A photo archivist for the show who was Huey Newton’s personal assistant keeps the memory of the Panthers alive.

By Martin Snapp
STAFF WRITER

Billy X Jennings remembers the first time he ever heard of the Black Panthers.

“It was May 1967; I was 16 years old. I was coming home from a track meet, and I knew I was in for a scolding because I had missed my curfew. But my father had fallen asleep in front of the TV set, so I was safe. The 10 o’clock news was on, showing a story about some black men with rifles on the steps of the state Capitol in Sacramento. I was so thrilled, I woke my father up. And he was as moved by the moment as I was. I completely forgot I was supposed to get a scolding, and so did he.”

In 1968 Jennings graduated from high school in San Diego. Right after the ceremony, he caught the first train to Oakland, clutching the graduation present from his favorite teacher, Ms. Daniels: a copy of “The Autobiography of Malcolm X.”

He soon joined the Panthers, working in the party’s free food program until 1970, when he became Huey Newton’s personal assistant. He grew quite close to the entire Newton family, especially Huey’s parents. (Incidentally, they named him after Huey Long, the “Kingfish” of Louisiana politics, whose slogan was “Share the wealth.”)

In 1973 Jennings ran the camp headquarters during Bobby Sea race for mayor of Oakland, which shocked the political establishment by registering 100,000 new voters, winning 40 percent of the vote.

The Black Panther Party has been gone for almost 20 years, but Jennings is making sure it isn’t forgotten. As party historian, he has spent the last decade collecting thousands of historic photographs, some of which are on display in an exhibit at the Berkeley Public Library: “Serving the People — Body & Soul.”

“When I was Huey’s assistant...”

San Francisco
Panthers

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to know all the photographers who were covering him, so I
know exactly who to call when I
started the archive. Then other
people started sending me memora-
bling, including copies of the
Black Panther Party newspaper.
More keeps coming in every day,
farther than I can catalog it.

The bulk of the archive can be
viewed online at Jennings'
Web site, www.itsabout-
timebpp.com.

The exhibit at the Berkeley Li-
brary runs until March 19; then
Jennings will take it on the road.
He is in constant demand as a
speaker from church groups, col-
leges, and high schools.

"Young people have some
funny ideas about those days," he
says. "They think it was all about
the guns, but the guns were just
a symbol. ... I tell them the Panthers
were really about serving the people."

— Billy X Jennings,
Black Panther Party historian

to-prison program.

But other photos show the flip
side of the Panthers' existence:
their running war with law en-
forcement agencies, which left
many dead on both sides.

The tension is still evident in
one photo showing two Panthers
being pulled over by Oakland po-
lace on their way to the funeral
of one of their comrades, Bobby
Hutton, who was 17 when he was
killed in a shootout.

Another shows Jennings him-
self when he was 19, leading a
delegation of Panthers at the fun-
ereal of George Jackson, the
"Soledad Brother" who was
killed during an alleged prison
escape attempt in 1971.

The highlight of the exhibit
will come on Feb. 26, when Jen-
nings and other veterans of the
era conduct a symposium at the
library about the party's histori-
ical legacy. The participants:
James Buford, who helped cre-
ate the free breakfast program;
Sister Sheba, who worked in the
George Jackson Free Medical
Clinic; Richard Aoki, who helped
found the ethnic studies depart-
ment at UC Berkeley; and Cec
Levinson, one of the party's ear-
liest white supporters.

The Black Panther Party was
founded Oct. 22, 1966, by two
students at Merritt College: Huey
Newton and Bobby Seale. Their
first recruit was Bobby Hutton.

Guns were front and center
from the start, partly because self
defense resonated in the black
community due to a series of al-
egged police brutality incidents,
partly because all that hardware
got people's attention fast.

That became evident in May
1967, when the Panthers ex-
splored out of obscurity as news
headers filmed them on the steps
of the state Capitol in Sacra-
mento, carrying rifles to protest
a bill that would have restricted
gun ownership.

In October 1967 Newton was
wounded in a shootout with po-
lace; he was later convicted of
manslaughter in connection with
the event. After his release from
prison he split with Eldridge
Cleaver, who had been running
the party in his absence. Newton
wanted to abandon violence in
favor of social programs; Cleaver
wanted "revolution now."

Ironically, Newton, who re-
ounced violence, was shot dead
in the street in 1989. Cleaver, the
apex of revolutionary violence,
died of natural causes — but not
before he became a Reagan Repub-
lican.

Piling irony upon irony, last
year the California Art Museum
in Sacramento asked Jennings
to curate a historical retro-
spective about the Panthers,
just a few blocks from the state
Capitol where they burst upon
the public consciousness almost
40 years ago.

