

Breakfast

Polly Graham knew about hardship and struggle. In the 1940s, she had been part of a failed attempt to organize low-wage black workers in the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Factory in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. But virulent anti-unionism, magnified by racism and anti-Communist hysteria, had beaten that noble and long-forgotten effort. Almost thirty years later, on March 4, 1970, she opened the door of her rented home to find police handing her an eviction notice. Because the property had already been condemned in a legal hearing, she understood that she owed no rent until the landlord made the necessary repairs. The landlord believed and acted differently. Confronted with the seemingly impregnable power of the police, Polly Graham went to the local office of the Black Panther Party for help.

The local Panthers immediately sprang into action, sending a contingent to Ms. Graham's home, where, with two armed Panthers standing guard, they replaced belongings that had been removed from the home by eviction police. In addition to resecuring Ms. Graham in her home, armed Panthers stood guard over the nearby homes of Pauline Greer and Minnie Bellamy to prevent similar evictions of these two elderly women.

The neighborhood temperature reached a boil. A standoff ensued between the police, trying to carry out evictions, and the Panthers, trying to keep these elderly black women from being tossed from their homes. Other community activists joined the fray. Lee Faye Mack, emboldened by the Panther presence, encouraged the crowd to "Go get

your pieces.” A cofounder of Mothers for Black Liberation and a Party adviser, Ms. Mack personified the increasingly tight bond between the poor and working-class black community of East Winston-Salem and the Panther Party. As Larry Little, the irrepressible leader of the local Panthers, recalled, after Ms. Mack spoke, even little “old ladies” went home and returned with “their double-barrel shotguns” to face down the eviction cops. Only after a third party paid Ms. Graham’s rent did the standoff cool down.¹

Still, Winston-Salem’s black community remained on edge. Three months later, in June 1970, Sara Alford seriously cut herself on a glass jar in the A&P Supermarket in the black Carver neighborhood. When Ms. Alford asked store management to pay for her anticipated medical bills they refused. As word of the store’s refusal spread, black outrage about the store’s position sparked a community-wide boycott and picket of the local A&P. Larry Little told store officials, “Either you make the A&P relevant to the needs of the black community or get out.” A protest against the store’s disregard for Ms. Alford’s injury escalated into a broader protest against discriminatory and disrespectful treatment endured by many black patrons of A&P. Protestors demanded that the store end its discriminatory hiring practices and employ blacks in substantial positions. The Party and its supporters demanded that the store contribute to its free breakfast program (formally known as the Free Breakfast for Children Program). Eventually, the store relented and agreed to the demands, including payment of Ms. Alford’s medical bills.²

Reenacted countless times in black communities across the country, similar confrontations between the Panthers and authorities helped build strong local Party chapters. Local Party chapters frequently served as community sounding boards and social service agencies—as black people’s stewards—deeply committed to social justice and community betterment. The Party essentially said to the community, Bring your concerns to us. And they did. Jamal, a Philadelphia Panther recalled,

The offices were like buzzing beehives of Black resistance. It was always busy, as people piled in starting at its 7:30 A.M. opening time and continuing ’till after nightfall. People came with every problem imaginable, and because our sworn duty was to serve the people, we took our commitment seriously. . . . When people had been badly treated by the cops or if parents were demanding a traffic light in North Philly streets where their children played, they came to our offices. In short, whatever our people’s problems were, they became our problems. We didn’t preach to the people; we worked with them.³

Community members brought all kinds of disputes to the local Party: job-related conflicts, evictions, rent struggles, gang violence, safety concerns, legal and criminal justice problems, consumer complaints, and issues with government social services, public and private utilities, and the underworld economy (numbers runners, pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers). If the local Party judged that redress was necessary, it took action. In doing so, it provided community members with a vital source of remediation that was often unavailable from the state. Its actions, in turn, attracted more members and supporters.

The Party saw itself as inextricably tied to the local black community. The most critical aspect of the Black Panther message proved deceptively simple: We are you; your problems are our problems. As one Party comrade explained, “The exploited . . . people’s needs are land, bread, housing, education, . . . , clothing, justice, and peace, and the Black Panther Party shall not, for a day, alienate ourselves from the masses and forget their needs for survival.”⁴

FROM GUNS TO BUTTER

By the fall of 1968, membership in the Black Panther Party was mushrooming. Local activists in cities throughout the country had heard of the Black Panther Party and contacted national headquarters wanting to join and start their own local chapters. Chief of Staff David Hilliard later recalled the deluge of calls from people “asking to start a chapter. We get calls all day long. Des Moines, Virginia Beach, Atlanta. Since we’re three hours behind the East Coast, the requests often start as early as eight A.M.”⁵ As Party membership and influence grew, so did repressive action by the state. The Party sought meaningful activities for members that would serve the community, strengthen the Party, and improve its image in the public relations battle with the state. In this context, community programs quickly became a cornerstone of Party activity nationwide.

