

In memory of Ray Eaglin

By Chuck Armsbury

A friend, comrade, people's servant and warrior, Ray Eaglin, died last June 2004.

I first met Ray in 1968 in Eugene, Oregon where I studied at the University of Oregon's (UO) graduate school and taught undergraduate classes in sociology. Born in Texas, Ray found his way to the mostly Caucasian UO campus after four years in the US Marine Corps. He came to play football, and with linebacker size and great speed, Ray was knocking players out cold. He quit R.O.T.C. because its faculty wanted him to be the 'white boys' drill instructor.

By 1968 in Eugene, the revolution was on. Wearing a Smith Brother's beard, a radical sign itself, I ran for mayor of Eugene that fall. My progressive platform caught the public's attention, including Ray's, who remembered in later years what was on his mind as he considered the four, white candidates:

"I was seriously questioning could there be somebody other than a drill instructor, other than a coach, other than a judge, other than a private or a dorm partner, a squad leader or something that I was associated with who understood the plight of other people. Specifically, I'm talking about people or myself with a particular color."

I didn't win the election, but Ray and I started a friendship that endured the repressive times of the late 1960s/early 70s. We shared a similar working class history, and both grew up in rural communities, mine in eastern Washington State. I had never met a person of color, other than white, until age 20.

In 1969, Ray enrolled in a class entitled "Racism in American Culture," the first ever offered on the UO campus, in which I was more the 'facilitator' than instructor. "I was really interested in who would really talk about the problem that people were trying to hush, trying to silence, trying to present more experts on race relations who would teach racism in a way that would perpetuate it," said Ray about the class in 1975.

In the 1960s, breaking through barriers of race or ethnicity was sometimes dangerous, especially in Oregon where 'sundown laws' discouraged black people from staying overnight in such towns as Medford and Roseburg. When the Black Panther Party began organizing a chapter in Eugene, my wife, Sonja, joined. I organized a local chapter of the Chicago Young Patriots, re-named the Patriot Party in Eugene.



Patriots adopted the Panthers' 10-point program and re-wrote it for oppressed white people who are "the living reminder that when the Boss Man Masters threw out their white trash, they didn't burn it." (Bill "Preacherman" Fesperman, Patriot Chairman, 1969)

Literally working side by side in the Eugene/Springfield, Oregon greater community, a Rainbow alliance served people with mind, body and soul. Panthers, Patriots, church members, academics and various individuals were feeding 30 to 50 hungry children a good breakfast each weekday morning, and other programs were launched, including the free firewood service for the elderly. Following the Panther's revolutionary model, the local school board soon made free breakfasts available for hungry children in every school in the Eugene district.

Combining firewood gathering, weapons training, and game hunting, Ray led urban comrades into their first rural experience of driving on winding, dark, logging roads. Venison, fish and other meats brought back from mountain adventures were given away to hungry families locally.

Ray was considered the underground general of the BPP in Eugene, and by day he and I collaborated in UO classrooms to turn them into forums of political education, debate and recruitment. Many students earned their grades in the social and human sciences by working at or contributing to the breakfast for children and woodcutting programs.

"After the Revolution, what?" was another new course at UO. Ray served as foreman and constructed a mock prison camp next to the football stadium. White student volunteers were the incarcerated, and guards were African-American students. We were 'bad and bold,' but the series of experimental courses only grew more popular. Football player and television personality Ahmad Rashad, known then as Bobby Moore, enrolled in one of these revolutionary classrooms, as well as the Anderson Brothers, Howard and Tommy, who led the Eugene BPP.

I was in the UO's Autzen Stadium for graduation ceremonies on the day that Ray accepted his Bachelor of Arts' degree. Instead of sitting down after taking the document, Ray, wearing his robe and cap, stepped to the lectern to speak. Startled, the University President let Ray have the microphone into which he then delivered a thundering denunciation of the Vietnam War, calling on the crowd of hundreds to demand justice in their communities.

Ray was good with children, and I remember times when he'd feed the kids. He could always 'deal with' a bowl of beans. I remember seeing Ray driving nails on the roof of a house that volunteers were building for a poor, white family. If someone needed a special tool or part, Ray would have it, or know where to get it. We were gaining community support, but we scared some folks, too.

In early 1970, white gunmen began shooting at random into our Patriot's Eugene Community Information Center at night, another time on a busy street in daylight. We kept our firearms close and fortified our houses with plywood, sandbags and nighttime sentries. During this tense period, I was arrested and charged with (constructive) possession of an illegal shotgun, later convicted and sentenced to 10 years in federal prison in 1970. I was 28, and it was my first criminal offense. Ray, other Panthers, family members and community supporters filled Judge Alfred T. Goodwin's Portland federal courtroom in June.

After my release in 1971 from USP Marion, I returned to Portland, Sonja and our seven children. I wasn't affiliated with the UO anymore, lost interest in finishing my Ph.D. requirements, and began doing community work with Portland Panthers and the Fred Hampton medical clinic. Ray, meanwhile, kept working, organizing and developing the people's survival programs with volunteers in the Eugene area, now called The Eugene Coalition.

In late-May 1974, an Oregon State Prison double-lifer walked away from an approved conjugal visit with his niece, sparking a nationwide manhunt for Carl Bowles, convicted of killing an Oregon cop in 1965. Along with other Oregon activists, and myself, Ray was charged with harboring a fugitive, a state-raised convict who, by his own hand and acting alone, murdered two innocent people he kidnapped while on the run. Bowles was shot, captured, survived and re-sentenced to the Federal prison system.

I was sentenced to eight years for harboring Bowles, and Ray was sentenced to three years on the same charges in a separate trial—the frightening association of leftist radicals with dangerous convicts becoming Oregon’s biggest news story of 1974. While in custody Ray suffered damage to his head from a closing prison door, an injury that probably initiated other medical problems in later years. Ray and I lost contact after I was released from prison in 1978, and I have a heavy heart to this day thinking about what happened during those mad June days of 1974.

Ray Eaglin was a celebrated artist, too. The image on this page is from one of his paintings he gave me in 1995 in Portland, and today hangs on the wall of the November Coalition building, called Our House, in Colville, Washington. He’s feeding the people spiritually today.

In June 1975, Ray addressed the Court at my sentencing:

“I would like to sum up this by saying the least he (Chuck) should have is 100 years’ freedom in the community, and the most he should get is a re-change of heart which takes listening, really, to our side of justice. Our sort of knowledge and working with Chuck and hundreds of other people like him. This has not been, we have not been programmed to say this. We have not been coached to say this.”

“We are not coming up here as a last-ditch effort because of regardless of what happens to Chuck, the conditions that made Chuck like he is and other people who have testified here, this condition still exists. This is a person that is trying to change those conditions within the framework that you are charged with the duty to the public at large.”

“Chuck is doing those things. He may not have the resources that the State does. He may not have the capabilities as some of the experts in the State do. . . He can drive a nail without hitting his thumb or the person’s thumb that is holding the nail. He can erect a chicken house. He can do those things. He’s like most of us. He’s a person.”

Today’s revolutionaries truly stand on the shoulders of those who labored and sacrificed before us. Ray Eaglin’s positive contributions to build grassroots groups are countless and subtle, and like many ordinary soldiers, Ray was a dedicated comrade with an excellent sense of humor, a master wordsmith and a friend I think about every day.

(Chuck Armsbury is Senior Editor of the November Coalition’s *Razor Wire* newspaper, and if someone has a comment, correction or addition to this remembrance of Ray Eaglin, Chuck can be reached by telephone (509-684-1550) or email at: chuck@november.org. The Coalition’s website is www.november.org.)







