

Alvian Every

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What the Black Panther Party Did for You

In October of 1966 Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, a socialist, multi-racial, black nationalist group that endeavored to awaken the black community and unify it in activism against the ‘pigs’ and political figures that disenfranchised blacks. Unlike other black nationalist groups, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was an organization that unified communities and sought to seek out against whites and black alike that held the community down rather than lifting it up. The Panthers carried an image of brutality for their many violent encounters with law enforcement and direct ties to the doctrines of Karl Marx and Mao. It makes sense that this type of organization would have a bad reputation, considering the borderline brainwashing ideologies. Why, though, would it have office buildings, and several eager members? An organization with so many moving parts cannot be boiled down the simple concept of “kill white,” as Bobby White, a former Panther, asserted in an interview.¹ In addition to taking the law into their own hands, members of the party provided community-oriented services such as the breakfast program, medical services, and discouraging the community’s youth from participating in drug use and prostitution.

¹ *Bobby White* (Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project).

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense has come to be “known as one of the most radical and violent of the black civil rights organizations,” and that reputation is not entirely undeserved.² The Panthers routinely got into altercations with the police while what patrolling that could get extremely messy and sometimes took on body counts. Although this is the case, the Seattle chapter of the BPP was ultimately molded by Arron and Elmer Dixon who grew up as young activist and even marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in 1961. The boys did not agree with separation from or hatred of whites as a solution to the race issue. In fact, Aaron is cited as saying “[his] friends were a full reflection of the rainbow,” which directly contradicts the idea that the BPP was about exclusion and violence.³ It is critical to understand that the BPP was an organization unto its own in the way that its beliefs were laid out. As indicated by Aaron Dixon in an interview, the Party did not believe in capitalism, whether it be white or black, because it held that capitalism was oppressive to everyone.⁴ While the Panthers were very much about empowering and lifting the black community, they also made a point of waging a sort of war on the poverty that riddled their community, in which they included other people of color and poor whites. In an edition of the *Ministry of Information Bulletin*, the editor shares the experience of a Native American mother who was denied welfare and told to find a “gentleman friend” to help her with her finances, or in other words, become a prostitute.⁵ In response to this and the overt need of the community, the Panthers operated and funded multiple community-oriented projects.

² Kurt Schaefer. *The Black Panther Party in Seattle, 1968-1970, Part 2: Background—The BSU and Black Power* (Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project).

³ Ibid.

⁴ James Johnson. *Transcription of Interview with Aaron Dixon, Interviewed by James Johnson, 11 July 1970*, (Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project), 4.

⁵ The Black Panther Party, Seattle Chapter. *Ministry of Information Bulletin* (Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project), 1-6.

The Panthers held authority in their communities because they gave so much back to them. Possibly the most notable of the programs to come out of the Seattle chapter was the breakfast program. The program was set up to provide a free first meal—and possibly only meal for several hours—to children both before school and on weekends by community workers.⁶ This program inspired the creation of similar programs in public schools that still provide children a free breakfast and lunch today. In initiating this program, the Panthers sought to decrease the community’s reliance on the Establishment that did not offer such services. The Party also offered “free health clinics staffed with nurses, doctors, and health science students as well as activists” to screen for diseases common to the community such as sickle cell anemia.⁷ This idea too was popularized by the Panthers and still exists.⁸ The socialist leanings of the Party demanded a certain focus on service to the community that the government at the time lacked, which is why people were inclined to join and push its political agenda.

Another service provided by the BPP was protection from police brutality. Although Seattle was not the worse place in the nation when it came to systematic violence against people of color, it was not a utopia, either. Panthers formed squadrons that patrolled with the police, or rather followed them. When they saw injustices take place, they acted immediately and earned a reputation for being violent and purposely starting things with the police, when in reality they were only protecting the community the way they saw fit.⁹ This practice fell in line with point seven in the Party’s Ten Point program, which stated that a major goal was to completely

⁶ Johnson, “Transcription of Interview with Aaron Dixon”, 2

⁷ Alfredo Morabia. *Unveiling the Black Panther Party Legacy to Public Health* (American Journal of Public Health), 106.

⁸ JoNina M. Abron. *The Legacy of the Black Panther Party* (The Black Scholar, 1986), 34.