The Black Panther community programs began in early 1969 under Bobby Seale’s leadership, marking an important transformation in the Party’s political practice. In the fall of 1968, Eldridge Cleaver went into exile to avoid returning to prison when his parole was revoked.⁶ With Huey Newton in prison, Seale, a staunch advocate of community programs since his days working in the government poverty program in Oakland, became primarily responsible for setting Party policy.⁷

The Black Panther Party announced its intention to launch the Free

Breakfast for Children Program in Oakland in September 1968. The call for volunteers and donations went out before Christmas.⁸ The Party launched its first free breakfast program at Father Earl A. Neil's St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in west Oakland in late January 1969. Parishioner Ruth Beckford-Smith coordinated the program. Beckford-Smith first became interested in the Black Panthers while teaching Afro-Haitian dance to young women at the church, including LaVerne Williams, Huey Newton's girlfriend. When the Party decided to organize a breakfast for children at St. Augustine's, Beckford-Smith volunteered to coordinate the program and helped organize it. The first day the program opened it served 11 children. By the end of the week, the program was serving 135 children daily at St. Augustine's. The *San Francisco Chronicle* covered the program and reported the "unspoken lesson" children would learn: "power in a community begins with people who care."⁹

By March 1969, the Black Panthers opened another Free Breakfast for Children Program at the Sacred Heart Church in San Francisco's Fillmore district.¹⁰ By April, the Party reported feeding more than twelve hundred children per day at nine facilities in Oakland, San Francisco, and Vallejo in California; in Chicago; and in Des Moines, Iowa.¹¹

Seale went to prison that August, and David Hilliard, chief of staff of the Party, took the reins of the national Party organization. Hilliard continued to give priority to development of the Free Breakfast for Children Program, and during his tenure, the program spread like wildfire, becoming the most important Panther activity.¹² By November, the Party reported feeding children free breakfast daily in twenty-three cities across the country, from Seattle to Kansas City and New York.¹³ At the height of the effort, between 1969 and 1971, at least thirty-six breakfast programs were operating nationwide with larger chapters running multiple sites.¹⁴

David Hilliard was born May 15, 1942, in rural Rockville, Alabama, the youngest of Lee and Lela Hilliard's twelve children. David's father always worked—often as a logger or tapping turpentine. His mother always worked when she was not nursing one of her babies. With such a large family, the Hilliards were poor, living in a four-room shack without flush toilets and scraping together meals. As the baby of the family, David was protected. He became an independent thinker, quite stylish and averse to drudgery. Extremely willful in his dealings with the world, he remained exceptionally loyal and deferential to family elders.¹⁵

Under Jim Crow, blacks were expected to kowtow to whites. The Hilliards, though, did not always comply. After a fight with a white man in the early 1950s, David's eldest brother, Bud, fled to Oakland, California. David later recalled being impressed by Martin Luther King and nonviolent civil rights activists but disagreeing with their approach: "The passivity of the civil rights demonstrators contradicts my family's most fundamental belief: you don't stand idly by and be kicked, you fight for yourself."¹⁶ When David was eleven, his mother moved to Oakland to join Bud, bringing David and eventually other family members along. In Oakland, David became close friends with fellow elementary school student Huey Newton. This friendship eventually shaped the course of his life. At seventeen, he married his sweetheart, Patricia, dropped out of high school, and entered the workforce. Within three years, he and Patricia had three children: Patrice, Darryl, and Dorion.

David Hilliard's ascent to Party leadership was gradual. He was first and foremost loyal to Huey, his childhood friend. As he became increasingly involved in the Party, the Panthers became his family. Until the summer of 1969, when he was thrust into primary Party leadership, Hilliard was always deferential, following the lead of Huey, then Eldridge, then Bobby. He was not eager to participate in big, head-on confrontations with the state and did not participate much in the early patrols of police, the armed rallies in Richmond, the armed action in Sacramento, or later confrontations; he went along with Eldridge on the April 6, 1968, armed action only under duress.

Rather than gravitating toward the military side of the Party, Hilliard saw the Party as one big extended family, building on the communal traditions he had experienced in the black rural South. He later recalled, "When I think about the influences that inspired the spirit and work of the Black Panther Party . . . the most important members of the Party . . . were imbued with the moral and spiritual values of their parents; and the work that went into the Party, our dignity as an independent people, the communal ideal and practice that informed our programs, all stem in part from the civilization of which my mother and father were so representative a part."¹⁷

In addition to his communal ethic, his working man's sense of organization, discipline, and efficiency—gained during a work life that included laboring on the docks—became an important characteristic of his leadership. He proved to be a good administrator, in constant communication with the diverse and rapidly growing local leadership of the Party in cities across the country. He worked hard to keep the local

chapters around the country united under a singular program. Under his leadership, the Panthers' community service programs flourished. And through the period of the greatest repression, the Party continued to grow. Hilliard's leadership and especially the community programs he championed contributed significantly to that growth.

