

*Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2016*

Interviewee: Elbert "Big Man" Howard

Interview Date: June 30, 2016

Location: Santa Rosa, California

Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: approximately 2 hours, 13 minutes

START OF RECORDING

Female 1: From the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

DAVID CLINE: Today is June 30, 2016 and we are in Santa Rosa, California. This is David Cline, from the history department at Virginia Tech, and also working with UNC, that is the Southern Oral History Program from the University of North Carolina, on the Civil Rights History Project, which is a project of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. Behind the camera today we have John Bishop, of Media Generation and UCLA. We're also joined today in the room by Guha Shankar, of the Library of Congress. We have the distinct pleasure of interviewing Big Man, who's a veteran of the Black Panther Party. And I'll ask you if you could introduce yourself and the only time I'll coach you, a complete sentence, "I am," or "My name is," and your name, and where you were born, and when.

ELBERT "BIG MAN" HOWARD: OK. Ready? OK, my name is Elbert "Big Man" Howard, and I'm from Chattanooga, Tennessee, a native of Chattanooga, Tennessee, but a longtime resident of California, northern California, specifically. And I wound up in northern California after military service, spending four years in the Air Force, and they decided to discharge me. Or, I decided I wanted to be discharged, in California because I loved it here. I loved the people and being a young man, I was trying to find my way, and so I ventured into Oakland, and started to, started my formal education, or what I wanted out of education, in Oakland at Merritt College.

DK: Could I ask you, first, just a little bit about your childhood? So you were born in Tennessee in what year?

EBMH: Nineteen thirty eight.

DK: And can you tell us a little bit about your family there, and growing up in the South?

EBMH: Yes, well, growing up, I don't know if it was typical or not, but my father died. I never knew him. All I knew was my mother and aunts and cousins, and I think that I was pretty much raised up as in that selection by women, the aunts, my mother's sisters. And then my cousins were, I guess you could say, my brothers and sisters, really. I attended school and high school, and that sort of thing.

DK: And all the schools were segregated schools at that time?

EBMH: Yes, right. And I think long about 1954, they began to talk about integrating schools, and you know, I heard about that and I told myself I have no problems going to school with white kids, because I have my own set of friends and, living in my own set of society, so I'm not up for that, but if it happens, it happens. But I

had teachers who I thought were concerned about me, who tried to teach me things that I needed to know to survive in a hostile world. So, I had no problem not wanting to integrate, or anything like that. I went through to the eleventh grade, and my mother, being a single parent and everything, I got to growing up and becoming an adult.

I figured one of the best ways for me to help support her and to develop myself was to join the military. The air force, after conversing with a lot of my friends who had been through basic training and all of that and come back. I picked their brains as to what it was all about, and therefore I made my selection [5:00] to choose the air force to go.

DK: And what year was that, that you wanted to go?

EBMH: That was right when I joined, 1956, I think I went in.

DK: So we're a few years after the Korean War, and--.

EBMH: Oh yes, yes. I missed that one. [Laughs]

DK: Had you talked to other veterans who had been in that war, or came back?

EBMH: Yes, I had some relatives that had been to war and stuff like that, and they advised me to stay away from the army, for one thing.

DK: Why was that?

EBMH: Because the army was the catapult to going into combat, and all that sort of thing. And what I could find out about the air force is like, you go in, you go through your basic training and everything, and after that it was like a job. You went to work, you did what you were told, and you had three meals a day, a decent place to live, and you had freedom to explore the places that they sent you to. So I felt very fortunate to be sent to Europe. I got to know Paris and Stockholm and Copenhagen. I visited all

those places and met different people, and to me it was a revelation and eye-opening to meet people of other cultures, and realize that even though the people were Caucasian or white, if you want to give it a color, they were very different than the whites that I had a great fear of in the South, that I grew up with.

So that was a revelation and a learning experience, and to immerse myself and learn about their cultures, learn how to drink wine and go to art museums and be taught stuff, and you know, that was a good part of maturity, maturing, to me.

DK: What about racial dynamics in the air force itself? Say, in basic training, but then when you got to Europe, also?

