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GERONIMO PRATT
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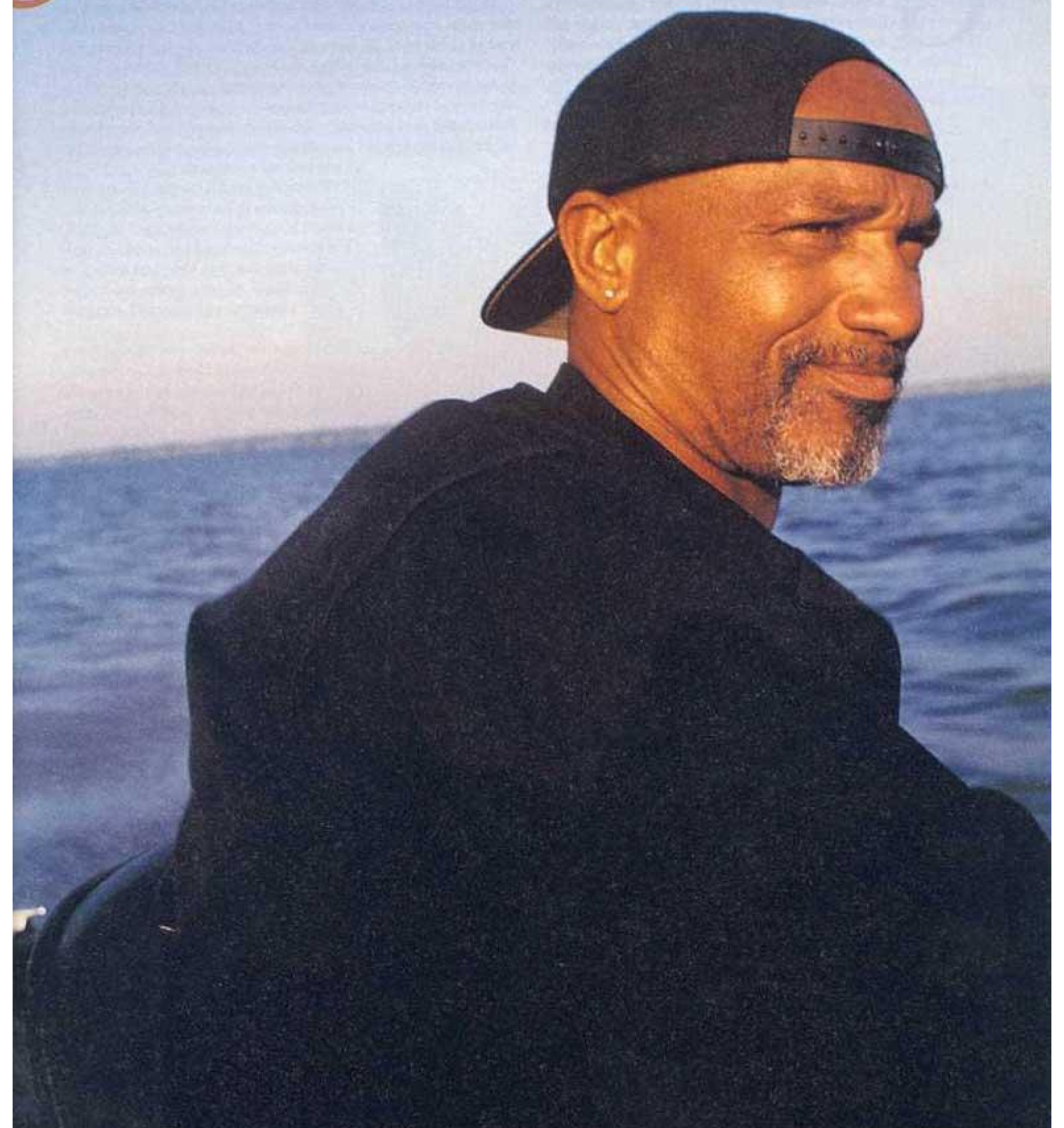
One year after his release, Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt) is still fighting for freedo

