some because they had felt the sting of racism, the cuts of injustice, and this was their

opportunity to strike back. A few were curious. A few others had their own agendas and ideas on how the liberation struggle could possibly benefit them personally, a view that would almost destroy the Seattle chapter.

Chester Northington, John Eichelburger, and Bruce Hayes were older cats who had been involved in other Black Nationalist organizations. I first met them at Voodoo Man's house. The Noble brothers brought two carloads of young recruits with them from the south end, including their two sisters. They would get the name of F Troop, not because they resembled the bumbling idiots on F-Troop, the TV show, but because of their wild appearance and frequent lack of discipline.

Two seventeen-year-old students, Warren Myers and Steve Philips, would become two of our best warriors. Besides students, there were also those brothers that had been involved in street life and saw the party as their way of evening the score as well as uplifting themselves in the eyes of the community. And there was always the trickling of Vietnam vets.

The first Vietnam vets that joined up were three buddies who had grown up together, went to war together, and were fortunate to return together—Bobby White, Bobby Harding, and Mike Tagowa. They were invaluable in terms of the experience and dedication that they brought to the chapter. Mike Tagowa and Bobby Harding used their military experience to bring discipline to the young Panther recruits. They started teaching weapons classes on how to break down and clean weapons, how to aim and discharge weapons properly. They led military marching, drilling the Panther recruits three times a week. We had to find some type of structural activity for all of the new

recruits, and since we considered ourselves a semi-military organization, military style drilling and marching was something the party adopted.

They would gather at Madrona Park, the scene of childhood memories of muddy football battles and wild baseball games and occasional fights. Now young men, dressed in the Panther black, berets tilted to the side, were learning military formations, how to stand at attention and stand at ease—and, most importantly, how to follow orders.

Bobby White, a slight brother who wore prescription sunglasses with his beret tilted to one side was one of the most dynamic writers in Seattle that I had ever met. He became lieutenant of information. He took charge of the news bulletin, and of decorating the office with posters and revolutionary slogans, and painting the Panther colors on the front office and with the words "Black Panther Party" in the middle. Bobby Harding was also a writer, a poet, and often times the three of us would share our work and talk about someday getting published.

The new recruits were not just men. Many young sisters joined up. Some of the sisters were actually tougher than some of the brothers. Joyce Redman had long been known as one of the baddest sisters in the neighborhood. No one wanted to mess with her because she was known to beat the hell out of her opponents, male or female. Maud Allen, articulate and hard-nosed about party rules, became the captain of the women. And there were the two Kathys—Kathy Jones, still in high school, and tall, thin Kathy Halley who was a student in college at Wilbur Forest, a black college in the Midwest. She later changed her name to Nafasi and became my close confidant, constantly worrying about my safety.

Buddy Yates and Curtis Harris were two brothers that were similar personalities, and early on it was obvious they had something else on their agenda that had very little to do with liberation of black America. Curtis was two years older than I, and was married to my sister. He named himself assistant captain, a title he made up himself. It was a move that should have alerted me and others, but we ignored it, a mistake that we would pay plenty for.

Of the many colorful individuals who signed up, none stuck out or was as committed in those early days as Lewis Jackson, LewJack, as he was called. LewJack must have been about 23 years old. He had moved to Seattle from New Orleans, and he used to tell us many stories about growing up in the tough ninth ward of New Orleans. He had a tattoo of a football right below his forehead, between his eyes, thus his nickname was Football. His beady eyes would light up when he talked about the fights he had been in and what he wanted to do to the pigs. Sometimes it was hard to understand him when he talked because of his French Creole dialect. He was one of the few recruits that came with a weapon, a .45 that he carried everywhere he went. LewJack would appoint himself as my personal bodyguard and would follow me around constantly, even sleeping out in front of the house in his car when there were threats against my life.

