

# The former leader of Seattle's militant Panthers has mellowed, but he is still fighting the good fight

By Matt Rosenberg

Photography by Rick Dahms

Three dogs are yapping in the basement of Aaron Dixon's very lived-in Leschi home. The phone won't stop ringing. A friend who's between apartments is feeding her 2-year-old son in the kitchen. On the refrigerator are kids' drawings, a youth dance class schedule and a torn-out newspaper article about a suburban hiking trail. There's a large, laminated multiplication table on the wall, a crusted waffle iron on the windowsill and a hefty pile of Black Panther Party memorabilia on the kitchen table.

It's topped by an October 1968 issue of *Seattle* magazine with Dixon, then 19 and the captain of the first Panther chapter, on the cover. Wearing a black leather jacket and a black beret with a Panther pin, he's leaning out the window of a Seattle police car with a tough deadpan stare. The cover photo caption reads, "Hey Chief, I hear you're looking for black policemen."

Thirty-four years later, Seattle's still looking for black policemen. Racial tensions around policing, schooling and public-sector contracting continue to garner headlines in the new millennium, but gains for blacks in Seattle and the rest of the United States have been substantial nonetheless. And Dixon, who's been to some dark places and come back home, is still passionately committed to making the city where he was raised a better place.

For Dixon, 1968 was a heady, turbulent time, one that involved more than a few confrontations with Seattle police and other authority figures.

Dixon was a freshman at the University of Washington and co-leader of the Black Student Union. The group had successfully taken over a top administrator's office for several days, helping force initiation of a black studies program at the UW that thrives to this day. Food was hoisted up with a rope and pulley for the duration of the sit-in.

Things really began to percolate in April. On the night Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, Dixon was in jail following an "unlawful assembly" arrest at Franklin High School. A few days later, with his brother Elmer, Dixon was on his way to San Francisco for the Black Student Union Conference, where Panther leader Bobby Seale's keynote speech proved electrifying. Dixon recalls, "As soon as he finished speaking, we converged on him, knowing that we had to start a Panther group in Seattle."

After a trip north by Seale a week later and a meeting "with 20 to 25 kids" in the Madrona home of Dixon's parents, the Seattle chapter was formed, C'ntprfrnt nffirt...it 14th :ind,Jan. New

recruits had to have two guns and 2,000 rounds of ammunition each, Dixon recalls.

The Seattle Panthers issued an agenda stressing freedom and self-determination for blacks. They called for full employment, decent housing, truth in education, an end to police brutality, amnesty for all black prisoners, all-black juries for black defendants and exemption from military service for all black men. A, more sweeping goal was a United Nations-supervised vote allowing members of the U.S. "black colony" to determine their national destiny.

While espousing a strong self-help ethic, the Panthers also incorporated Marxist-Leninist philosophy, Dixon says. "We wanted to create a better world for everybody, where all living things could be able to share in the wealth and everyone's needs would be taken care of."

Membership swelled to about 300. A speakers bureau was formed and talks given to neighborhood associations, parent-teacher associations and other groups. Drawing on contributions from a wide cross section of Seattleites, the Panthers established several community programs. They bused family members to see loved ones held in western Washington prisons; they started a food bank, free medical and legal clinics, and a free breakfast program in five locations.

The Seattle Panther chapter also opened a "liberation school." Dixon says, "There was no day care then. So kids came in to the liberation school during the summer for political education and to learn other subjects. We fed them and went on field trips, too. People like to remember all the controversy, but the Panthers did more than you can imagine for people in the community."

Panther activists found a burgeoning demand for administering ad hoc social justice as well. One woman had her apartment door removed by her landlord for nonpayment of rent: The Panthers went to the landlord's house, found the missing door, carried it down the street and put it back on.

In May of '68, the mother of a black student at then predominantly white Rainier Beach High School called and told Dixon her son was being repeatedly beaten and verbally abused, and the school was doing nothing about it. Several days later she called again, saying conditions had worsened: Some white students were now bringing in guns, chains and knives.

"About a dozen of us took our rifles and shotguns and went over there in two cars. There were 20 or 30 police standing outdoors, to the side. We

walked toward the building with our arms. An officer said we couldn't take loaded weapons in. I told him the guns weren't loaded. We went in and the principal ran. We caught him, put him in a room and told him if he wouldn't protect the black students, we would. He promised things would get better. When we left the building, we backed up to our cars, never taking our eyes off the police. It was very intense."

Faced with mounting responsibilities for the Panthers, Dixon dropped out of UW prior to his sophomore year. The party continued to weave its outreach work and Black Power message into the fabric of Seattle community life.

Conflicts with law enforcement escalated. Bogus arrests and questionable police shootings of Panthers and other African-Americans sparked marches, rioting and more. One time, Dixon recalls, the Panthers set off firebombs near the Madrona fire station (now a public library), then peppered the area with sniper gunfire to keep firemen pinned inside.

Such events didn't escape the notice of federal authorities. Dixon recalls getting a phone call from a black Justice Department employee in Seattle in '69. "He said the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms were planning on raiding our headquarters and killing us."

The Seattle Panthers set about fortifying their headquarters, which had been moved to a duplex at 20th and Spruce in the Central District. A white carpenter, a former Communist Party member, helped. Dixon notes that while the majority of Panther members were black, more than a few whites were sympathetic and lent assistance in a variety of ways.

The raid never happened, but more action was to come for Dixon. He was ordered to the Panthers' national base in Oakland in 1972, where he ran an outreach program to Panther chapters in California state prisons and served as office manager. Elmer Dixon ran the Seattle chapter until it folded in 1979. He now lives in Seward Park and runs a diversity consulting firm, Executive Diversity Services.

Aaron Dixon says, "When I went down there, Oakland was flooded with cocaine." Under then-Panther chieftain Huey Newton's megalomaniacal sway, the Panthers there became increasingly involved in drugs, gangs, guns and crime. "The image of the party got pretty bad. Huey was living in a penthouse and 'was addicted to cocaine himself. He