GERONIMO ji Jaga (Pratt) stands across the street from the White House waiting to hear his name. He is one of the final speakers at Jericho '98, the first major national protest to free U.S. political prisoners. America's most recently released "prisoner of war" has spent the March day greeting admirers, posing for pictures and catching up with his old Black Panther Party comrades and other activists. Kathleen Cleaver is there. So is Angela Davis. And Safiya Bukhari and Herman Ferguson, two of the event's key planners. It is a reunion of revolutionaries as much as a day of protest this spring afternoon in Lafayette Park across from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

It's closing in on 5 p.m. and many of those in Lafayette Park have been out since 8:30, when they gathered at another park — the one named for Malcolm X — and marched the 15 or so blocks to this small patch of green in the nation's capital. Then they marched around the White House with banners and signs; and someone blew a horn, just like in the Bible. In the story of Joshua and the City of Jericho, the King James version says, "the people shouted," a horn blew and the walls came tumbling down.

BY MARCIA DAVIS

– other prisoners' and his own



This movement should have it so easy.

If it is to win amnesty for the 150 or so people activists say are imprisoned because of their political beliefs, they must first convince America that these "prisoners" exist at all. Cuba, not the United States, has political prisoners — though Fidel Castro, at Pope John Paul II's request this year, released some of those claiming to be imprisoned for their political beliefs.

But "U.S. political prisoner" is not in the national lexicon.

GERONIMO ji Jaga (though he dropped Pratt years ago, it is the name by which he is more popularly known), is trying to put it there. He will give you names and dates of revolutionaries left languishing in prison cells across the country — from California to New York.

Jericho, he says, is an important initiative, an effort to free political prisoners and prisoners of war, many of those jailed at a time when America seemed at war with a generation.

Other survivors of that time have gathered at Jericho. It is a united front, a mixture of Black nationalist organizations, Native Americans, Puerto Rican movements and others, and an effort to push the issue, from what Washington politicos might call the fringe, into the mainstream of the national dialogue and debate.

Seconds before he is to speak, Pratt falls quiet. The late-afternoon sun catches the beads of sweat on the back of his clean-shaven head. A tiny diamond stud glistens in his left ear. Standing behind the makeshift stage in his baggy blue jean overalls, he looks more comfortable with his Louisiana roots than with the cause célèbre his life has become.

"I would never go on stage, but folks say 'You better get your [butt] up there,'" he jokes.

He is a soldier, not a speaker. A revolutionary, not a rap star. Still, when he steps on the stage, the crowd roars.

"This is a dream come true for many brothers and sisters who are behind those walls who for years have struggled to try to get the message out that this country does in fact have political prisoners and prisoners of war," he says, as the crowd presses closer. The sound system has begun to falter, and this crowd of hundreds — the last of a couple of thousand who participated in the event — wants to hear every word.

"...Ya'll know that we're here because the brothers in the pen said 'G' go over there. This is a necessary struggle, this is a necessary avenue." He shoves his hands deep in his pockets and raises his voice a bit.

"But I ain't never been in no White House march asking them for nothing. We take what we want and we die or go to prison in the process."

The crowd cheers again at the fiery words hurled across decades, back from a time when police were "pigs" and the revolution — which would not be televised — was right around the corner. It was the age of Black Power and beyond, a time when Black nationalism mixed with Marx and Mao, and there was a militancy so dizzying and dynamic that it swept up young lives into a tornado of ideals, ideologies and unbridled bravado. It frightened a nation, too — Whites and some Blacks alike — and sent J. Edgar Hoover into a deep and dangerous rage.

Young men and women were ready to die for their beliefs. And many did. Pratt knew them well, can call their names like it was yesterday: Bunchy and John and Fred and Mark and George and Jonathan, only 17 when he walked armed into a courtroom. He is talking, of course, of Bunchy Carter, John Huggins, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, and George and Jonathan Jackson. But they are the well-known, and there are so many others.