⁹Christopher Murray. *Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Encyclopedia of Black Studies*. (Gale Virtual Reference Library), 136.

eradicate police brutality and violence against blacks.¹⁰ Point eight, which demanded the release of all incarcerated black people, asserted that because the trials held for them were not impartial—not held with a jury of their own peers—and in accordance with that goal the BPP offered legal services and bus service to an from jails with a meal for the trip. They did this to keep those imprisoned connected to their loved ones and to the community. In the process of fighting for the freedom of incarcerated blacks, a Party field lieutenant named George Jackson wrote a book to raise awareness of the “inhumane conditions inside the country's prisons”. Just as the BPP raised awareness for their own specific causes, they also aided other ethnic or minority communities in the fight for equality and are noted for involvement with “the American Indian Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, Chicano and Asian rights organizations and the women's rights struggle,” as well as taking organizational cues from them.¹¹

The BPP often blamed the police or the Establishment for the stifled advancement of the black community, but it also recognized that some work had be done to truly clean up the neighborhood. Bobby White, a former Panther was interviewed and recounted several stories of his time in the organization. He explained that the Party would look after the black youth by keeping unwilling girls “off the streets,” or free them from forced prostitution. The mothers of young black girls would need only call a Panther member for a squad to be rounded up to confront the girl and then to find and deal with the person forcing her to sell her body.¹² The party also explained to the youth that drugs were a tool of the Establishment that wished to keep them from rising to political power and too out of it to realize the injustices plaguing their communities. In addition to their work on neighborhood streets, the Party spearheaded the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ JoNina M. Abron. *The Legacy of the Black Panther Party* (The Black Scholar, 1986), 35.

¹² *Bobby White* (Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project).

organization of Oakland Community School and the Oakland Community Learning Center. OCS was a place where children went to learn beyond the boundaries of the classroom and learn “to be critical thinkers and problem solvers [...] and] think of ways to make their community better”. As one would expect, the ideology of the Party was taught, but ultimately the focus was to teach kids not to follow the Establishment or any organization blindly and think for themselves. Despite the BPP’s reputation for being violent, the teachers and faculty were noted for dealing with outbursts in a way that was constructive and healthy rather than yelling or punishing, and even acting as a sort of extension of child protective services.¹³ The school became a template for others and represents one of the BPP’s many outstanding contributions to the community.

According to the doctrines adopted by the Party, service to the community was not only the right thing to do, but also the direct responsibility of the federal government to ensure all citizens either a job or a guaranteed yearly income.¹⁴ The idea behind the ten points and the Marxist recommended readings that the Party endorsed was to increase membership and thus increase the number of people willing to back them in a public election. Far from using only violence in their campaigns, the BPP selected one of their own field marshals to bid for a spot in the district legislature, publicly asserting its goal of “[protecting] blacks from what he called their white oppressors”.¹⁵ The Party also held “several voter registration drives in the Oakland/Alameda County area between 1972 and 1977” when Panther leader Bobby Seal ran for mayor of Oakland.¹⁶ The Panthers strove to serve the community in this way because it was believed by most that the way the oppressed would finally be lifted up and completely

¹³ Tammerlin Drummond. *Black Panther school a legend in its time*. (East Bay Times).

¹⁴ Christopher Murray. *Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Encyclopedia of Black Studies*. (Gale Virtual Reference Library), 136.

¹⁵ *Black Panthers May Run Candidate*. The Seattle Times, (Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project).

¹⁶ JoNina M. Abron. *The Legacy of the Black Panther Party* (The Black Scholar, 1986), 35.

empowered was with the advantage of political power. In this way, the BPP would spread its beliefs and satisfy constituents with the implementation of their Ten Point program at the local and state levels.

The Black Panther Party was an organization that embodied the radical side of the civil rights movement, especially in Seattle, which has always been a hotbed of social and political change. Panthers wore uniforms and did participate in violence against the police, but the emphasis was on community service. The Party embedded service into everything that they did, including political endeavors because their socialist ideology demanded it. What mattered to Panthers like Bobby White and Aaron Dixon was the opportunity to make their community a place where the disenfranchised and oppressed could find purpose in their lives and learn to stand up for their own rights. What mattered was keeping young women off the streets and young men off drugs. What mattered was feeding children a nutritious first meal of the day when the schools would not, and providing preventative medical services to those that could not afford it otherwise, or those who were refused service in what editors of the *Ministry of Information Bulletin* would call a “racist, fascist system”. In the same publication, an editor said that “[we] must serve the needs and desires of the people, because we are the oxen to be ridden by the people”.¹⁷ The BPP stood for those who could not stand for themselves because they believed that the only thing their organization was good for was to serve and take the heavy load off the oppressed. What the Panthers were was everything a strong community endeavors to be and the impacts they had on community service will last several lifetimes.

