

Ex-Black Panthers recall social activism

By Rebecca Koffman | SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Kent Ford led a recent tour of Portland's Black Panther sites, with former Panthers Percy Hampton and Oscar Johnson joining in.

The crossroads at Northeast Shaver Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard is one of Portland's bleaker intersections. There's no sign of Lidio's, the Italian fast-food joint that stood here in 1969. Kids would shoot craps in the alley out back. One summer night, police broke up the game.

"I drove by," says Kent Ford, now 64, "and I saw this kid I knew in the back of a police car, and I opened the door to let him out."

Officers jumped Ford and beat him up before taking him in. In those days, Ford observes wryly, black men were lucky if they were taken straight to the police station.

Ford had had enough. He launched the Portland chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense a few weeks later. The party's first headquarters was a few blocks south of

Lidio's at Northeast Union Avenue, now MLK, and Cook Street. The building, shared with the Resisters, a group that protested the Vietnam War, is long gone.

"We had the upstairs, and the Resisters had the downstairs," Ford says at the empty lot. The groups worked to get young men train tickets to Canada. The place was a target for police. "They didn't like longhairs, and they didn't like blacks," Ford says.

Nationally, Black Panthers live in the popular imagination as gun-toting revolutionaries, but the stereotype takes no account of the street-level organizing and social programs of the Portland Panthers.

They had about 50 members — maybe one-third women — and in the late 1960s and early '70s ran free medical and dental clinics and a children's breakfast program.



JAMIE FRANCIS/THE OREGONIAN
Kent Ford, who founded the Portland chapter of the Black Panthers in 1969, stands outside Highland United Church of Christ.

The Fred Hampton People's Free Health Clinic at North Vancouver and Russell opened in 1969. Staffed seven nights a week by volunteer doctors, the clinic offered general care plus testing for sickle-cell anemia and lead levels.

When the clinic closed at 10 p.m., Panthers would escort doctors to their cars past bustling taverns on Russell. Percy Hampton and Oscar Johnson, looking at empty blocks, remind each other of the names of long-gone bars and the musicians who played in them. The buildings were razed in the early '70s for an Emanuel Hospital expansion that never happened.

The free breakfast program began in November 1969. Between 75 and 125 kids would show up every weekday morning at the Highland United Church of Christ two blocks

from their school.

The kids ate well. "Sweet rolls from Wonder Bread, ground beef from McDonald's, milk from Standard Dairy, produce from Corno's," Ford recalls.

Johnson tells how he structured days around Panther activities. "I worked nights, so I was the driver. I'd finish my shift and pick up kids who needed a ride to breakfast. Go home and sleep." He solicited cash and food from neighborhood businesses in the afternoon and attended political education classes at night.

"It felt good," he says. "We were doing something. We had the respect of the community."

The breakfast program ran for 11 years. People still approach former Panthers all over town: "Remember me, Mr. Ford?" they ask. "You used to feed me breakfast." ■

Walking tour



- 1 King School, 4906 N.E. Sixth Ave.; students from Highland School, as it was called then, attended the Black Panthers' breakfast program
- 2 Highland United Church of Christ, 4635 N.E. Ninth Ave., site of the breakfast program
- 3 Site of the Panthers' second Portland office, now an empty lot along Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, south of Beech Street
- 4 Site of first office (building is gone) on the southeast corner of Northeast Cook Street and MLK
- 5 Site of the Fred Hampton People's Free Health Clinic (building is gone) at the northeast corner of North Vancouver and Russell
- 6 Second and last site of the Malcolm X Dental Clinic, 214 N. Russell St., now an OHSU dental clinic
- 7 Site of the first Malcolm X Dental Clinic, 2337 N. Williams

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