During the year Hilliard served as the senior ranking Panther not in prison or exile, from August 1969 through August 1970, the Black Panther Party developed an impressive array of community programs in Panther chapters throughout the country. These programs eventually included the Free Breakfast for Children Program, liberation schools, free health clinics, the Free Food Distribution Program, the Free Clothing Program, child development centers, the Free Shoe Program, the Free Busing to Prison Program, the Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation, free housing cooperatives, the Free Pest Control Program, the Free Plumbing and Maintenance Program, renter's assistance, legal aid, the Seniors Escorts Program, and the Free Ambulance Program.¹⁸ Larger and more established chapters tended to run the most diverse range of programs. The histories of specific programs in local chapters were often episodic, at times short-lived, depending upon the strength and viability of a given chapter at a particular moment. Virtually all chapters ran at least a Free Breakfast for Children Program at some point.

The breakfast program quickly became an important public face of the Party as well as its cornerstone activity. In 1969, it moved front and center for the Party programmatically, politically, ideologically, and publicly. The Party claimed to have fed twenty thousand children in the 1968–69 school year and said it hoped to feed one hundred thousand in 1969–70.¹⁹ As “the most respected and popular” of the Party's programs, former Detroit Panther JoNina Abron has observed, these breakfast services enjoyed widespread support within black neighborhoods.²⁰

The Free Breakfast for Children Programs adopted a rigorous common routine. Members had to be at the sites early in the morning, in time to prepare the food and be ready for the arriving children before they ate and then headed off to school. Transporting some of the children from home to the site and then to school was another vital yet often trying logistical job. While the children ate their meal, members taught them liberation lessons consisting of Party messages and black history. Miriam Ma'at-Ka-Re Monges recalled that in the breakfast program at the Ralph Avenue Community Center in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, “Party Members and students cooked and served

large pots of grits and eggs. We cajoled supermarkets for donations and we fed hundreds of children. Most importantly, we also nourished their minds with Black History lessons as they ate their meals. Sometimes we fed parents of the children.”²¹ The Brownsville breakfast program was not unique in its willingness to feed not just the hungry children but also other hungry community members.

Feeding “hundreds of kids a day and approximately 1,200 per week” as the Los Angeles chapter did at one time demanded strong publicity, marketing, organizational, and executive skills. In Los Angeles, Flores Forbes notes,

The organizing effort began with us going door-to-door in the projects, passing out free papers with leaflets advertising the program. We talked to parents, kids, and storeowners near the projects. We explained why we had started the program: to help the kids grow and intellectually develop because children can’t learn on an empty stomach. The breakfast program was an excellent organizing tool, helping us make friends and comrades in the projects. . . . The response was overwhelming. All types of parents agreed to host and serve our efforts. We held the program in the homes of junkies, drug dealers, regular public assistance recipients, gamblers, and gang bangers. Store owners donated bread, eggs, bacon, sausage, milk, and paper products. In addition to our organizing activities, we cooked, served the food, knocked on doors to let the kids know which apartment the food was being served in, and on many an occasion made last-minute pick-ups of donations from stores.²²

Businesses donated food and supplies to the local breakfast programs for a mix of reasons, including altruism and the promotion of positive community relations. Businesses that chose not to help out faced the Party’s wrath. At times the Panthers’ cajoling blended into harassment and strong-arming. Far more common were boycotts and pickets of businesses that refused to assist the programs. Equally common was the tactic of calling out, or publicly shaming, those who refused to help. Churches and other community-based organizations that refused to help, notably those who refused to sponsor or allow breakfast programs on their premises, faced similar treatment. For starters, the Panther newspaper and Panther representatives railed against the non-supportive businessperson or community leader as a “capitalist pig.” Other epithets included “religious hypocrites,” “lying preachers and merchants,” and “avaricious businessmen.”²³

Multiple ideological goals linked these programs, which, broadly speaking, helped to “raise public consciousness about hunger and poverty in America.”²⁴ More specifically, the free breakfast programs high-

lighted the fact that hunger impeded a child's ability to learn. Politically, the breakfasts shed light on the government's failure to address childhood poverty and hunger—pointing to the limits of the nation's War on Poverty. The U.S. government spent only \$600,000 on breakfast programs in all of 1967. Government-sponsored breakfast programs grew rapidly as the Panthers pioneered their free breakfast program. By 1972, government-sponsored breakfast programs were feeding 1.18 million children out of the approximately 5 million who qualified for such help.²⁵