Too many, Pratt says, are still doing time.

At Jericho, he looks out into the crowd at the sea of signs. There is one for Ruchell MaGee, Marshall Eddie Conway and Mumia Abu-Jamal. There are signs, too, for Leonard Peltier, of the American Indian Movement, and others from Puerto Rico. And on and on.

"They fought for our freedom, now it's time for us to fight for them," he tells the crowd, riding the rhythm of his words.

What he does not say, does not waste his breath mentioning is that there is an outside chance he may again need a support committee of his own. In January, Los Angeles District Attorney Gil Garcetti appealed the ruling of Orange County Superior Court Judge Everett W. Dickey, who overturned the conviction, stating that his trial had been tainted because the prosecution's star witness, Julius Butler, had lied under oath and prosecutors had not revealed to the defense lawyers that Butler had been a police informant. Dickey ordered a new trial.

The case that landed Pratt in prison nearly 30 years ago has its roots on a California tennis court. It was early evening Dec. 18, 1968, when Caroline Olsen, a 27-year-old elementary school teacher, was slain and robbed of $18 on a Santa Monica tennis court. Her husband, Kenneth, was shot and seriously wounded.

Pratt, once the deputy minister of defense for the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles, says he was in Oakland at a party meeting at the time of the slaying. His story has never wavered. Lawyers Johnnie Cochran Jr. and Stuart Hanlon have led his defense. There are FBI documents about the need for him to be "neutralized," and he has received support from a former FBI agent, Wesley Swearingen, who says agency surveillance files that showed Pratt was indeed in Oakland at the time of the slaying were destroyed.

But the district attorney's January appeal states, "Nothing that has been learned about this case in the 25 years since it was tried, or in the 29 years since Caroline Olsen was murdered warrants a new trial. Nothing points to Pratt's innocence; everything points to his guilt."

Momentum seems to be against the appeal. In February, a *Los Angeles Times* editorial called Garcetti's efforts a "fool's errand," noting that most of the witnesses were dead — including Kenneth Olsen — or unreliable after a quarter of a century. It also notes, as it has been pointed out by others, that Pratt already has served 27 years, more time than the average murder conviction.

"Nobody's worried, 'G' isn't worried either," says Ashaki Pratt, his ex-wife and mother of his two children. "I think Garcetti is doing what everyone expected him to. Nobody is surprised."

His older brother Timothy Pratt, one of six siblings, isn't taking any chances.

"'G's case is not over," he told a crowd of nearly 400 gathered at Howard University's Law School at a rally shortly before Jericho. "G's simply been released until a decision is made. If Gil Garcetti has his way, he will do everything he can to put 'G' back behind bars. I don't trust the legal system in this country at all and until it is totally resolved I'm worried about it."

It's the morning after Jericho and Geronimo is waiting for his old friend Kathleen Cleaver. Her assignment is to deliver him to Kwame Ture, the former Stokely Carmichael of Black Power fame,

who is now battling prostate cancer. Pratt is standing in front of a mom-and-pop store at 13th and P streets in Northwest Washington, a short walk from the low-budget Travel Lodge where he has been staying the last day and a half. Many of the Jericho participants have also stayed at the hotel.

He is functioning on almost no sleep. He gave up on that the night before the demonstration, when his room had become a "revolving door," one meeting after another.

Cleaver is late, but Pratt isn't worried. His lifetime friend and fishing partner Alvin "K-Doe" Delco Sr. is with him. They grew up in Morgan City, La. together, and K-Doe remembers working with the young Pratts in their father's junk yard, separating copper from tin, brass from aluminum.

On this Saturday morning, they are leaning over the engine of a new Pontiac Grand Am, separating the past from the present.

"Me and K-Doe used to fix cars together," Pratt says excitedly. "When we used to do it, the engines were this way," he moves his fingers to indicate a vertical position. The engine now is horizontal. So much in the world has changed. "That's a nice car. I want to drive it. I have a legal license."