EBMH: Well, it had its little nuances of segregation and even in France, which is a different environment, you had the blacks hanging together because, I don't know, our cultural similarities, or whatever. And you got along with the whites, but again, when it comes to stuff like economics, when it comes to promotions and stuff like that, you were looked over or screwed over and so you just let it go by, and enjoy yourself, you know? And learn what you wanted to learn, and survive. To a great extent, be happy without having to look over your shoulder all the time.

DK: Now, did you go in thinking that you would make a career of it, or was this just a way out of where you were?

EBMH: At the time, I thought it was kind of a way out, to learn something different and at the same time to support my mother, through an allotment. She got a check every month and I had food and shelter and everything for myself, and to me it was a pretty good deal. I just had to put up with whatever I had to put up with, and it wasn't all that strenuous. Just abide by the rules and the routines and do what you were told, and

as long as you were there in the camp, or whatever or when you got your free time, you had a chance to get out and explore, and pretty much have a good time, you know? Go to jazz clubs and converse with jazz musicians who had left the US for the freedom of Europe, to be able to practice their art, and so forth. Became an adventure, for me.

DK: Now, did you already have a love for jazz when you went over, or did that develop in Europe?

EBMH: Oh, I grew up, it was a process of development from listening to the spirituals to [10:00] old-time blues to R&B, when that came in the focus, and bebop come along. My brain, it was a progression, right on up until today. Look for the new sound, and adapt to it.

DK: So you ended up, after Europe, going back to the United States, in California, is that right?

EBMH: Yes. And I can say, I was still in the service on the air base in northern California. [Coughs] Excuse me. And I used to go into town in Oakland, and that's where I met a lot of people. You know, the very rich culture. You had blues and jazz and great soul food and friendly people, and they took me under their wing, so to speak, as a young trooper, and showed me around and stuff like that, and I enjoyed that. So when I got my discharge, I decided to take it here in northern California, and hang out in Oakland. And not really having any focus as to what I really wanted to do, I looked for a job and at that time they were very hard to come by, pretty much as they are today.

I had a resource and educational benefits from the air force, so I decided to enter into City College in Oakland, and draw on my GI Bill. Use that to sustain me until I found some type of employment and all that. And in the meantime, well, I began to study

black history and stuff like that, and I didn't have any real academic ambitions, but I always thought that I wanted to be able to write, and express myself clearly, so I took some courses in writing and stuff like that in school to try to develop writing skills. Nothing professional, just my own, when I wanted to convey something, to be able to do it.

DK: Had black history been part of your schooling at all, in Tennessee?

EBMH: No. At that time, it was not even thought of.

DK: So this was new material for you, in some ways?

EBMH: Yes. And enrolling in Merritt College, I began to associate with other students who had similar interests, and that's where I met Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. We used to, after our classes, we'd have rap sessions and talk about these things, and talk about ways of dealing with them, because we had repression going on in Oakland. Police repression. People getting killed by cops every week, and we would kick around ways of dealing with that. Try to figure out a different way of approaching it as opposed to the civil rights and the non-violence, and all that sort of stuff, because we knew what that was about, but we were trying to develop a new approach. Something progressive and revolutionary, if you will. Bobby Seale said, "I want you to meet Huey, and we're thinking of starting a new organization," and they started to develop the Ten-Point Platform and Program, which was the mandate, or if you will, that [15:00] would differentiate us from other organizations, because they had other organizations that dealt with culture, Swahili camps, learning the language, and stuff like that. We were more interested in trying to deal with combatting the ills in the community, on a progressive and a revolutionary level.

DK: So what were some of the issues at the base of the Ten-Point Platform?

EBMH: We want freedom. We want the power to determine our destiny, which was number one on the list, and we felt we were occupied by police forces. Doing the bidding of the rich politicians. So, we began to study things like the writings of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong. Of course, Malcolm X and all the revolutionary people around the world, and we started to cherry-pick some of their philosophies and ways of thinking and apply it to what we wanted to do. Because we fully realized that we were not in China, we were not in Cuba, and we could emulate anything that those people did, but we had to come up with our own approach, utilizing what we could from these great people. That's where we got a lot of our philosophy from.