Attacking the serious problem of childhood hunger was a way to win people's hearts and minds. "While we might not need their direct assistance in waging armed revolution," acknowledged Forbes, "we were hedging our bets that if we did, they would respond more favorably to a group of people looking out for their children's welfare."²⁶ The FBI and police agreed. In Baltimore, as in other places, they castigated these programs "as a front for indoctrinating children with Panther propaganda." As a result, the national repression apparatus went into overdrive to destroy the free breakfast programs. Police and federal agents regularly harassed and intimidated program participants, supporters, and Party workers and sought to scare away donors and organizations that housed the programs, like churches and community centers. Safiya A. Bukhari discovered that participation in one of the Harlem free breakfast programs fell off after the police spread a false rumor among black parents that the children were being fed "poisoned food." A police disinformation campaign in Richmond, California, suggested that the Party used the Free Breakfast for Children Program to spread racism and to foment school riots. Student participation began to decline, forcing local Panther leaders to combat the official disinformation.²⁷

The police were not above raiding breakfast program locations, even while the children were eating. The Baltimore Panther branch was comparatively small, but as Judson L. Jeffries demonstrates, the branch endured "an excessive amount of violent repression, and not even children were spared harassment by the police." One morning, the Baltimore police disrupted the children's breakfast, barging menacingly onto the premises. A witness recalled, "They walked around with their guns drawn and looked real mean. The children felt terrorized by the police. [The police] were like gangsters and thugs." The *Black Panther* explained that in Baltimore, "the hired mercenary pig forces" terrorized the community, the Party, and especially the Free

Breakfast for Children Program. Ronald Davis, co-coordinator of the Baltimore program, reported that “the foul minions of legal brutality and murder” had encircled the church sponsoring the program. The police were, he wrote, “armed to the teeth with the weaponry of the fascist war machine. After holding the people in check, with guns, the pigs proceeded to force their way into the Children’s Breakfast Program under the false excuse of looking for . . . suspects. Once the Gestapo shock troopers left the Breakfast Hall, they kicked in the door of Sister Angeline Edison, a former member of the Party, and kidnapped her and her son from her home with guns pointed at her and surrounding her, all under the pretentious lies of justice.”²⁸

HEALTH CARE AND BEYOND

The success of the Panthers’ Free Breakfast for Children Program led the Party to initiate free health clinics and a range of other community programs. Many blacks were poorly served by the health care system, and some had never seen a doctor. Despite the health care initiatives within the federal government’s War on Poverty—particularly the newly created neighborhood health centers targeting the needs of inner-city communities—many residents in these communities received only limited, if any, health care attention.²⁹

In response, the Party created a series of free medical clinics across the country. These clinics relied on the volunteer services of local doctors, medical students, interns, residents, nurses, and community folk as well as donated or low-rent clinic space. These public Panther-run clinics, such as those in Berkeley and Cleveland, offered services to all who came, black and nonblack alike. In some cities, like Baltimore, the Party formed coalitions with like-minded individuals and groups to run free clinics in the community.³⁰

For the Party, the focus was plain and urgent: to address within its limited resources the pressing health care concerns of poor black communities that sorely lacked adequate medical facilities and professionals. Clinic services “included first aid care, physical examinations, prenatal care, and testing for lead poisoning, high blood pressure, and sickle cell anemia.” If necessary, clinicians referred patients to specialists for follow-up care. There were at least eleven such clinics, including those in Kansas City, Seattle, and New Haven. Chicago’s Spurgeon “Jake” Winters Free Medical Care Center was one of the best-run and most-respected Panther health clinics, serving over two thousand peo-

ple in its initial two months. “Medical teams from the Winters clinic went door-to-door assisting people with their health problems,” according to Abron. “The clinic’s staff included obstetricians, gynecologists, pediatricians, and general practitioners.” Milwaukee’s People’s Free Health Center emphasized preventive medicine and health care education on “sickle cell anemia, drug abuse, children’s health and birth control” as well as free health care screenings. The clinic also sponsored discussions on black social relations, including relations between black women and men, and concerns of black youth.³¹

The Party’s sickle-cell-anemia testing program and its Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation made a serious contribution to black health care in America. The Party worked hard to publicize the seriousness of the disease, which afflicts about one in five hundred African Americans.³² Before the Panthers launched a public awareness campaign in 1971, black and mainstream awareness of the disease was limited. After the Panther’s publicity offensive on behalf of battling the disease, more and more blacks learned of the disease and got tested for it. In the Panther clinics, health care professionals referred those with the disease or with the sickle-cell trait for further counseling and, if necessary, treatment. The Panthers’ Sickle Cell Anemia Research Foundation provided a public face to the disease, promoting pioneering work that led to advances in scientific understanding and medical treatment of the disease.³³

The Party’s health care programs included efforts to combat drug addiction. Often led by ex-drug addicts who worked with the Party, these initiatives focused on treatment and rehabilitation. In Boston’s South End neighborhood, “Project Concern” was “run by ex-addicts who have acquired a political consciousness and therefore realize the necessity of quitting drugs in order to survive.” The Party lauded the project’s ideological thrust as well as its health advocacy and gave special praise to the brothers who ran and participated in the program. These brothers built their program “on the revolutionary ideology of capitalism plus dope equals genocide.” Dope, they argued, was part of the oppressor’s plan “to ensure our enslavement.” A similar initiative, People for the People, offered “drug control and education” in “the heavily drug-infested” community of Corona-East Elmhurst in Queens, New York.³⁴