Says he: "It's about time."
Photos reveal Black Panthers' community spirit

BERKELEY — Former FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover once called the Black Panthers the “greatest threat to the internal security of the country.”

But a collection of black-and-white photographs on display at the Berkeley Public Library shows a softer and more philanthropic side of the militant organization that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. In tandem with Black History Month and next year’s 40th anniversary of the Black Panthers, “Serving the People: Body & Soul” will run through March 19 at the main library in downtown Berkeley.

“When people see these photographs, they say, ‘I didn’t know the Black Panther Party was doing these things in the community,’” said Billy X. Jennings, the party historian who set up the photo exhibition.

Jennings has been collecting the photos on display and will host a talk Saturday with other former Black Panthers.

The Black Panther Party was founded by community college students Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in October 1966. Though the party was based in

Please see EYE, Local 6
Photos show softer side of Black Panthers

**EYE, from Local 1**

Oakland, soon there were chapters in other cities. Jennings claims a membership of at least 5,000 at one point during the ‘60s and ‘70s.

Jennings said the party did good for the community that was not widely publicized.

By the end of 1969, the group’s free breakfast program for schoolchildren was feeding thousands of youngsters nationwide before they went to class each day.

The group also registered thousands of people to vote, distributed free bags of groceries to thousands more and ran urban medical clinics, Jennings said.

“This is something we are not given a lot of credit for,” said Jennings, who was Newton’s personal assistant and Seale’s campaign manager.

The Black Panther Party was a multifaceted organization. Members advocated for people’s rights to bear arms, and members policed Oakland’s streets to ensure citizens’ safety, Jennings said.

The founding members — Newton and Seale — penned the Black Panther Party Platform and Program, which sought freedom, fair and decent housing, education and an end to police brutality against African Americans.

The 22 photographs, shot between 1967 and 1975, capture party members in their roles as community leaders and volunteers.

They were shot by Stephen Shames, Lauren Williams, “Ducho” and Jeffrey Blankfort, most of whom now live out of state and were not available for comment, Jennings and library staff said.

The photographs are getting a lot of attention from patrons just “bumping into (the exhibit) and really becoming absorbed with it,” said library staff member Pat Mullan.

The pictures are varied and include one of Maya Angelou teaching at the Oakland Community Learning Center, a young child eating a free breakfast and a free shoe program.

There’s a photo of Newton behind bars flashing a peace sign following his arrest in connection with the slaying of Oakland police Officer John Frey.

The collection also includes a picture of sickle-cell anemia testing in Berkeley and one of George Jackson’s funeral at St. Augustine’s Church in Oakland in 1971. Jackson was gunned down in prison by a San Quentin guard in August 1971.

The library hosts a free talk and video screening by former members of the Black Panther Party at 2 p.m. Saturday in the library’s community room, 2090 Kittredge at Shattuck Avenue.

**Listings**

— Tonight — **Final Fridays Microcinema:** "Chisholm ‘72 — Unbought & Unbossed" documentary on Shirley Chisholm’s historic run for president. 7 to 9 p.m., Eastside Arts Alliance, 2587 International Blvd., Oakland, donations requested, 533-6629.

— Tonight — **Josh Workman Quartet, with Nicole Vigil.** 9 p.m., downtown restaurant, 2102 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, free, 649-3810.

— Tonight — **Noise Show:** Sixes, Xone, Stimbox, Portland Bicycle Ensemble, Mucose and the Mau Maus, Skullcaster. 8 p.m., 21 Granda, 4498 23rd St., Oakland, $5-$10, 444-7203.

— Saturday — **Art, Jazz, Jam to remember the Scarab Club and celebrate Black History Month:** "Deep Color" abstract art print sale and exhibit by Rockey Jones. 4 to 8:30 p.m., Adeline Artists Lofts, 1131 24th St., Oakland, free.

— Saturday — **Black Rock Expo: Stone Vengeance, Omissa, 12 Inches, A Band Called Pain, Love Infinity, Damond Moodie.** 7 p.m. to 2 a.m., Oaklandish, 411 2nd St., Oakland, 87-$10, 451-2677 or www.oaklandish.org.

— Saturday — **The Art of Living Black Art Tour.** 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., various Bay Area locations, 620-6772 or www.therichmondartcenter.org for artists, locations and information, free. also Sunday, and March 5 and 6.

— Sunday — **Friends of Negro Spirituals presents a Black History Month celebration of Jester Hairston: a Worldwide Ambassador for Spirituals.** 2 p.m., general meeting, 3:30 to 5:30 p.m., educational forum, West Oakland Senior Center, 1724 Adeline St., Oakland, free, 238-7016 or (415) 563-4315.