DK: Could I ask you to tell me just a little bit more about young Bobby Seale and young Huey Newton? What they were like when you first met and started hanging out with these guys?

EBMH: Well, with Bobby, I hung more with him than with Huey. Huey was always in and out, so to speak, but he was, to me, very knowledgeable about the justice system because he had been through it, and whenever I had a case or some problem with the police, I could usually go to Huey and say, "How should I approach this?" And going to court, and stuff like that, too. He knew how I should do that, and so I got some advice from him, but we never hung together, except for having meetings as the organization began to come together and grow, you know. Saw more of him then, but Bobby, to me, had a great skill for organizing. He had great ideas and at the time, early on, a lot of them seemed very far-fetched to me, but I've always been a listener. Try to internalize what I'm hearing and put it in the locker for later references.

But we would get together with other kids on campus and we'd sit down and we would go back and forth about approaches, and ways of solving problems, and so forth, and in the meantime, Bobby said we're starting a new organization, and then we began to work on that Ten-Point Platform and Program. And Richard Aoki, who was an Asian who pretty much grew up after he got out of that damn camp that they put his family in, he began to live and associate with the other poor and oppressed people in Oakland. I mean black people. So, he used to hang. He would work with Bobby on that Ten-Point Platform and Program, and [20:00] it started to come together. Our ideas and so forth, and we began to talk more and more with more and more people, and they'd say, "Yes, I can relate to these ideas," and so forth. "What do we do next?" Come together pretty much like that.

DK: Was there, I think, a particular incident with the police that sort of pushed you towards the group a little bit more, and--.

EBMH: Yes. Yes.

DK: Tell us about that?

EBMH: Because, as I said, I enjoyed going out to Oakland to the blues and jazz clubs and so, and one night I was out at a club and Don Barksdale was the guy that run the club, a black ex-basketball player, and I think it was Lou Rawls, when he was first coming on and getting popular, went out to see his show. Me and my date--and when it was over, we were leaving, and it was drizzling outside so I told my date, "Wait here, I'm going to go and get my vehicle, and I'll come back and pick you up right here in front of the club." So I pull up in front of the club, waiting for her to come out, and the cops come up and start writing tickets. Well, they wrote me a ticket and I looked at

behind me. They didn't write the guy behind me one, and the person ahead of me. I took offense, because I had a brand new red pickup truck.

I protested. I asked them, "Why the hell am I getting a ticket and you didn't write these other people any?" And they said something smart and I said, "Well, fuck this, I'm taking off," so I got in my truck and took off, and then here comes the gang. Box me in, and took me and my pickup to jail. So, from then on I said, "Well, I got to get involved with something that combats this kind of crap." And this is what Huey and Bobby were talking about, so I went to court and I asked Huey to advise me and stuff. And he went to court with me and the judge says, well, something that offended me, and something like, "He's probably guilty, but I'm going to dismiss it." In the meantime, the cops were sitting there in the court laughing and shit. I got highly pissed off about that.

Anyway, they dismissed the case so after that I left and I took to--very angry--and I took to driving around in my pickup, where I had a rack put in the back of it, and I put a legal shotgun in the back of it, so I rode around and I'd say, "Well, I'm as good as some of these rednecks that ride around like this, and if I'm ever confronted I'm going to defend myself. Period." So luckily, nothing happened, and I didn't have to do that, but I continued to do that. As I joined the Party, I continued to do that.

DK: And you all had researched and were aware that it's perfectly legal, right, to--.

EBMH: Oh, yes. Yes. And on the way to take Huey home after the court date, I asked him about the legalities of carrying a weapon in a car, and he schooled me on that. That's why I was able to do that. I knew that it was perfectly legal, and it was a 12-gauge shotgun that I purchased, and went from there.

DK So, what were some of the first things that you all did?

EBMH: In terms of what?

DK: Of work that you did with the Party? I think patrolling [25:00] the police themselves, was that one of the things that you started to do?