He is almost giddy, and for a moment he and his friend — a modest, working man who walks with a cane after a forklift injury — look like who they are: two middle-aged Black men, fathers and grandfathers, shooting the breeze under the hood of a good car.

But there is a charm and high-spiritedness that's always been there, that 'G,' as he's known, didn't let prison take away from him, K-Doe says. "He's always been like that."

Young people pick it up right away. Jericho participants leaving the Travel Lodge gather around him.

"My name is Neil," says a White kid from New Jersey, as he grabs Pratt's hand. "It's good to see you out." He introduces his two friends, both dressed in black with earrings in interesting places. Pratt shakes their hands, smiles warmly and urges them to keep up the good work.

A group of Black teenagers from South Central Los Angeles are also excited to find him there on the street.

"Hey what's that in your head, boy," Pratt says teasing one of the four teens whose hair appears to be chemically relaxed. "You know what we call that? Toxic waste. We say natural all the way."

The teenager smiles slightly. He's not really there to talk about hair. They are a rap group, Counteract, and eager to perform for one of their heroes. It's a rap simply called "Life," and they perform it on the street, eager for Pratt's approval. He and K-Doe are an enthusiastic audience.

"I feel so young myself," Pratt says later. "Most of my 20s, all of my 30s, all of my 40s, that's a lot of youth that got wasted [in prison]. But I didn't let it be wasted because it's still in me."

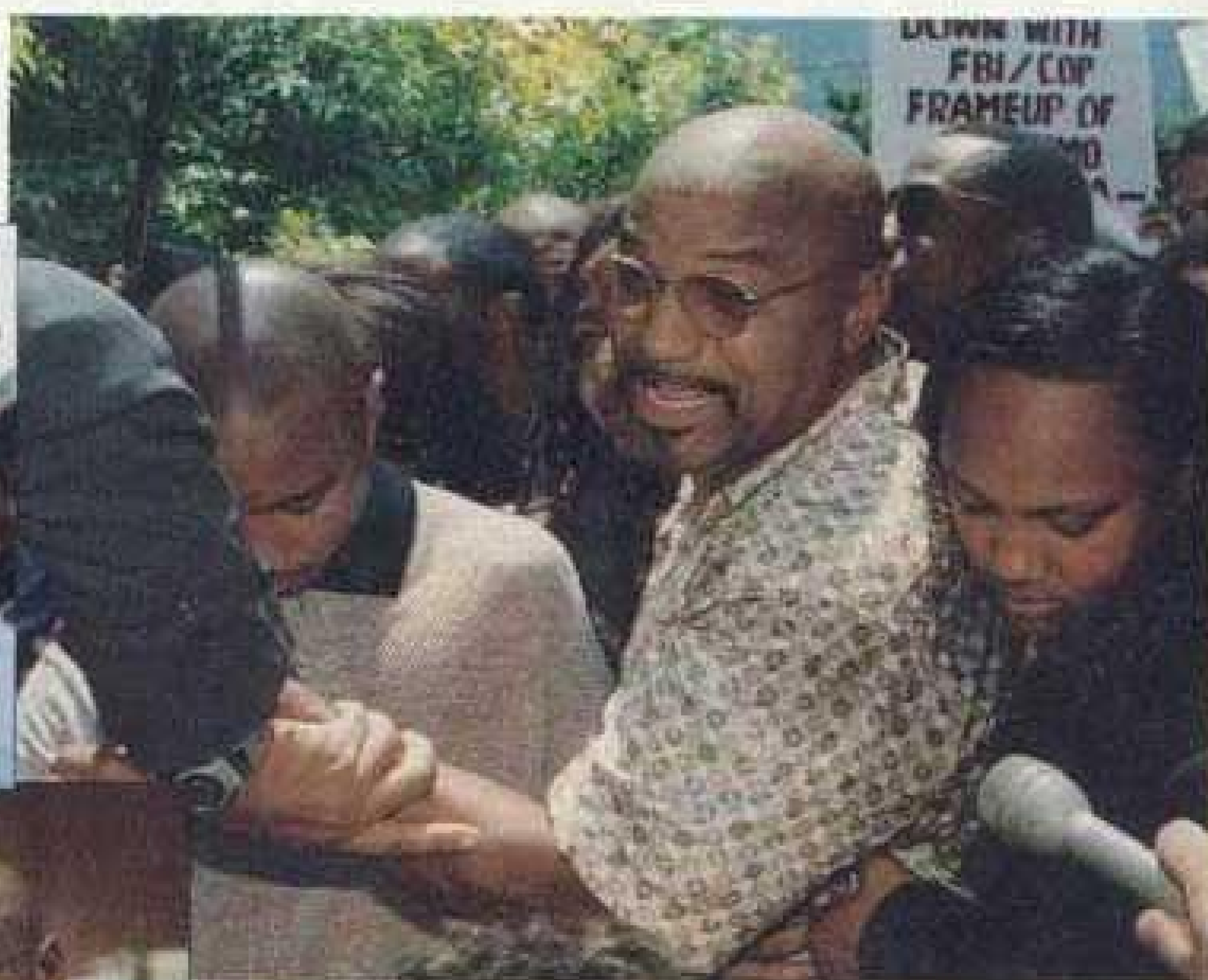
Says Daymond Johnson, 17, one of the rappers, "He was locked down but he still comes out with a smile."