New recruits were given a three- to four-page pamphlet with party rules, Mao's three main rules of discipline and a list of books that were required reading. The recruits were instructed to attend weekly meetings, which never seemed to get off the ground on a consistent basis. We formed a central staff composed of appointed officers.

Theoretically, the central staff was supposed to be the guiding force of our chapter, similar to the central committee in Oakland. Of course, it never functioned as we had envisioned. There were just too many strong personalities, and at that time my personality was not strong enough to command the respect that was needed.

When Chairman Bobby was here, he had talked about an organizing tool that was used in the Algerian Revolution called the 10-10-10, which called for dividing the organizing area or community into ten sections and further dividing each section into subsections and subsections into blocks. Each section had a section leader and each subsection had subsection leaders as well as block captains. We attempted to use a variation of this tactic, as would other new chapters.

We divided our organizing area into three sections and appointed section leaders. This was supposed to be a way of not only organizing the community, but also engaging and coordinating the new recruits according to the section they had been assigned to. However, making this tool fit our purposes was difficult.

Early on, because so many young people had signed up, discipline was a problem. Elmer, who was rapidly becoming my solid right hand, organized a goon squad to administer some discipline to the young comrades that were not following orders and were conducting themselves in a rowdy, disorganized fashion.

In Oregon, Portland and Eugene also started Panther branches. Seattle was given the responsibility of organizing and working with the brothers and sisters there. This meant frequent trips to Portland to check with Captain Kent Ford and to Eugene to see the Anderson brothers.

It wasn't long before our little sleepy Madrona neighborhood had been transformed into a Black Panther sanctuary. On any given day, scores of young men and women in black berets and leather jackets congregated inside and outside of our storefront office; sometimes they marched at the park, often carrying rifles and shot guns up the street. It wasn't uncommon for twelve or more Panthers to be sitting around the office holding their weapons.

The community's response to us was mixed. There was fear and apprehension among many. On the other hand, there was a sense of pride and hope, particularly for the disenfranchised, the victims, the hopeless. For the first time since the likes of Marcus Garvey and Paul Robeson, the Black Panther Party represented a proud, defiant presence in the community. A presence that would stand up and fight back against the racist cops and the racist institutions of America.

Despite our militancy, many people felt a powerful sense of pride when viewing Panthers in action and this never was more true than it was on an overcast Seattle Saturday afternoon when over a hundred Panthers attended the Saturday afternoon drills in full Panther uniform.

Lieutenants Bobby Harding and Mike Tagawa had drilled the comrades well over an hour marching up and down the Madrona playfield. They looked superb and disciplined that day.

For some reason the cops showed up in their cars and lined up on the side of the park. We decided we would give them something to look at. I instructed Bobby and Mike to put the comrades on the streets. They put on a display that day; marching out of

the park, proceeding three blocks down 33<sup>rd</sup> Avenue completely engulfing the streets, their eyes looking determined, looking straight ahead as Bobby and Mike barked out the cadence. They reached Cherry Street, one of the main streets coming up to the hill. Marching down Cherry, the comrades took up the complete right side of the street. The people began to come out, sitting on their porches, some cheering, others taking pictures, looking on with a hidden pride, a pride that many of them had never felt before.

Meanwhile, the cops had stationed squad cars at every intersection. At one point the comrades marched towards one of the police cruisers and at the last second veered to the left. It was as if they had been marching for years together. Finally they turned at the bottom of the hill and marched back up and into the park. That was a very proud day for the black community. We were <sup>then</sup> there protectors, their defenders.

Our phones at the office were constantly ringing as people called asking for help with landlord problems, spousal abuse, or problems with the police. In one incident a single mother with a house full of kids called to report that her landlord had taken the front door of her house off the hinges because she had gotten behind in her rent. We dispatched a squad of Panthers to the landlord's house. They secured the door and carried it down the street to the woman's house and put it back on its hinges. We often got calls from women complaining about abuse from husbands and boyfriends. Usually after a contingent of armed party members showed up, the abuse would stop, at least for the time being. And we responded to constant calls about police harassment, showing up with armed Panthers confronting surprised police.



