

## Activism a focus of Black Panther reunion

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nature was only one part of the BPP. In Seattle, and across the nation, the BPP launched a series of grassroots "survival programs" aimed at feeding the needy, providing 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 we're 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 nefarious FBI. Coordinated, illegal pressure was levied against the BPP under the fed's extensive and covert COINTELPRO operations. These FBI counterintelligence programs were designed to neutralize domestic political dissidents through various means of infiltration into anti-war movements and political organizations such as the Black Panther Party.

"The forces which are most anxious to weaken our internal security are not always easy to identify," Hoover asserted at the time of his agency's domestic subterfuge. "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 American way of life."

From the mid-1950s to the early

targeting radical political organizations, including the BPP. During this time period the FBI conducted more than 2,000 COINTELPRO operations 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 action 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 various COINTELPRO operations.

"I can remember. It was raining 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 attributed 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 conference, which covers the party's historical Oregon and Washington districts, is being watched by BPP alumni across the nation. The trio feels one of the primary reasons for this attention stems from

the fact that they've made it a priority to engage the local community, especially the youth.

"[Our principles] might be put toward another situation, another form of struggle," Johnson observed. "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 racked up to historically high levels, the similarities between today's climate and the politically charged times of nearly 40 years ago bear eerie similarities.

"What's interesting is, in 1968 and 1969, we created these survival 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 Panther Party and what its alumni are up to today? Visit [www.itsabouttimebpp.com](http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com).*

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

*On Saturday, May 14, political and historical workshops (including one tracking 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 information, call 206-268-0557.*



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# 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, de-

scribed 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 audi-

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## EX-PANTHERS SHARE HISTORY WITH NEW GENERATION

### Former leaders encourage young to build on legacy

ence at Garfield yesterday.

Panthers also could call 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 here 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 a 1986 Seattle



*Nigel Lanclos-Jones, 13, left, from Tacoma, and his friend Ruwan Chapple, 13, of Seattle, look at a vintage Black Panthers poster from 1969. They attended a Panthers reunion yesterday at Garfield Community Center in Seattle.*

### To participate

**Organizers of the Black Panther Party reunion are hoping that their younger admirers will create education or service projects. For more information, contact Shamseddin Williams at 206-321-7050.**

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 Sylva 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."

Mike Lindblom: 206-515-5631 or [mlindblom@seattletimes.com](mailto:mlindblom@seattletimes.com)