Despite these successes, state repression continued. Local police and the FBI worked to undermine the Party’s health clinics and the Panthers’ health care activism. In 1971, Cleveland Panthers worked

hard to transform their health clinic into a larger People's Free Health Clinic. On August 18 that year, a dynamite explosion severely damaged the clinic. The blast was widely believed to be the handiwork of the state, and Panther Jimmy Slater suggested that the police and FBI counterintelligence were responsible for blowing up the clinic, though definitive proof is lacking. "Any positive program that served and mobilized the community was attacked. It was one of the things we had going on that served a lot of people who needed free medical aid, and it was attacked to undermine the party's efforts."³⁵

That same summer, early Sunday morning on July 5, the Party's Franklin Lynch People's Free Health Center in Boston was hit by thirteen shots, causing limited damage. Due to the loud noise of the July 4 fireworks and firecrackers, the attack went undetected until early Sunday morning. The shots were allegedly fired by local police, and clinic patrons and workers, community folk, and party members were outraged. The Boston Party chapter resolved that "the strength, the love and determination of the people has built the Free Health Center up to what it is today, and the same strength, love, and devotion of the people will make the Free Health Center stand up to future attacks by Mayor White's Gestapo pig force."³⁶

The Party's advocacy of public health care for blacks revealed the group's deep commitment to a holistic view of health that was both environmental and physical. For the Party, the well-being of individual black bodies and the collective black community reflected the overall welfare of the larger black body politic. Improving the health status of blacks thus went hand in hand with improving their political, economic, and social status. In the Party's view, black political activism and black public health activism were interwoven.

Complementing the Party's health care activism were several programs that addressed the most basic material needs of poor black communities. The Free Food Distribution Program, the Free Clothing Program, and the Free Shoe Program were extremely well received. Also popular were targeted give-away initiatives featuring free food, clothing, and shoes, sometimes in conjunction with a Party rally. Free-food rallies organized by the Winston-Salem Black Panther Party chapter inaugurated the Joseph Waddell Free Food Program to honor a beloved comrade who had died in state prison under suspicious circumstances. One rally drew over two thousand people to the Kimberly Park Housing Project, where Party members gave out free food and shoes for children.³⁷

A lack of adequate ambulance services was an especially galling problem in Black Winston-Salem. On October 17, 1970, fifteen-year-old Alan “Snake” Dendy was shot and then died when the drivers of the county ambulance that arrived on the scene refused to move his body, claiming they lacked authorization to do so. Responding to community outrage at the injustice, the local Panther chapter swung into action. By June 1971, the group had acquired an old hearse that it retrofitted as an ambulance. Party members had already been taking emergency medical technician (EMT) and first-aid classes at Surry Community College, and by summer’s end, they were certified as EMTs. The chapter was thus able to begin operating its own ambulance before the year was out.³⁸

The free emergency ambulance service was a big success and was named the Joseph Waddell People’s Free Ambulance Service to commemorate the Panthers’ recently deceased comrade. Waddell’s \$7,000 life insurance death benefit went to the local chapter, which used the money to subsidize the free ambulance program. Operating for over two years, the service at its height featured twenty-four-hour service and twenty certified EMTs who were Party members. The Forsyth County commissioners granted the chapter a franchise to operate.³⁹

Another popular Panther effort, the Free Busing to Prison Program, helped incarcerated blacks stay connected to their families and communities. Because so many inner-city blacks could not afford transportation to and from prisons (which were often located in out-of-the-way rural sites) to visit relatives and friends, the busing program proved very popular, though it was expensive to maintain and suffered from chronic underfunding and persistent state efforts to destroy it.⁴⁰ The busing program had multiple political aims. First, it helped sustain connections between imprisoned blacks and their home communities. “Just because a Brother or Sister commits a crime, is it correct for them to be cut off from their loved ones, friends and community with no communication?” asked Milwaukee’s Ronald Stark.⁴¹

Another aim of the Free Busing to Prison Program was to highlight the unjust incarceration of a disproportionate number of blacks and bring attention to the wrongful imprisonment of Panthers and other black political prisoners through bogus charges. The Panthers also sought to expose the alarming racism underlying these wrongs—an entire criminal injustice system for blacks and poor people. The extreme state repression of the Party, the unjust imprisonment of so many Party members, and the devastating consequences of both only

heightened the ideological and practical significance of the Party's Free Busing to Prison Program.⁴²

After becoming a member of the Detroit branch, JoNina Abron's involvement in the busing program introduced her to the Party's other community service programs:

I drove one of the vans that transported families to visit their incarcerated relatives at Jackson State Prison. Having grown up as the sheltered daughter of a minister and a music teacher, I was overwhelmed by my experience at Jackson State Prison, which was my first visit to a penitentiary. Another service that the [Black Panther Party] provided for prison inmates was the free commissary program. [Party] members secured donations of personal hygiene items and non-perishable foods and sent care packages to prisoners. The party also offered attorney referral services for prison inmates.⁴³

Just as the Party's free medical clinics at times led to cooperation with local allies and outlasted the Party's active involvement, several of the Free Busing to Prison programs lived beyond the Party. In Cleveland, for instance, Panther JoAnn Bray's work with the Party's Free Busing to Prison Program continued after the local Party itself collapsed. With ongoing community support and a \$16,000 grant, Bray was able to keep the buses running for several years in the 1970s, changing the program's name to the People's Busing Program and charging a small fee.⁴⁴

Panthers at all levels and from all class backgrounds had endured the racism of public schools and knew firsthand the crying need to remake fundamentally black public school education. The Black Panther Party thus committed itself to a relevant and empowering education for black children. Point 5 of the Party's platform demanded an education "that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society" and "teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society." Such an education had to be probing and affirmative. It had to create highly skilled citizens dedicated to advancing the best interests of the black nation within the American nation.

Building upon the tradition of black self-empowerment, alternative black schools dotted the progressive landscape before the Panthers came on the scene. The citizenship schools of the Civil Rights Movement, led by Septima Clark, helped many blacks master the knowledge and mechanics necessary to register to vote in the South before the Voting Rights Act. Freedom Summer 1964 in Mississippi featured a series of freedom schools that taught the fundamentals alongside black history and culture as well as the Civil Rights Movement's ideology and goals.

These efforts contributed to the larger social changes transforming Mississippi and the rest of the former Confederacy.⁴⁵

The Panthers' liberation schools extended this tradition by insisting on a Black Power revolution: the inclusion of black perspectives, experiences, and knowledge in the formal and informal school curricula. The liberation schools typically served children in kindergarten through the eighth grade and included meals, social welfare help for needy students and families, and extended hours. These schools also featured black history and culture, a diverse and rich academic and political curriculum, and lessons in the Party's ideology, goals, and activities. Whereas the Party saw these schools as training grounds for well-equipped citizens, sensitive to issues of class, race, and socialism, the Black Panther Party's enemies—principally state and federal governments—saw them as purveyors of anti-American and antiwhite propaganda.

The Panthers launched at least nine liberation schools across the nation, from Seattle to the Bronx, with the first established in Berkeley in June 1969. These institutions varied in longevity, structure, substance, and effectiveness. Because of the Party's emphasis on education and the Panthers' own often negative experiences with the mainstream education system, Party members labored hard and long to make these schools effective. Still, government misinformation and bad publicity led to the demise of several efforts, such as Black Panther Party-sponsored liberation schools in Des Moines and Omaha.⁴⁶

Variations on the Panthers' central educational model sprouted up throughout the United States. Building upon the Party's broader community-based educational work, the Philadelphia chapter sponsored a People's Free Library that featured texts by black authors. In the summer of 1970, the Cleveland chapter ran a summer liberation school with meals and ten hours of instruction for twenty-five children. In Brooklyn, the local Party ran a liberation school that supplemented the basics with an Afrocentric focus. According to Miriam Monges, the schools emphasized "rudimentary aspects of the Afrocentric paradigm. . . . We taught African history lessons and sponsored African dance classes."⁴⁷

The most substantial and successful Party liberation school was the flagship Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI) in Oakland. Founded in January 1971, the school graduated its first class in 1974 and lasted through 1982, well after the rest of the Black Panther Party organization had disintegrated. The IYI's first class had twenty-eight students, most of whom were children of Party members. At its height, the

school had a waiting list of four hundred. Working with students from ages two and a half to eleven, the faculty, led from 1973 to 1981 by Ericka Huggins and a strong group of mostly women teachers, taught a demanding program to a student body with wide-ranging abilities and often challenging backgrounds.⁴⁸

Adopting a pedagogy that grouped students by ability and achievement rather than by age, the IYI sought to do its best by each student. The Party provided meals to students, and when the school expanded to encompass a middle school, it provided housing for some of the older children. The school also at times hosted other programs, including a GED (high school equivalency) program and instruction in martial arts. At its height, the school was commended by Governor Jerry Brown and the California State Assembly for “having set the standard for the highest level of elementary education.”⁴⁹