¹⁷ The Black Panther Party, Seattle Chapter. *Ministry of Information Bulletin Seattle* (Civil Rights & Labor History Project), 3,5.

Annotated Bibliography

Abron, JoNina M. "The Legacy of the Black Panther Party." *The Black Scholar*, no. 6 (1986): 33-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41067327>.

This source lists and explains some of the BPP's contributions to society and highlights the ones that it helped in popularizing. It also explains the Panthers' hand in how the US populous perceived the police in the 60's and 70's. The Ten Point program is also listed in the text along with a picture of some party members wearing their uniforms. This source will allow me to point out the fact that the BPP made a significant impact on community services.

"Black Panthers May Run Candidate," *The Seattle Times*, Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project, accessed October 20, 2017, http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/images/bpp/news/ST_July6-68.jpg

A newspaper clipping from the *Seattle Times* recounts the events of a meeting in which the president of the Black Student Union at the University of Washington disclosed that the party was considering running a candidate in the upcoming election independent of either major political party. This will support the point that the Black Panther Party was a multi-faceted organization which provided services and functioned as a political organization.

Schaefer, Kurt. "The Black Panther Party in Seattle, 1968-1970, Part 2: Background—The BSU and Black Power" *Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project*, http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/Panther3_schaefer.htm

The Black Panther movement as it began in Seattle started with the Dixon brothers and their roles in the Black Student Union at their high school. This source explains how the two got their start in the civil rights organization and how the movement spread between schools. I will use this source mainly to give background in the early parts of my paper.

Drummond, Tammerlin. "Black Panther School a Legend in Its Time". *Eastbaytimes.Com*. <http://www.eastbaytimes.com/2016/10/06/black-panther-school-ahead-of-its-time/>.

This article describes one of the Black Panther's service projects in detail and has interviews of former students of Oakland Community School embedded in it. This article will help me show how the Panthers treated education of young people differently than higher education and add another example of community service to the list of evidence supporting my thesis.

Johnson, James. Transcription of Interview with Aaron Dixon, Interviewed by James Johnson, 11 July 1970, 1-11, accessed October 20, 2017, http://depts.washington.edu/civilr3/pdf/Dixon_Interview_med.pdf

Aaron Dixon, co-founder of the Black Panther Party chapter in Seattle, Washington, was interviewed 1970 by James Johnson. In the interview, Dixon explains the philosophies and motives of the party as well as charitable actions and community service done by its members. The interview was taped and the document I am using is the transcript of that tape, which does not list any authors or editors. This interview will add the perspective of a leader in the Black Panther Party to my paper. It highlights some of the services that the party provided to the community and talks about the tactics they used to combat police brutality, prejudice, ect.

Morabia, Alfredo. "Unveiling the Black Panther Party Legacy to Public Health." *American Journal of Public Health* 106, no. 10 (October 2016): 1732-1733. CINAHL Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed November 1, 2017).

This source discusses the lasting impact the BPP's service programs had on public health and highlights how the Panthers were able to run so many programs without making any profit. This will be helpful in explaining the dedication and organization the Party had and further disprove the notion that violence was central to the organization's practices.

Murray, Christopher. "Black Panther Party for Self-Defense," *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*. Ed. Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Reference, 2005, 135-137, accessed October 21, 2017, Gale Virtual Reference Library.

This source summarizes the ten-point and community service programs run by the BPP. It also gives a good amount of insight into the Marxist ideologies that the party borrowed from. It also talked about the rise and fall of the party as a result of the FBI's attempt to break it up from the inside using spies and psychological warfare. I can use this information to strengthen my points on government opposition to the party.

"Bobby White". YouTube video, 24:57. Posted September 2016. Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project, accessed October 20, 2017, <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/white.htm>

Bobby White, a Vietnam veteran who joined the Panthers after coming home, was interviewed and spoke about how the party endeavored to take girls forced into prostitution off the streets, the violence he participated in, the perception of the Party by black youth, and other experiences. This video describes another act of community service that upholds the argument that the Black Panthers were more than an organization bent on killing and violence between races.

The Black Panther Party, Seattle Chapter. "Ministry of Information Bulletin," Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project, 1-6, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://depts.washington.edu/civilr3/pdf/bpp/bpp3.pdf>

This source is an issue of the newspaper published by the Black Panther Party which talks about (what were) current events in the Black community and incidents of police brutality and

prejudice in the judicial system. The authors of the paper were members of the Black Panther Party who wrote to bring the real news to their community as well as writing on the reason they had to continue to fight and serve. This will give me insight on what impact the Black Panthers had on their communities and how their message was formatted.