EBMH: Oh, yes, that happened a little bit later on when we began to get more members and we began to acquire more firearms, and stuff, and once again, consulting with Huey, he knew the law, because he studied law and stuff, and knew that we could do that legally. So, we began to do that at night, on the weekends, when we knew cops were patrolling our community. And so we decided that we would get out and patrol them and not to confront them, necessarily, and engage in any battle, but to teach people in the community that they had a right--they had rights, and we would advise people when they were stopped by the cops. We'd get out and observe the cops so-called performing their duty.

We were on the scene. They were not abusing people. They became more concerned with these young black people with guns, and so we would advise people that are being arrested to go ahead and take the arrest, don't resist, and we're going to follow you down to the courthouse and we're going to bail you out. And we did that, and people began to wonder, who are these guys? Why would they be doing that? As a result, they'd drop around to the Panther office to find out more about it and we began to gain recruits. More people to join the Party. That was building up the organization, with people coming in, and like I said, the attitude of many young people coming in was that was the emphasis on the Black Panther Party, that we would confront cops and be ready to deal with shootouts, and so forth.

But when they'd come in, we'd say, "No, we're going to have political education class, it's on such-and-such a night." If we hadn't scheduled one, give us your phone number and we'll call you and tell you when we're going to hold it, and we began to teach revolutionary principles. More about what we were about, and it went from there. We weren't in the business of getting anybody killed at that point, but at the same time, we were determined to defend ourselves no matter what. We were determined to get, [if] any of our members [were] arrested, if they went to jail, we were going to do everything we could to get them out as quick as possible. And so, of course, that pissed the authorities off, too. If you're not creating animosity or hate, then you're not doing very much against the system or the people that propagate, or the repression.

DK: So for you, personally-- you alluded to this some and you talked about the incident at the night club, but for you, personally, what did you want to change? What was animating your--

EBMH: Everything. [Laughs] I thought I learned a lot from Bobby and stuff in terms of dealing with the ills of the community. Like the Denzil Dowell incident in Richmond. Well, these people, I would say, had taken notice of the Black Panther Party, so his family, Denzil Dowell's family, wasn't getting any answers from the authorities. And they were told that they were justified in shooting this kid in the back [30:00] as he ran and tried to climb a fence. And his mother knew, and told us that he couldn't possibly jump a fence because he had some injury. And so we exposed that as a lie and we had a demonstration in front of the Richmond courthouse to protest that, and at the same time we developed--we talked about creating our own news media.

That's one of the first things we did, we mimeographed a sheet off explaining what happened to Denzil Dowell and the lies that his family was told, and so forth, and we took that in the Richmond community and we'd give it out, and we asked people to come to a rally. We did that, and we asked them, you got a quarter or a dime or something you want to donate so that we can continue to produce information like this? Fine. If not, if you would, anyway, we'll give it to you anyway. So, that was one of the first organized rallies that we had. By the way, we were armed when we went to that rally, and that, of course, drew the attention of the police and all that, but it was part of the growing process.

DK: Pause.

Guha Shankar: I think your throat's getting a little dry again.

EBMH: Thanks.

GS: Yes, sir.

John Bishop: Guha, could you bring water over here?

GS: Yes, absolutely.

JB: OK, are you ready?

DK: Mm-hmm.

JB: And we're going.

DK: You said you were armed at that rally, so I wanted to ask if you could tell me just a little bit about the symbolic power of that, of the gun for you.

EBMH: The symbolic power was that the people in the community saw that, and they saw that we weren't rushed or put upon by the authorities because we were there ready to defend ourselves. And in essence, to defend the community, if necessary,

so we had a demonstrated determination to do that, and the people saw that, and so that, once again, drew people to us. We began to get more requests of support, whatever, and whenever we would call a rally, bunches and bunches of people would show up without fear, and with enthusiasm. Willing to help, and help us in whatever endeavor we were getting into, but donations for this, that, and the other.