SHIFTING GENDER DYNAMICS

Women were a pivotal force in the Panthers, at times constituting a majority of the Party’s membership. Panther women energized the local branches and played a central role in creating the indigenous culture of struggle that gave the local chapters their resonance and distinctiveness. They kept the community programs alive and did most of the painstaking day-to-day social labor necessary to sustain the chapters. Providing informal child-care networks and day-care centers, assisting elderly and infirm community members with their housing, food, medical, and even more personal concerns were generally the province of Panther women. The Party heavily recruited women to staff programs like the Free Breakfast for Children Program, where women, notably mothers, garnered special praise for their work. Reflecting traditional gender norms, the Party newspaper enthusiastically endorsed these kinds of programs as fundamentally maternalist: particularly well suited to mothers’, and by extension to women’s, sensibilities and commitments.⁵⁰

In its early years, especially before 1968 and the explosive subsequent growth in Party membership, the organization was largely male. The Black Panther Party got its start as “a male-centered, male-dominated organization.”⁵¹ The group’s initial rhetorical and programmatic emphasis on arming members for self-defense, organizing the “brothers on the block,” and revitalizing black manhood highlighted the Party’s masculinism.

Even after women began to join the Party en masse in 1968 and the struggle to achieve gender equity intensified, the Party never overcame what Tracie Matthews has aptly called its “masculine public identity.” Nevertheless, Frankye Malika Adams, speaking from her experiences at the grassroots level and reflecting a widely held view among Party members, noted, “Women ran the [Black Panther Party] pretty much. I don’t know how it came to be a male’s party or thought of as being a male’s party. Because these things, when you really look at it in terms of society, these things are looked on as being women’s things, . . . feeding children, taking care of the sick. . . . We actually ran the [Party’s] programs.”⁵²

The gendering of the Party’s community programs as female and the public face of the Party as male became entrenched for two major reasons. First, the Party’s continuing masculinism and the society’s deeply ingrained gender norms undercut the women’s serious battles against sexism within the Party. Second, even as women’s participation became increasingly central to the operation of the Party and questions of gender equity loomed large, the Party had no formal and effective mechanisms to root out sexism and misogyny. Consequently, despite the Panthers’ antisexist rhetoric and efforts and the efforts of many Panther men and women to confront these ongoing problems, the problems persisted. Ericka Huggins recalls visiting a local chapter where women prepared the food and then waited in the kitchen until Panther men had eaten before serving themselves—a dynamic she quickly ended.⁵³

Just as the lure of guns proved compelling for many recruits, both women and men, community service programs brought innumerable men and women into the Party and actively engaged large numbers of Panthers of both genders. Indeed, while women often ran many of the Free Breakfast for Children Programs, male participation in the programs was widespread, sensitizing innumerable Panther men to the importance of family, children, and gender issues for the Party as well as for black communities and the larger society. The Free Breakfast for Children Program specifically and the community service programs generally provided a powerful counter to the misleading stereotype of the Party as a bunch of gun-toting men.

Many of the Party members who served black communities in the free breakfast and other community programs lived in low-cost, no-frills communal arrangements within black communities known as Panther pads or Panther cribs. To the extent that these homes operated along egalitarian and democratic lines, they worked for all involved. In

part, Panther pads reflected the Party's critique of conventional familial norms. As Huey Newton once noted, the traditional nuclear family in particular and conventional familial norms in general were "imprisoning, enslaving, and suffocating."⁵⁴ The Party's open and nonmonogamous communal living arrangements aimed to offer freer and more fulfilling lives.

In fact, these Panther pads often perpetuated the very practices they were supposed to alleviate, reinscribing male privilege and sexist attitudes. Thus, women were primarily responsible for housework and bore the brunt of the responsibility for open relationships with men, taking on family planning and reproductive concerns—notably birth control and abortions. Similarly, pregnancy and child care were primarily women's responsibility, so single mothers with children were often expected to pull the same load as their single and childless comrades. Rather than ushering in greater gender and sexual equality, these Panther pads all too often replicated gender and sexual inequality.⁵⁵

THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

The Party's community service programs were fundamentally political programs as well as socioeconomic ones and were thus vital to the Party's developing political ideology and practices. Writing in 1969, Bobby Seale maintained that the programs were not "reform programs" but "revolutionary, community, socialistic programs." This distinction—by casting the programs as part of a broader insurgency to change the American capitalist system to a more equitable socialist one—was crucial to the Party's political and ideological integrity. In the Panthers' view, the programs were revolutionary, not reformist. As Seale explained, "A revolutionary program is one set forth by revolutionaries, by those who want to change the existing system to a better one," whereas "a reform program is set up by the existing exploitative system as an appeasing handout, to fool the people and to keep them quiet. Examples of these programs are poverty programs, youth work programs, and things like that."⁵⁶

The Party's community-based revolutionary ethos epitomized the pervasive desire within Black Power movements to empower black communities. The Party attracted large numbers of members and supporters, from various classes and races, who wanted to be part of a dynamic liberation movement rooted in the day-to-day struggles of ordinary black people, most of whom were poor and working class.