When Cleaver arrives the boys perform again.

She is one of the first prominent women of the Black Panther Party, and the former wife of Eldridge Cleaver, its minister of information whose later divisions with party founder Huey Newton are a critical point in Panther history. Now a lawyer, who at times has worked on Pratt's case, Kathleen Cleaver remains willowy and youthful, her Afro replaced by long, reddish-brown braids.

During Pratt's trial, party divisions — much of it exacerbated by the FBI — kept members from testifying on his behalf. Cleaver, living in Algiers with Eldridge at the time, returned to the United States to testify. Pratt has never forgotten that.

"From the start, when I came on the scene, Kathleen was one of the ones who insisted that I take over from Bunchy when he was killed," he says. "She's always been a very, very close inspiration. After her husband left into exile, she was left with us, and we looked out for her.... Kathleen, she's always been like the bravest woman in the world. The FBI set up scenarios to make her not want to come [and testify], that made her come quicker. She's like my real sister."



Far left, Kathleen Cleaver at Jericho '98. Clockwise from top: 'G' and children, Hiroji, Shona; with lawyer, Johnnie Cochran Jr.; Ashaki and grandchild.

Says Cleaver of those difficult days and the FBI, "They would make you think people who were good Panthers were police. They would make you think that your enemy was your friend."

She and Pratt have maintained a friendship over the years. When she finally gets him out of Washington, Pratt slides behind the wheel of her worn station wagon. He eats up the road at 80 miles an hour. The 205 miles to New York fly by.

FOUR HOURS LATER, under a soft light in the bedroom of a Harlem apartment, Geronimo sits in a chair at the foot of the bed of Kwame Ture. The world used to know him as Stokely Carmichael, the dashing, daring Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee chairman who braved racist Southerners to register Black voters and rocked Northern cities with his call for "Black Power." For a short time he was a Panther, too. But before long he was leaving the United States for good, settling in Guinea, the West African country that sits between Senegal, Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. But even abroad, Hoover's FBI hounded him.

Now he is dogged by a different problem. Prostate cancer has left his cheeks sunken, his arms frail, his long, lean body weak. But his eyes are still full of fire, and his voice, that Caribbean-clipped voice, is still a strong melody.

PHOTOS: LEFT: JASON MIDDLO JOHNSON; RIGHT: AP/KEVORK DJANSEZIAN; AP/NICK UT

Ture, in a white T-shirt and dark pajama bottoms, is flat on his back. To sit up is painful, but he manages to make it without help. None of that stops him from being the most gracious of hosts, overly concerned about his guests' comfort and the food he has had prepared for them. He invites one visitor to sit beside him on the bed — the only place left to sit in this small bedroom.

