Activism a focus of Black Panther reunion

nature was only one part of the BPP. In Seattle, and across the
nation, the BPP launched a series of
growing "survival programs" aimed at feeding the needy, pro-
viding healthcare, offering free
legal aid, and mounting literacy
and political studies classes for
their membership. For example, in 1969
the BPP established the
first free breakfast program for
school children while opening the
first free medical clinic in the
northwest that same year. Initially
named after Sidney Miller, the
clinic was later rededicated as the
Carolyn Downs Medical Clinic, which is still in operation today.

"The thing is we had a can-do
mentality. We received a political
education. We understood what
our direction was. We were can-
do," said Hobbs, Seattle's BPP
medical clinic coordinator. "We
loved each other. We loved our
community, and we always said,
"can-do." When we said we wanted
to feed 200 kids at a particular
church in the morning, can-do! It
will get done.

"We were a black political
organization for the black
community, but we banded with all races
of people. We fought for all races
of people."

Public enemy No. 1

Strong, proud, and effective,
the BPP garnered the attention of
J. Edgar Hoover's notoriously
fearful FBI. Coordinated, illegal
pressure was levied against the
BPP under the fed's extensive and
coveted COINTELPRO operations.
These FBI counterintelligence
programs were designed to neutral-
ize domestic political dissidents
through various means of infiltr-
ation into anti-war movements and
political organizations such as the
Black Panther Party.

"The forces which are most an-
xious to weaken our internal secu-
rity are not always easy to iden-
tify," Hoover asserted at the time
of his agency's domestic subver-
sion program. "They utilize cleverly
camouflaged movements, such as
peace groups and civil rights
groups to achieve their sinister
purposes... It is important to learn
to know the enemies of the Amer-
ican way of life."

From the mid-1960s to the early
70s, the BPP was a major force
in Seattle and across the nation,
targeting radical political orga-
nizations, including the BPP. During
this time period the FBI conducted
more than 2,000 COINTELPRO op-
erations before being officially
discontinued in the early 1970s.

"There was a lot of attrition
that took place," Dixon
remembered. "Every time an office got
raided, somebody got to thinking,
"maybe I'm not ready to die, and
people would leave."

During the summer of 1968, the
Seattle office suffered such a raid.
Dixon was arrested for possession
of a stolen typewriter, a police ac-
tion that resulted in a three-day
riot. Four years later, after Dixon
and Hobbs moved to the party's
central headquarters in Oakland,
California, cheap rock-cocaine hit
the streets in massive quantities.
Many attribute this upswing in the
underground drug market to vari-
ous COINTELPRO operations.

"I can remember. It was rain-
ing cocaine," asserted Dixon, who
noted that prior to 1972 cocaine
was used as a social drug snorted
primarily by the rich and affluent.

[The feds] had a psychological
profile on our leadership. Through
COINTELPRO they devised ways
to pit organizations against
organizations, leaders in the party
against leaders in the party, and
the influx of cocaine into the
community. All of these things attrib-
uted to the demise of the party.

Each one, teach one

"The reason why we're having
this event is to pass on and share,"
Dixon said. "Because of the abrupt
way that we ended, we were not
able to pass on [our knowledge]
to younger people.

Dixon, Johnson, and Hobbs say
the upcoming regional BPP con-
fERENCE, which covers the party's
historical Oregon and Washing-
ton districts, is being watched by
BPP alumni across the nation. The
trip feels one of the primary rea-
sons for this attention stems from
the fact that they've made it a
priority to engage the local com-
munity, especially the youth.

"[Our principles] might be put
toward another situation, another
form of struggle," Johnson ob-
served. "The same things that we
did to deal with hunger can be
used now. The same things we
did to deal with a lack of housing
can be used now. We see these
same problems rising up today."

With the economy grinding
along under the burden of two
active wars and a national debt
docked up to historically high lev-
els, the similarities between
today's climate and the politically
time charged times of nearly 40 years
ago bear eerie similarities.

"What's interesting is, in 1968
and 1969, we created these sur-
ival programs because all the
money was being drained for the
war in Vietnam, which is the same
thing now," Dixon observed. "All
the money that should be going to
our communities is going to the
war in Iraq. It's the same scenario.

Want to learn more about the local,
and national, legacy of the Black Pan-
ther Party and what its alumni are up

The reunion and forum kicks off
at noon on Friday, May 13, with a rally
of former Black Panther Party mem-
ers at Seattle Central Community
College. Following the rally, a BPP film
festival will kick off at Seattle University's Wydoff
Auditorium at 1 p.m. The festival fea-
tures documentaries about the BPP,
women in the party, and COINTELPRO.
A question-and-answer period at 7 p.m.
with BPP co-founder Bobby Seale con-
cludes the festival.