The most significant call that we received came from a single black mother whose son was attending a predominantly all-white school called Rainier Beach, which sat on the outer fringes of the black community. She said that her son had been having trouble with the white kids at school. They had beaten him up on several occasions and the principal refused to do anything about it.

I had talked with Chairman Bobby in response to my most recent weekly report. He told me that we were not the police and that our function was not to respond to every call from the community. So with this in mind I told the lady that we could not respond to her request.

Since the school year was coming to an end, the white kids at Rainier Beach stepped up the attacks on not only this black kid, but the few other black kids at the school. At the beginning of the last week in May, that mother called our office every single day of that week. Finally, on a late Friday afternoon, she called crying and sounding desperate, saying that the white kids had brought knives, chains, and bricks to school, threatening the lives of her son and the other black students. We must have received four other calls from distraught black mothers. After I hung the phone up from the last mother, I looked around at the comrades who sat holding their rifles and shotguns. They were wondering if I was going to give the word.

"Let's go," I said, grabbing my carbine. We loaded up in three cars and headed out south to Rainier Beach, taking the back streets, going past Lake Washington, past large expansive homes and manicured lawns, finally arriving at the school. When we arrived we spotted thirty cops lined up on the side of the building. As we got out and

headed across the street towards the entrance of the school, we were met by a fat sergeant, his belly hanging over his belt. I recognized him—we had run into each other on several occasions. He had once remarked, "Oh, not the Panthers again," when we had responded to a community call.

"Dixon," he blurted, "you can't take those loaded weapons into the school."

I shot back, "They ain't loaded," meaning that if a bullet was not in the chamber, then the gun wasn't loaded.

We continued in and began looking for the principal. We saw a man in a black suit hurry down the hallway—it was him. Willy and several other comrades went and got him, and escorted him back to an empty office.

"If you don't protect these black kids then we will do it, understand?" The words just seemed to shoot out of my mouth.

The poor guy was visibly shaken. "I promise I will make sure nothing happens again," he replied.

Satisfied with his response, the 13 of us left the building, backing up and crossing the street. Keeping our eyes on the cops, just as Huey said, we hopped in our cars and headed back to the office. The cops followed us, but they did not stop us. That evening, I received a call from Mike Rosen of the ACLU. He said that the District Attorney was preparing an indictment against us. However, the indictment never came.

For us, this was what putting on the Panther uniform was all about. Standing up strong, refusing to be brushed aside and marginalized. We were dead serious when it came to the rights of the people. One thing was certain, if we had to die in this process,

then most of us were ready for that too. The Rainer Beach incident was one of the most significant moves that we would make during that summer of 1968 and it would set the stage for upcoming battles with the police.

During those early days of the beginning of the Seattle chapter, we were very unorganized. We had a lot of recruits, yet we did not have a clear understanding or picture of exactly what we were supposed to be doing. We organized a speakers' bureau to respond to the constant request for speakers to talk about what the Black Panther Party was about. Gary Owens, a college student in his early twenties, along with Willy Brazier and others, took the bulk of the speaking assignments. We eventually started getting Black Panther newspapers from Oakland after Eldridge Cleaver got out on bail following the April 6 shootout. The paper had pretty much lay dormant since the shootout until the minister of information returned. The Black Panther newspaper was the most important mechanism the party had for educating people about the party and what was truly going on in America and the world. It also provided us with a much-needed source of revenue.

Since the death of Martin Luther King, my life and the life of many other black youth throughout America had taken on an overwhelming sense of urgency. Suddenly, it seemed that the movement had accelerated. We were now almost totally consumed with the fight for justice and the right to determine our own destiny. For me school had now taken a back seat to the emerging struggle.

After I got back from Oakland on that first trip as a Panther, I immediately began to go through my closet, taking out all of my suits and the Italian knit sweaters that I had bought from my work money. I no longer had any need for these fine clothes. They