"I wanted to see Geronimo to thank him for his consistency in struggle," Ture explains. "Our people are very strong in spontaneous struggle, but weak in protracted struggle. In order to do that you must have integrity, which he has a great deal of."

It is high praise from one soldier to another. Eventually, they are left alone. Despite what Ture says, there is still much to discuss, still a revolution to be won.

Later, on the street, where Cleaver has gone to move her car, she is waving her arms against the night sky, expounding on an important point about history, social change and the two friends she has left upstairs. "You see people think that leaders make change. They think that God makes change, but the reality is that people, everyday people, make change."

Hours later, Pratt settles into the corner of a steel-gray couch in a Midtown Manhattan hotel. Much of his time out of prison has been spent reconnecting with comrades like Ture and Cleaver. But this meeting has moved him more than most. "I don't often get emotional," he says. "Tonight was a special night in that we were able to revisit the many many feelings, feelings that were left alone for so many years in fear that if any touch would have been made, the enemy eyes would have misinterpreted, but tonight we were able to whisper into each other's ears and that was very therapeutic."

Big egos helped make the party vulnerable, he says. It is also one of the dangers of the current political prisoners movement. He is even worried about the unavoidable media attention he receives.

"How can I tell people about not being egotistical then show up on the cover of your magazine. There should be stories written about Jericho, about others still in prison."

HIS OWN TIME IN PRISON helped him see the issue clearly. "One thing you learn is acceptance," he says. "When I was in prison my first eight years was in the hole. You can't do too much. You're in a cell with no one but yourself. A hole in the floor for a toilet. It wasn't until I accepted it on my own that I began to understand how to do this time and not let the time do me.

"My intention was always to escape. Because I was a soldier...but you have to accept, accept, accept."

Initially, he was in the cell 24 hours a day. Eventually he was allowed out a half-hour a day. At times, he says, he refused the showers he was allowed. "Sometimes you'd get under the water and you think you are all right, then all of a sudden, scalding hot water would come out and burn you up.... There are some sick people in these prisons. You still have [that kind of treatment] today."

Eastern philosophies and the blues helped sustain him. "I had a mantra that included the blues that I grew up hearing in these swamps... there was something in those intonations that I would do that would balance and calm me, and brought such contentment that I sometimes think I could have been in a caldron, in a fire, and not been burnt. It made me understand how people could walk across hot coals and not get a blister."

He sang everybody, from Memphis Slim to Muddy Waters and Albert King. He laughs remembering Smokey Hogg's line, "I'm raggedy, but I'm right."

"You see that's the Texas blues there. These were tunes that were in my head... so when I would meditate, I would do my [meditation chants] and they would be interconnected with these bluesy songs. The philosophical sides were coming to me so strong."

He still carries those tunes in his head as he tries to move into a life beyond those prison years. Though he travels when he is called to make speeches at meetings and marches across the country, he battles to find time for himself. He worries that maybe he will be unable to make up the time with his daughter, Shona, 18, now a mother herself who lives in California. He and his 15-year-old son Hiroji, are close, he says. Hiroji and Ashaki are also in Morgan City.

He has returned there, to his roots, the place where he was once an altar boy and a high school quarterback, where he used to catch catfish in the Atchafalaya River — 60 and 70 at a time, then sell them for a dime if he had cleaned them, a nickel if he had not.

Where else do you go but home to heal after being imprisoned for more years than you've been free?

He is home, too, to be with his ailing mother, Eunice Pratt, now 95. His father, Jack, was a junkman — "like Fred Sanford," — Pratt says. His mother, a devoted Catholic, stayed home with the children. They have always been close. She has lost most of her ability to speak and write. Her youngest son walks with her twice a day when he is home, once in the afternoon and again in the evening just before bed.

