

Sunday, Jan 15th, 2012

Santa Rosa High School Auditorium
5:15 PM – 7:30 PM

1235 Mendocino Ave.
Santa Rosa, CA

Doors open @ 445pm

Dr. Martin Luther King JR Annual Birthday Celebration

Keynote Speaker: Elbert ‘Big Man’ Howard

Good afternoon to all of you. I am honored to be here and to be able to share my thoughts with you this day, as we come together in this community to share in this annual birthday celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King JR.

Today I am going to talk about Dr. King Martin Luther JR's efforts to secure human and civil rights and draw parallels to the Black Panther Party and its struggles for basic human rights and its Community Programs. Both Dr. King and the Black Panther Party fought for voters' rights for African-Americans and all disenfranchised and poor people. They enlightened people as to how they could be empowered and promote change by delivering political consequences to government representatives by exercising their voting rights.

Both Dr. King and The Black Panther Party sought to feed the poor and the hungry and believed in these facts: human rights included fair wages, equitable medical treatment for all people, and the shelter of affordable housing.

Those civil and human rights struggles were about the same issues people are faced with today. That's why they're out in the streets now protesting the same bad conditions: namely unemployment, decaying educational structures, expensive unnecessary wars, lack of equitable voters' rights, lack of affordable decent housing, a completely devastated economy, and greedy, criminal corporate and government officials.

As we reflect on Dr. King's many contributions, I feel that it is especially important to remember his campaign for the National Voters Rights Act, which after so much government opposition and bloodshed in the streets of America, was eventually passed into law. Dr. King's struggle to attain human and civil rights inspired and motivated so many of us.

As many of you know, I am one of the original 6 members of the Black Panther Party, which originated out of Oakland in October of 1966 and as I speak, you will learn how many of us, as is not always recognized, had a deep connection to this great man, Dr. King and his work.

I will share with you some history. In 1969, the Rainbow Coalition was founded by groups which included the Chicago Black Panther Party. The Rainbow Coalition was so-named because it included people of all races and ethnicities. It consisted of Panthers, Southern working class whites, and

activists and community members Puerto Ricans, and Native Americans. Nothing like this party had ever existed here before. When Reverend Jesse Jackson ran for President of these United States on the Rainbow Coalition Platform, Panthers supported him.

As the Black Panther Party evolved, many members became involved in electoral politics throughout the country. In Chicago, Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther Party member, got elected as the United States Congressman for Cook County.

Panther Larry Little of the Winston Salem, North Carolina Chapter won a seat and served as an assembly-man in that state.

In 1971, Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale ran for Mayor of Oakland. He did not win, but, very importantly, he captured 40% of the electoral vote, and set the stage for another African- American to soon be elected as Mayor of Oakland. Three members of the Black Panther Party ran for and became members of the Berkeley City Council. The Oakland Black Panther Party was an instrumental force in the launching of the political career of California Congressman Ron Dellums.

So, contrary as to how the Black Panther Party was depicted by the media and American power-brokers, like Dr. Martin Luther King JR, the Black Panther Party was a source of hope and political power, particularly to disenfranchised, poor Blacks, Whites, Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans. I am saying that contrary to what you may have thought or been told, the Black Panther Party played a powerful role in the civil and human rights struggles of the 99 % who were struggling to survive in America.

As Dr. King said, “No lie can live forever.” And “Truth crushed to dust will rise again.”

On a personal note, I wish to share my thoughts with all of you about how and what it was that Dr. King inspired in me.

As a young observer, having been born and raised in the segregated South, I knew what it was to be considered less than a human being. To be forced to ride only in the back of buses (public transportation) but pay equal fare. To shop at downtown stores and spend our money but be prohibited from eating at any downtown lunch counter. To live in fear of the KKK and white people in general. A life of oppression and fear.

Then along came this young Baptist Preacher speaking up bravely and clearly, addressing *our* issues – the issues of Blacks in America who were tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. Dr. Martin Luther King JR took action in the deep South and organized poor Black people to resist and demand freedom, justice, and equality. He taught us that no matter what, in all actions taken, the most important thing was to stick together and not to allow the forces of hate and oppression to frighten or break you or deter you. To remain united. That many things could be accomplished with grim, bold, and steadfast determination.

I think that among the most important things I learned from Dr. King were the power of the boycott and the importance of mass protest. His dogged determination to see through to their conclusion all the challenges he undertook, despite threatened violence, being jailed, death threats, and attempts to take his life.

Dr. King was a man of faith with the highest of moral convictions. He truly lived up to the words of that old protest marching song: “Ain’t Gone Let Nobody Turn Me Around.”

Yes, I believe it was because of Dr. Martin Luther King JR that I found my own moral center which gave me my will to fight for human rights and against injustice and to stay the course.

I want to thank you all so very much for coming today and allowing me to share my thoughts with you. Stay the course and stay united.

“All Power to the People”