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LEAD STORY

'Dr. Tubman,' We Presume

Noted activist **Dr. Tolbert J. Small** may not have led slaves to freedom land, but as a physician for the infamous **Black Panther Party**, he helped lead the way with the launching of several free clinics for indigents who were being ravaged by sickle cell anemia in the early 70s. In 1980 he founded the **Harriet Tubman Medical Office** in Oakland, Calif., headquarters for the Panthers, and discovered there's an ongoing battle against injustice everywhere, even in the medical industry. He's just trying to keep African Americans from languishing in ill-health.



Dr. Tolbert J. Small, left, and Elbert "Big Man" Howard have known each other for more than 30 years when both of them fought on different fronts for the Black Panther Party. Small was the Panther's physician and Howard was the deputy minister of information for the 60s-era militant group. Small came to Memphis recently after burying his brother's ashes and struck up a conversation about the medical industry past and president. (Courtesy photo)

Dr. Tolbert J. Small and his wife were in Memphis last week to bury the ashes of his brother in Coldwater, Miss. The mood may have been a somber one, but the Smalls didn't seem to mind the company of an old friend, Elbert "Big Man" Howard, the former deputy minister of information for the infamous Black Panther Party, the 60s-era militant group known for espousing self-defense and its gun battles with police, and less known for its self-help programs.

Small, who's board certified in internal medicine, operates the Harriet Tubman Medical Office in Oakland, Calif., with his wife, Anola. Their aim was to bury some ashes, to bid farewell to a loved one while transacting family business in nearby Coldwater.

But the memories of years past crept into Small's conversation with Howard, whom he's known since the late 60s when the two fought their own battles against racism and wanton injustices.

Small came to bury his brother's ashes, but some unpleasant memories may never be buried in Small's mind, or Howard's, for that matter. However, while the two conversed at Java, Juice & Jazz (a local eatery and bookstore on Elvis Presley), a plethora of memories took them back to the perilous days when the Black Panthers fearlessly roamed the neighborhoods of Oakland — the city of the Panther's birth — and chapters sprang up across the country with a membership in the thousands.

Howard, 66, was one of six original members, joining revolutionaries Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale when they founded the Party in Oct. 1966. Howard had befriended Newton and Seale as a student on the campus of Oakland City College.

Recalling his first encounter with Small, Howard said, "When I was at the community college, he (Small) gave me leeway to the president. I thought I would take advantage of it to set up a clinic on the campus. We put out flyers in the community to test for sickle cell anemia and high blood pressure."

Small never officially joined the Party, but worked as a physician between 1970-74. "I did labor-intensive work for them," Small said. "The Black Panther Party set up the first sickle cell anemia clinic and set a fire under President (Richard) Nixon" to deal with the disease that snuffed the life out of so many African Americans.

Two Panther clinics are still operating in Seattle, Wash., Small noted, which eventually totaled nine during their heyday. Designed to curb the imminent threat of sickle cell disease, Small would go on to become the medical director of the People's Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation from 1971-74.

The apparent warm friendship shared between Howard and Small signified the level of respect each has for one another. Thus, reminiscing about the good times was a given. But then there were some testy ones, too, when the struggle for civil rights and human rights meant that death would be certain if one wrong move was made.

"I used to drive Fannie Lou Hamer around in Detroit; she was beaten in Mississippi, arrested by the sheriff and taken to jail," Small pointed out, adding that he, too, had a run-in with the police. "I was picked up by the police in Winona, Miss. (122 miles from Memphis). I was filming the city where my grandparents lived. They hauled me off to jail, but they soon let me go."

It had been years since Howard — considerably tamed since his militant beginning — has seen Small. While the "Big Man" traveled a rugged path to right the wrongs in society "by any means necessary," he once said, quoting Malcolm X. Small, a slender, soft-spoken gent, followed his heart into medicine with

a charge to strengthen African Americans from the inside out.

"We were developing ourselves to go back into the community to supply healthcare and education," said Small, 62. "We wanted to get back into the community. That's why we opened an office."

Why become a doctor when racial tension was stretched to the max and exploding across the face of America? "Because there is so much damn racism," Small retorted. "I wanted a skill. There wasn't a Black teller in the banks in Detroit (where Small grew up and went to medical school: Wayne State University, also in Detroit) or any other field that African Americans could excel in. "I wanted a skill that I could bring back to the community and be independent."

The visit here seemed to provide Small and his wife a soapbox on which to vent some frustrations with the medical industry. In Oakland, countless patients, many of them elderly and Black, who remember those sordid days when their life wasn't worth a plug nickel, relish the opportunity to chitchat with the doctor they sometimes call Dr. Tubman, after Harriet Tubman.

Small's Oakland office is adorned with posters, signs and artwork of African-American giants who fought valiantly for freedom and equality, such as Tubman, conductor of the Underground Railroad, and Malcolm X, a nationalist with the Nation of Islam, also a feared militant group.

"A lot of my patients are in their 70s from Texas and Arkansas," Small quipped. "They see these signs and they are reminded (of the hardships). I want people to be aware of our history so we won't repeat it."

Not all of Small's fellow comrades in medicine understood why he would name his medical practice for a woman who was revered yet hated for leading slaves from a life of bondage and certain death despite the potential for losing her own life in the pursuit of freedom. There were other professionals, too, who just didn't understand Small's motive.

"When I first opened the office, a group of criminologists asked why we called it the Harriet Tubman Office," said Small, responding, "Because she (also) performed as a medic in the Union Army. A lot of doctors in the 80s were critical of us, too."