“Unlike the Niagara Movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or the Urban League,” Miriam Monges reminds us, “the Party’s origins lie enmeshed among the black down-trodden. [Black Panther Party] offices were always located in the center of low-income areas of African American communities.”⁵⁷ The short-lived and all-black Niagara Movement (1905–9), the interracial NAACP (1909–present), and the interracial Urban League (1911–present) all began as middle-class-led movements. The Black Panther Party, as a movement primarily identified with the black working class and under-class, linked itself to movements like the Nation of Islam, Garveyism, and varieties of black worker- and union-based activism dating back to the nineteenth century.⁵⁸

Through direct service to the community, the Panthers accomplished several pressing functions. First, the services provided concrete aid to an impressive number and cross-section of folk—whites, blacks, and other people of color—materializing the notion of service to the community. In addition to providing their own labor, the Panthers generated alternative bases of funding and resources to serve impoverished communities, collecting individual and local business donations.

Second, these programs accomplished crucial educational and political work within communities, conveying the insufficiency of the capitalist welfare state to meet even the most basic needs of its citizens, especially its black citizens. As Ryan Nissim-Sabat has pointed out, the piecemeal yet serious efforts of these community programs represented a broader offensive “to compensate for the inadequate institutions of the state and to raise the consciousness of people in their local communities.”⁵⁹ As Yvonne King, deputy of labor in the Party’s Chicago chapter, observed in the spring of 1969, “Hunger among schoolchildren illustrates one of the basic contradictions in American society. America is one of the richest nations in the world, able to send countless numbers of rockets into space at the drop of a dollar, yet people are starving.”⁶⁰ The Free Breakfast for Children Program in particular enabled the Party to crystallize these stark contradictions and heighten black awareness of such structural inequities. This deepening awareness then pushed black communities to create other programs to ameliorate the crushing problems stemming from systemic inequalities.

Third, the Panthers’ programs expanded communities’ understanding of the process of grassroots institutional development—how to create and sustain their own much-needed institutions from the ground up. Building upon these communities’ tradition of active self-help, the

Party revitalized and modeled grassroots black community development and institution building. Its programs offered concrete examples of Black Power's vision of community empowerment. The ultimate goal of these institutions was clear: self-determination. Empowering black communities to take control of their own affairs and manage them in their best interests was central to the Party's social service programs.

Fourth, these programs not only kept the Party alive in the face of awesome state repression, they also initially enabled it to grow during these trying times. Party members' arduous work with very little formal remuneration—particularly in the breakfast programs and free medical clinics—won the Panthers' strong support in black communities and contributed substantially to the Party's "street credibility." This vital work likewise had strong support from liberal and progressive blacks and whites.

The Party's emphasis on direct community service as a means of advancing black community self-determination and ameliorating the ills besetting them linked it to the historic organizing tradition of the Black Liberation Struggle. Just as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's extraordinary organizing work helped galvanize the Southern Civil Rights Movement, the Panthers' organizing efforts were vital to galvanizing the national Black Liberation Struggle.⁶¹ The social service programs linked the Party's organizing work to a long tradition, including the work of organizations like the postwar Nation of Islam, with its successful rehabilitation programs for black male prisoners, exemplified by the rehabilitation of Malcolm X.⁶² These kinds of formal programs constituted concrete steps to advance the best interests of the black nation within the American nation. Black Panthers saw their own community-based programs as part of their commitment to a black nation-building project, an expression of the Party's revolutionary nationalism.

Even as the state wrenched into overdrive to decimate the Party in 1969 and 1970, the community service programs attracted innumerable new Party members and supporters and enabled the Party to keep growing. Jimmy Slater explained that he joined the Cleveland chapter because of "the many different positive programs sponsored by the party."⁶³ Flores A. Forbes noted that "the work I most enjoyed" was the community service programs, particularly the free breakfast programs for children in the four main Watts housing projects.⁶⁴

The state marshaled its vast and enormous powers and labored overtime to destroy the Party. In late August 1970, a series of Gestapo-

like raids of several Panther headquarters by the notorious Philadelphia police proved disastrous for the Party, causing extensive property loss and damage and subjecting arrested Party members to humiliating public strip searches in front of the media and the community. Still, the community did not abandon the Party. Instead, in early September, ignoring police orders, community members labored to return the North Philadelphia office to a habitable state. Clarence Peterson remembered, “It was the most beautiful experience I’ve ever had in my whole life. I really cried because the people opened up our offices again. . . . We did not think our office would open again. The people in the community put everything back in the office. They put furniture back . . . they fed us for about a week . . . they kept our kids. It was something that I have never seen or heard of before. It was really something . . . it was out of sight . . . they told the cops that these are our Panthers, so leave them alone.”⁶⁵ Precisely because the Panthers responded as best they could to the pressing concerns of their home communities, these communities embraced their Panthers, and the ties between local Panthers and local communities deepened. This deepening support came just in time.