

required to view the Panther film "Off the Pig" as a primer on how the Party was founded in Oakland in 1966.¹⁸ According to Mary Rem, the main reason that the Heartland chapters had to tailor BPP programs a little differently from other Panther chapters, such as the one in Chicago, was because the Panthers did not have a large black population to draw on in those regions of the country.¹⁹

But the differences in Des Moines were not restricted to demographics; there were differences in political style as well. Cadres wanted to know how general political ideas related to their particular situations in the heartland. Knox explained:

The mid-west was down with the Political Education to the extent that it was very practical. How did it really work for us? So that was a big difference from just reading a line and saying that this works. When we start talking about the raising of consciousness we ask well, what is this? And how do we do it? So again, we were raising those kinds of questions. That was in a sense unique to the mid-west. Because when we went to other places our people weren't doing that. That was a practical thing so that we would not have mistaken ideas, as Mao talks about. How do you correct mistaken ideas? Criticism and self-criticism.²⁰

The Des Moines BPP attempted to pursue the goals of the Black Revolution in several ways by including national programs, political education, regional cooperation, local solidarity, and national solidarity. For example it adopted the revolutionary nationalist philosophy of the central committee headquartered in Oakland, California, but its political education classes focused on literacy and the concept of freedom with cadres and community people, which were issues of particular concern to the black community of Des Moines. Many of the rank-and-file cadres were functionally illiterate and had to be taught how to read in order to understand and promulgate the party line. Knox described the situation:

You have to remember that the folks that came to the party, many of them couldn't even read. This is very important. They couldn't even read. They couldn't distinguish letters. The political education classes taught them to read. We would take the Red Book and ask brothers to read a paragraph out of the book. Dictionary and Thesaurus next to us, and we read and we read and we learned to read. And we learned analysis.²¹

Part of what the Panther Party did was to make reading relevant and accessible. Knox continued, "That was so great to see. Young people who couldn't read, all of a sudden learning to read. They didn't read because they didn't have a reason to read. Now they have a reason to read. What is the reason? The reason is our freedom. The reason is our liberation. The reason is for your mother, for the family, for us."²²

In addition to its political education program for fighting illiteracy, the Des Moines BPP adopted key national programs but tailored them to local needs: a Drug/Alcohol Program and a Free Breakfast Program. The Drug and Alcohol Program emerged out of the insistence that cadres not consume alcohol while conducting Panther business, for an intoxicated Panther could not be effective and function for the people, and the assertion that alcohol caused the body to deteriorate. Knox explained how the heartland handled those issues as a regional organization:

What happened out of that was a series of lectures on alcoholism grows out of this . . . need to talk about treating people who did have the problem and launched us into, say, Des Moines bringing people, taking people, to Kansas City to get treatment for drugs, for drug addiction—*right*—because Des Moines did not have a center. Or Kansas City when the person can't go there, go into Des Moines if Des Moines had something or Omaha. So you see we moved into those areas because of necessity.²³

The Des Moines BPP also successfully developed a Free Breakfast Program which was not a simple task, given that many of the city's African American leaders did not like to discuss the level of hunger in the black community:

Because they were going to school inadequately nourished and cold . . . we were at the bottom of the system and we understood the problems better than anyone else. And how did we address them? We went ahead and established a breakfast program and didn't have any money. So look at how it works, if we can establish a breakfast program with no money—by donation and the system has all of the money with taxes, why don't they have a national free breakfast program for children? Which happened after the party established a free breakfast program for the children.²⁴

Seventy-five to one hundred elementary and junior high school children of different races and backgrounds were fed by the Free Breakfast