Anola Price Small, 53, takes a little credit and swells with pride when speaking about the building of her husband's medical practice to a level of repute. "We just wanted to honor our ancestors," she said. "There's too much lost and a lot to be gained. There's a saying that Jewish people never forget. Why can't we do that?"

While the Panthers literally took matters into their own hands — often clashing with the police who eventually whittled away their power base and caused their demise — Small decided to increase his own power base in medicine — often clashing and disagreeing with the government, pharmaceutical companies and the malnourished healthcare system.

In an op-ed piece for *Vital Signs*, a monthly Bay-area newspaper for medical professionals, Smalls, a longtime board member of Coalition of Concerned Medical Professionals, started his commentary off with these words: "The United States government has gone out of its way to hinder our practice of medicine for people who live in the community."

"We have this myth that there's a level playing field," Anola Small chimed in. "How can you set policy when there's no diversity to meet the needs of everybody?"

The Smalls have a beef with pharmaceutical companies, HMOs and insurance companies. There is a propensity for greed," Dr. Small said. "You have lots of money being spent on healthcare, but it doesn't go into health service," he wrote. "It goes into people's pockets."

"The insurance companies get the premiums, but they don't want to spend the money on healthcare for the patient," Small



Dr. Small, right, shares a few memories with TSD's Wiley Henry, left, and "Big Man" Howard, his longtime friend from the Black Panther Party.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3A

added. "For example, if you have someone who has weakness in their legs, back pain, numbness radiating down their leg, obviously they need an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) to rule out a herniated disk.

"If I order an MRI, the HMO will not allow me to order it. The radiologists are paid a capitated rate," Small explained. "Capitation is where they will pay them so many dollars for each patient that signed up whether they are treated or not. So the radiologists don't want the primary care doctors to be able to order MRIs, because they'll order 'too

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many' appropriate MRIs, cutting into their profit."

The state of medicine is being lulled to sleep, Small believes. And the fate of disenfranchised African Americans is teetering at dangerous levels. President Bush has been grappling with this problem, hoping to improve healthcare and prescription drug coverage. He has proposed billions in tax credits for private healthcare insurance, a Medicare prescription benefit package, which Congress passed, and a "patients bill of rights."

When Minnie Edwards underwent open-heart surgery nearly three years ago, doctors loaded her up with expensive drugs that she could not pay for.

Although Medicare has eased her burden to a degree, Edwards, 72, still has to rely on a heart patch called Nitro-durdis, Vitaplex, Clonidine, Glucovance, Plavix, Zocor, Furosemide, Tiazac, Celebrex, Accupril, and Toprol-XL — names she has trouble pronouncing. The cost of these drugs range from \$100-\$200 for each prescription.

Not long ago, approximately 150,000 indigent recipients on TennCare, the state's answer to healthcare for the uninsured, were purged from the program to keep it from imploding. The massive program had begun to bleed internally with government red tape and depletion of funds.

Fearing the worst for about 1.4 million people who depend on TennCare, Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen had to inoculate the fragile program with a shot of fresh funds to keep it alive and well, and to keep it fiscally solvent within the framework of the state's budget.

Small understands the dilemma and the many problems heaped upon the shoulders of African Americans who need medical help. "Our country doesn't care about healthcare," he said. "Other countries have a national healthcare plan."

Quoting statistics, Small said, "We spend 14 percent of our gross national product on healthcare in the United States. Pharmaceutical companies have over 600 lobbyists and make a 19 percent profit. They manipulate both Democrats and Republicans."

He called this corporate greed, when making money is more important than the health of people; and corporate welfare, when companies are permitted to pillage the people and benefit financially by not having to provide adequate service.

Small cited in his commentary several problems his office had with reimbursements and refusals by companies to pay for lab work and other tests he performed on patients. "They said they were inappropriate," he said.

In 1972, Small left for China with a delegation of Black Panthers and soon started performing acupuncture on patients. He boasted he was the first to do so.

Besides running free clinics and lecturing on sickle cell anemia for the Panthers' Berkeley (Calif.) chapter, Small, who had worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) while in medical school, said they were enthused about what the Chinese were doing.

"Tuberculosis was under control,

and schistosomiasis — a parasite that infects people through snails — was under control," Small wrote.

Howard said Small, who currently works 12-hour days, was everybody's doctor and a friend of the Panthers, even after the group drifted into complete obscurity.

Anola Small said her husband, who had directed the George Jackson Free Medical Clinic, Berkeley, Calif., and Operation Reach Drug Detox Center in the early 70s, has always been benevolent and cares for his patients even if they can't afford to pay. That's why he set up practice in the community and sometimes provide free service, she said, to help the least of his "brethren."

"He loves to talk to his patients and sometimes he would get behind in appointments," Anola Small said.

Growing up in the Detroit ghetto, Small's father had a sixth-grade education and his mother made it to ninth-grade, which didn't deter the

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budding intellect from pursuing a career in medicine.

"He was prepared to face a racist higher education," said Anola Small, mother of the couple's three children.

Dr. Small was educated by Jesuits in Catholic school, "who were interested in giving poor Black folks in the city an education," the doctor said.

"There was only 100 Blacks in the whole Black Catholic school. Even though there was a lot of racism among the Jesuits, they believed in teaching," Small said. "Of the 100 kids from Black Bottom (a ghetto that doesn't exist anymore), many of them have PhDs and many keep in touch today."

Howard said Panthers just believe in keeping in touch, sharing what they've learned about the world and its problems since the raging 60s.

"It was a pleasant surprise to see him," said Howard, who still goes by the nickname "Big Man."