On Saturday, May 14, political and
historical workshops (including one
tackling hip-hop's revolutionary roots), guest
BPP speakers, and a BPP photo exhibit
will be hosted at the Garfield Community
Center at 23 Avenue and East Cherry
Street from 12 to 4 p.m. For more infor-
mation, call 206-268-0557.
Panthers share history with new generation

**REUNION** | Speeches and entertainment bring 400 together to discuss the Black Panthers' legacy.

BY MIKE LINDBLOM
Seattle Times staff reporter

Years after they laid down their guns and focused on community activism, the Black Panthers are on another mission: sharing their history with a younger generation.

A dozen former members of the Black Panther Party from Seattle and Oakland came here for a reunion Friday and yesterday, the first of its kind outside California. More than 400 people attended speeches, teach-ins, a film festival and musical performances at Seattle Central Community College, Seattle University and Garfield Community Center.

Elmer Dixon, the Seattle party's minister of defense, described how the group reinforced a house at 20th Avenue and Spruce Street with steel, sandbags and manhole covers to make it impregnable in case of a police raid.

"The cops were shocked. Our body armor was better than theirs," he told a laughing audience.

Please see > **REUNION, B3**
EX-PANTHERS SHARE HISTORY WITH NEW GENERATION

Former leaders encourage young to build on legacy

ence at Garfield yesterday.

Panthers also called on supporters, including whites, to surround the police, he said. For about 11 months, party members patrolled the streets with rifles.

Former party leaders no longer encourage taking up arms. Today, the old stories provide street credibility for another message: that young people ought to be building what the old Panthers called “survival projects.”

Bobby Seale, who co-founded the Panthers in Oakland with Huey P. Newton, called the Seattle chapter “probably the most dynamic and most profound” because of its humanitarian work.

- Its Sydney Miller Health Clinic screened thousands of people for sickle-cell anemia, then checked 268 prisoners at Walla Walla, said Leon “Valentine” Hobbs, a former bodyguard to Seale. The clinic still operates, with government funding, as the Carolyn Downs Family Medical Center.
- Party leaders trained themselves to use pesticides and rid homes of roaches.
- Panthers served hot breakfasts to children near the old Colman School. Food banks and feeding programs spread to four public-housing sites.

“The first food bank and clothing bank — they’re everywhere now — the first one was funded by the Black Panther Party,” said Metropolitan King County Councilman Larry Gossett, who thanked the group yesterday “on behalf of the 1.8 million people who reside in Martin Luther King County.”

- A free van service took families to visit inmates.
- “Liberation Schools” in the summer included lessons in revolutionary thought and the black struggle against slavery.

By mid-1969, a year after they started, local Panthers left their guns at home and focused primarily on such service projects.

Seattle Mayor Wes Uhlman refused to allow the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to raid the party headquarters, made in 1970, as happened in Chicago and Los Angeles. “They did have some guns, but they did not pose a threat to anyone in our city,” he said in 1986 Seattle Times interview.

However, in their early months, Black Panthers did commit sporadic arsons and fired weapons at police and fire stations, acknowledges former party captain Aaron Dixon, brother of Elmer. He said these were “ambushes” in response to government violence. But much of Seattle’s unrest, including a riot in July 1968, was caused by others who were simply looking to lash out, he said.

“Had the Black Panther Party not come along, those riots would have continued,” Aaron Dixon said. “Individual blacks would have responded with racism. They would have gone after individual white people. It would have turned into racial conflict.”

Seale praised the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, which drew tens of thousands into the streets to denounce global capitalism, pollution and exploitation of labor.

“I was hoping this new movement would start. That’s what we need. We need another high-profile, progressive movement.”

Shamseddin Williams, the son of a Seattle party member, and Syifa Jones, a legal-aid worker, helped organize the reunion in hopes that young people will sign up for yet-undetermined community projects, open to all races.

One challenge for the black community is dispersal, caused by high housing costs and gentrification. In the last census, only 8.4 percent of Seattle residents were African American.

Williams suggested that black men form an on-call group to mentor or tutor young people who don’t have role models nearby. Other ideas include groups to study anti-colonialism, the Civil War and slave revolts.

“We’re not looking to start a new movement,” Aaron Dixon emphasized. “A movement is not something you can plan.”

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