

Style

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BY DUDLEY M. BROOKS—THE WASHINGTON POST



FILE PHOTO

Bobby Seale, in baseball cap, the co-founder and chairman of the Black Panther Party, at the party's 35th reunion in Washington this week, and in New Haven, Conn., in 1971 after being released from prison. Seale spent 21 months in jail before being acquitted of murder charges.



FILE PHOTO/THE WASHINGTON POST

Elbert "Big Man" Howard, the party's deputy minister of information, at a news conference outside the party's community information center in Washington in 1970, above, and snapping a photo of some former colleagues at the reunion.



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A local committee led by Billy Jennings has spearheaded a national conference to commemorate the 35th Anniversary of the founding of the Black Panther Party For Self-Defense. A highlight of the Anniversary will be an exhibit of Party photos and memorabilia. Jennings says that the exhibit may lead to a permanent museum.

OBSERVER Photos by ROBERT MARYLAND

Black Panther Party Anniversary Is Set

Local Committee To Host 35th National Reunion And Conference In Washington, D.C.

In May 1967, a one-year-old Black Panther Party For Self-Defense received national notoriety upon marching to the Sacramento Capitol in protest of a bill outlawing the carrying of loaded weapons in public.

Fittingly, a local committee of former members and supporters has organized a national conference in honor

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of the organization's 35th anniversary.

The "It's About Time" Committee will host the 35th Year Black Panther Party Reunion and Conference, April 18-20 on the campus of Washington, D.C.'s University of the District of Columbia.

The Conference was originally planned for October 2001, but was rescheduled due to the incidents of September 11.

"It's a chance for party members to clarify our legacy so that we can define our own organization," said local committee coordinator of the Conference, Billy Jennings.

Jennings once worked at the Black Panther Party's Oakland headquarters along with founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale.

He says the image of the group has been skewed, even by those who, today, seek to imitate it.

"If you ask the average person about the Black Panther Party, they have no clear answer," Jennings said.

He said while the media were portraying the Party as gun-toting, White-hating radicals, members were in the community effecting change.

"Our legacy is educating people about sickle cell anemia, feeding kids, but there's no story there. The media was more interested in guns," he said.

The three-day Anniversary Conference will be split into three focuses.

Day one deals with reparations and will be highlighted by a town-hall style discussion, open to the public.

The second day's topic will be political prisoners. Among those participating will be Robert "King" Wilkerson, who was released from Louisiana's Angola Prison after serving 31 years for a crime he did not commit.

The final day of the conference will be dedicated to discussing COINTEL-PRO, the counter intelligence program the FBI used to infiltrate and undermine the Black Panther Party and other Black civil rights movements.

In addition to some 20 strategy-minded workshops, there will be a memorabilia exhibit and a festival of rare films by and about the Black Panther Party. One by filmmaker Cynthia Herman features the story of Pete and Charlotte O'Neil, living in exile in Tanzania, yet creating oppor-

tunities for Black students here in the United States.

Jennings said the conference gives older members the chance to share



"We were kids at the time but we were committed to the community," said Bill Jennings, a former member of the Black Panther Party. He is shown here holding a picture of himself, left, during the Party's early days.

their experiences with a new generation of activists trying to "pick up where the Panthers left off" in order

to provide an accurate base from which to build from.

Speakers at the Anniversary Conference will include Sam Anderson of New York's Medgar Evers College; Kathleen Cleaver, former communication secretary and attorney; and the Black Panther Party's surviving co-founder Bobby Seale.

Organizers have registrants from as far as Africa, Japan and New Zealand. Jennings points out that the Black Panther Party has influenced people around the world. Groups in the former Soviet Union, South Africa and India have all incorporated the word "panther" into their fight for civil rights. Here in the United States, the Gray Panthers are seniors' advocates.

"The world over, the image of the Panther is tied to standing up for your rights," Jennings said.

Jennings also points to law enforcement's establishment of Miranda Rights, a federal feeding program for needy students and a national focus on the impact of sickle cell anemia in the Black community as issues first introduced by the Black Panther Party.

"I haven't seen an organization that effective since. We didn't compromise. We just did what was right," he said.

For more information on the 35th Year Black Panther Party Reunion and Conference call the It's About Time Committee at (916) 455-0908.