"There are some slight signs of improvement," says Pratt, who wants to find the funds to help get his mother as much professional medical help as possible. He was a boy when his father suffered a stroke and lived the rest of his life as a "vegetable." He died in 1970.

His brothers and sisters were there in Morgan City to celebrate his homecoming last year. Much of his family remains in Morgan City now. But regardless of the family support, the adjustment has not been easy. The prison years have cost him a lot, he says.

It was 1975 when Ashaki agreed to a friend's request to visit a prisoner in San Quentin. He remembers her pink halter top and hip-hugger jeans. She remembers the chains around his neck, hands, crotch and ankles. They spoke through Plexiglass and mesh wire.

They were married in December 1976, though Western marriage is not something he believes in, Pratt says. "She doesn't talk about what she had to do to come and see me. The guards who despised her just because she was coming to see me," he says. The visits of family and friends were crucial to his survival.

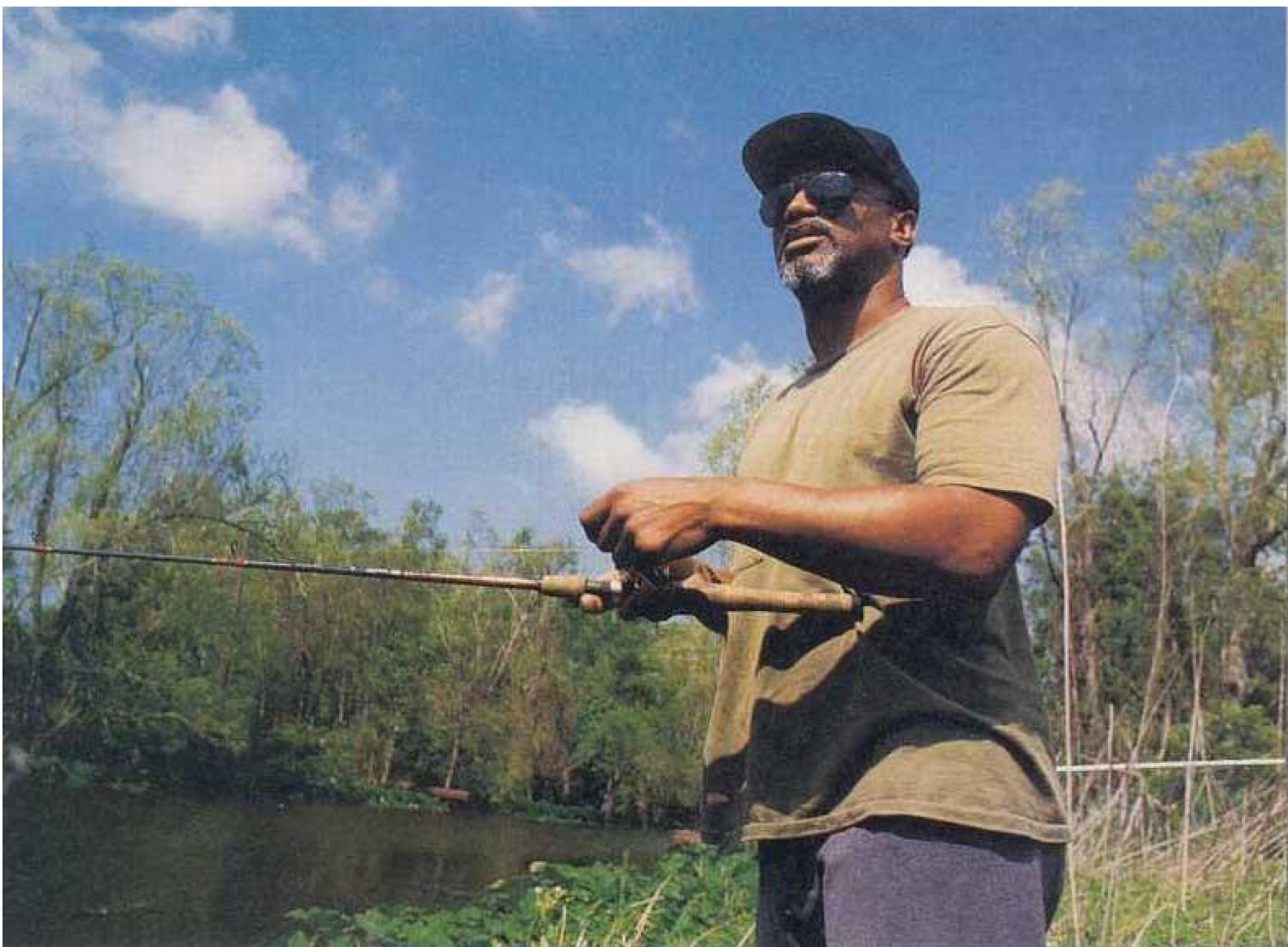
"You learn to draw strength from places where people never think you could draw strength from."

