

MILLENNIALS CELEBRATE THE BLACK PANTHERS' 50TH ANNIVERSARY

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Half a century after Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the nationwide fight against militaristic police forces still rages on. During Black History Month, millennials on the front lines of today's movement paused to reflect on the legacy of what many consider one of America's most revolutionary groups.

"I am so glad that it is [the Black Panther Party's] 50th anniversary and that attention is being brought to their movement. Somewhere between when I was high school and now, there's been this purposeful image of the Black Panthers as a militant group." Karen Abdul-Malik, a nationally renowned storyteller also known as Queen Nur, said.

Even at a young age, Abdul-Malik's father instilled in her the importance of black pride. As a teenager, she supported the Black Panther movement to the point of being labeled militant by high school officials. These days, she tells stories of African and African-American traditions and heritage.

"I was in high school in the 70s," she added. "I went to a school that was 1 percent black. We used to have race riots. I was 10 years old around [the time of the] Black Panther movement. It taught me that I have power. I have the power to speak, speak up for my rights. That's what the Black Panther Party taught me and it taught me to be prideful in myself. So that's what I got out of it," Abdul-Malik added.

People across the nation spent much of Black History Month acknowledging the Black Panther Party's accomplishments in celebration of its 50th anniversary. During Super Bowl 50 earlier this month, Beyoncé paid tribute to the Black Panthers during her halftime performance at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, located 40 miles from where the organization started. Her dancers sported black leather outfits, afros, and berets, the party's signature attire.

On Feb. 16th, PBS aired "The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution," a 2015 documentary about the group's inception and activist history that included commentary from former members. Celebrations also happened locally. Sankofa Video Books & Café in Northwest hosted a pre-Super Bowl



Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in 1966. Black millennials in D.C. and across the country are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the group's inception this year. / Photo courtesy of AtlantaBlackStar.com

discussion about the Black Panther Party earlier this month. Guests discussed the historical significance of the group's fight against police brutality and other social and economic issues currently affecting majority black communities.

In 1966, Newton and Seale, students at Merritt Junior College in Oakland, California, formed the Black Panther Party to patrol African-American communities and protect residents from acts of police brutality. Black Nationalist leader Malcolm X, who was assassinated the year prior, inspired much of the group's philosophies, outlined in its Ten Point program. At the height of their movement, the Black Panthers advocated for full employment, decent housing, fair court proceedings, and the exemption of black males from the military.

In their efforts to battle police brutality in Oakland, the Black Panthers took advantage of the Second Amendment. They received national attention on May 2, 1967 when members marched fully armed into the California State Legislature in Sacramento to protest against the impending Mulford Act, which would repeal laws allowing people to carry firearms.

The Panthers also gave to the community, organizing a Free Breakfast

for Children Program that spread to every city with a Black Panther Party chapter. They also provided educational enrichment, tuberculosis testing, legal aid, ambulance services, and shoes for the impoverished.

Their national recognition caused the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) to label them as the "greatest threat to national security." Through the Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), the FBI dismantled the party through violence and sabotage. Many Black Panthers died, including Fred Hampton, the Chicago Black Panther leader who was shot dead in his own home during a police raid in 1969.

Even as a remnant of the past, Chase Weddington, 24, from Charlotte, North Carolina believes the example of the Black Panther Party gives black people the strength and pride to support one another. "The Black Panther Party was a group of people that showed that collectively as a group of black people we're strong in what we stand for and we can pull ourselves together supporting the cause of trying to show that there's a togetherness of black people," said Weddington.

Abdul-Malik said she's proud that black people across the country are celebrating the Panthers this year and

acknowledging how they took care of their community and took advantage of rights guaranteed by the law.

"The Black Panther Party was purposely designed and I am so glad the story is coming out because the story shows a few things. For one, it shows what they did for the community and how they came together to serve the community," Abdul-Malik said. "Two, all they did was say 'okay, the Constitution says we have this right and all we're doing is embodying this right.' The National Rifle Association [supports] the right to bear arms, but when it came to the Black Panthers who had [used] that right, all of a sudden it's not cool."

Fifty years later, the Black Panthers' principles and ideals lives on through memoirs written by its members, hip-hop music, and black people who continue the fight against police brutality. These revolutionaries have paved a way for black people to be black and proud, and assert their black identity.

"It was something that was needed," Weddington said. "Even though we do not have The Black Panther Party today, you will always have a sense of Black Panthers inside of you if you're black. I think people think about how proud they are to be black and how they [The Black Panther Party] wouldn't break or bend or anything like that."