

*The Liberations Schools, the Children's House, the Intercommunal Youth Institute and the Oakland Community School  
~written by Ericka Huggins for the  
Oakland IYI/OCS Photo Gallery*

The Oakland Community School (OCS) was one of the most well-known and well-loved programs of the Black Panther Party. Point Five of the Black Panther Party's original 1966 Ten Point Platform and Program, emphasized the need to provide an education that, among other things, taught African American and poor people about their history in the United States. To this end, the Oakland Community School became a locale for a small, but powerful group of administrators, educators, and elementary school students whose actions to empower youth and their families challenged existing public education concepts for black and other poor and racially marginalized communities during the 1970s and 1980s.

Historically, however, the educational programs of the BPP started long before the OCS with the vision of the party's leaders. As early as 1967 Huey Newton and Bobby Seale began speaking to high school youth at San Francisco/Bay Area public schools. In 1969, in US cities where there were strong BPP chapters, liberation schools, staffed by volunteer party members, opened in storefronts, churches and homes. These after school programs were created to give academic support to black and other poor youth. These community school programs created a forum for young people to explore a factual history of America and a sense of connection, community.

In 1970, in Oakland, David Hilliard created the idea for the first full time liberation day school. This school, and its attendant dormitories in Oakland and Berkeley, was simply called the Children's House. This school concept, directed by Majeda Smith and a team of BPP members became the way in which sons and daughters of BPP members were educated. Staff and instructors were Black Panther Party members.

In 1971 this school moved into a large building in Berkeley and then to the Fruitvale area of Oakland. The Children's House was eventually renamed the Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI). Under the leadership of Brenda Bay, the IYI served BPP families and a few nearby families in the Fruitvale area, maintaining a day school program and dormitory with 50 children, for two years.

In September of 1973 Oakland Community School (OCS) opened its doors at 6118 East 14<sup>th</sup> Street (International Boulevard) in East Oakland. Starting with 90 children, the school's enrollment quickly blossomed to 150 and maintained a daunting waiting list. From that time until 1982 the school, directed by Ericka Huggins and Donna Howell, was a community focal point for the conscious development of all of the innate intelligences of the young child. Serving the extended community and its children, the educators and staff of the OCS represented a mixture of individuals: Black Panther Party members, former Oakland, San Francisco and Berkeley Unified School District teachers, as well as new teachers looking for an innovative and culturally rich learning environment to work in.

OCS advanced in the Oakland community, supported by community leaders and families, and became an identifiable and replicable educational model. The school was a critical formulation of the Black Panther Party vision that students would use their education as a stepping-stone to become world changers. Every child was appreciated for her/his innate wisdom and unique talents. A guiding and global principle of the school was *The World is Our Classroom*. This principle sprung from the school's philosophy that children at OCS "will learn how, not what, to think".

Former students of the OCS remember their own experience as a happy and transformative time in their lives. They remember that though their teachers had great academic expectations for them, they were available to speak with them about anything, from curiosity about nature to the challenges of their own families. A young mother of two, speaking about her fourth grade math class at OCS, recalled that she learned to solve Algebraic questions, through a powerful math program called Project Seed. It was at OCS, one young man said, that he learned what it means to be part of a

community and be responsible for it. This understanding has remained with him throughout the years wherever he goes.

The students remember starting the day with a ten minute exercise program. Breakfast, followed by a short, school wide interactive check-in preceded the morning classes. A nutritious lunch at midday and ten minutes of meditation in the early afternoon was followed by classes for the older children and rest for the smaller ones. Dinner concluded the day and the school vans transported the children who could not walk to their homes.

The students remember their teachers and the school staff:

Lorene Banks, Melvin Dickson, Haven Henderson, Vivette Miller, Rodney Gillead, Pam Ward, Joe Abron, Linda Dunson, Amar Casey, Steve McCutchen, Tommye Williams, Carol Granison, Charles Moffitt, Frank Kellum, Adrienne Humphrey and many more. The curriculum written by Donna and Ericka with the support of Dr. William Moore was student-centered. Math, English and Spanish language instruction, Creative Writing, Physical Education, including Martial Arts, led by Sifu Steve, was the base of the class schedule. Art, Music and Drama were also a priority. These classes culminated in school-wide performances, written by students, twice a year.

Great human beings, poets, artists and activists such as Rosa Parks, Cesar Chavez, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Sun Ra and Richard Pryor visited and showered the students with their empowering and inspiring presence, Educators and graduate students visited as guest teachers and interns so that they could return to their town or state from as close as Sacramento and as far away as Amsterdam.

The value of the BPP education programs do not rest with what the early Liberation Schools, the Children's House, the IYI or the OCS were able to do between 1969 and 1982. The legacy that was passed on through the vision and philosophy of the BPP, to the IYI and OCS staff continues to live on. The legacy lives in the hearts of the children who were taught then and will continue to live on in the generations of children they touch.