But the strain of separation was great. They divorced in 1995.

"We had about a good six or seven years and then things went down," he says. "We will always be a family. We have children, but we're not together."

He talks frankly about the problem with alcohol that Ashaki

PHOTOS: TIM IVY(2) FOR EMERGE



Pratt, left, with his mother Eunice Pratt, 95, in Morgan City, La. Above, Pratt fishing on the banks of the Atchafalaya.

developed while he was imprisoned; he also has been wrestling with the issue since he's been home.

"Guys used to come in the pen and I would watch the drug trends on the other side of the wall by whoever comes in strung out on whatever... and so I was able to get a good viewpoint of a lot of things." But not on something affecting Ashaki.

"Alcoholism was not there," he says of his prison years. "So when I got out and saw it, it just blew my mind. I was so sorry for her and especially for Hiroji and Shona, because they had been trying to explain in their own little young minds to me behind these walls what they were going through with their mother. It was torture. Not all the time. Their mother was there for them.

"I mention it openly because...this is very common among our people, and we often, as I did, misconstrue it as other things. It's a disease, a real disease. But Shaki is going to be all right."

It is not an easy topic to discuss, and Ashaki Pratt takes a deep breath before she speaks. "It's true that I'm an alcoholic. That is true," she says. "You don't go through what we've gone through without being damaged.

"A lot happened while he was in prison, and he can't forgive me for it....We've hurt each other.... Trying to have a relationship in prison, that wasn't a normal thing. There's a lot that he needs to work on and I need to work on. It's been tough.

"He has his story and I have mine," she says.

Geronimo Pratt, a decorated Vietnam War veteran, also suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Their lives are together and apart, but on this they agree: There is a lot of healing to be done.

"We've all suffered," says Ashaki. "There were times when the children were so angry with me. Now they are very supportive.... But there's so much healing to be done. We need so much help and we're not getting it.... There are so many people pushing and pulling.... Sometimes I feel as if people are too busy hero-worshiping him. It doesn't give him a chance to grow. It's not good for him."

The push and pull of the personal and political is at the heart of Geronimo Pratt's life these days.

In his prison cell he often heard the voices of his family and the "elders" and thought about the Louisiana town where he grew up — the times he and his siblings and their good friends like K-Doe spent fishing in the Atchafalaya.

Pratt, when he is not away speaking on behalf of political prisoners, spends a lot of time there now, too. Now, along with the catfish, he and K-Doe hunt bass. And peace.

Water has healing power, Pratt says.

"I try to get him out there at least once a week," K-Doe says. "It relaxes you. We go out there and he talks and I mostly listen."

"You ever read *Siddhartha*," Pratt asks at one point, referring to the 19-century Hermann Hesse novel about a young man who goes out into the world, comes to a river, where he learns about suffering, rejection and finally peace and wisdom.

He then quotes Langston Hughes' poem, "A Negro Speaks of Rivers." "My soul has grown deep like rivers," he says. " It's like he was writing that, you know, for me."■