We needed an office and we had to pay rent for an office to have a focus in the community where people could relate to, rather than just roaming group of young men with guns. And have a place for people to come if they wanted to join, or to come and give us a small donation, what have you. So, we were in the community. We were visible in the community, so it kind of started there.

DK: And that first mimeographed sheet that you had at that rally, was that the birth of the Panther newspaper?

EBMH: Yes, yes, because Bobby Seale said something when we were at the rally. Said, "We need our own organ, we need our own news facilities," so [35:00] we come up with a thing we were going to mimeograph and then I did the text to it and Bobby Seale did the graphics. Drew the panther on it and all of that. We gave that out and that was really the beginning of our news outlet.

DK: And you were over the newspaper, from the beginning, or--.

EBMH: Yes. [Laughs] Somehow, we were all young and feeling our way, as I said, so I guess that's why I had a little bit of thing. Because I had written little quips for different little radical publications in the community, and Bobby said, "Well, you can be our first editor. You can be editor of the paper, and we're going to do some progressive moves and develop this thing, and you can be the editor and I would say,

well, I don't know much about being an editor, but that fierce determination to do whatever was necessary, I said, well, "I'll do it." So, it started out and people [would] write articles and I would read them, through whatever changes in it I saw, I determined that it would be more readable and so forth when we printed it, so it kind of started there. I said, "Well, OK, I'll do whatever's necessary."

Eventually Eldridge Cleaver got out of prison and he was a best-selling author with his book, *Soul on Ice*, and we said, "Well, we're going to make Eldridge the editor." I said, "Fine," and he'll be the minister of information and you be the deputy minister of information. Whatever.

DK: So, you'd had the minister title, up to that point--.

EBMH: Yes, first.

DK: --minister of information. And did that mean giving speeches as well, or things like that?

EBMH: No, that came later. It just was dealing with putting out information, public information in the form of pamphlets, or whatever. We needed a steady stream of information going out, so I would write some articles, Bobby would write some articles, and other people. We did what we thought was right, to put out some cohesive information to the community. But I never gave too much importance to a title. I just wanted to do the work. I just wanted to make, do something to stick a fucking fork in the system. So, from there, speeches came later as, more of the main speakers went to jail, and all of that. Other people had to step up, and I had never considered myself a public speaker or anything, but once again, that old hard-nosed determination said I was going to do whatever the hell it took to advance this vehicle we got going, so I took a shot

at it and turned out all right, so. So I [40:00] keep doing it, keep doing it. The more you do it, the more coherent, I guess, I was. [Laughs] But that's the way that started.

JB: I better break.

[Recording stops and restarts.]

JB: OK, we're back on.

DK: So, just before we leave the newspaper, how important do you think that paper was to the Party, both in terms of keeping money coming in but putting the message out, recruiting?

EBMH: It was vital. It was very important. It was vital because we were combatting the *Oakland Tribune* and all their negative shit that they put out about us, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, because they were, just printed everything negative that they could. So, we knew people in the community bought those papers and stuff, and we said we got to put out things that were the truth. When some incident goes down or some issues are in the community, we're going to tell the truth about it and we're going to put it out to the community. It was very necessary, and as the Party grew across the country and our chapters and stuff began to develop, we would have--we would require--that our chapters and branches send us information about incidents in their community that would concern their community, and also pictures.

So they would send that stuff to the central headquarters in Oakland, and I would look at it and I would read it and edit it, make changes or whatever, and then we would print it in the newspaper. And then we would distribute that newspaper back out across the country so the people in the community could look at it and see something about what's happening to them in it, and so that's what made it more popular. So we were

beginning to get demands weekly, and it also brought in revenue. Not a lot of money, because we would sell the paper for twenty-five cents, and Party members who didn't have any income would go out and sell that paper and they'd make fifteen cents off of it and ten cents would go into reproduction of the paper, and help fund activity of the Party. That was kind of the way that worked.

DK: It kept people, kept your Party members, going too.

EBMH: And then people, we'd go throughout the community--and I'm sure it happened all across the country--we would be in the beauty shops, barber shops, restaurants, wherever, and told people, "Here, you should read this paper and if you don't have a quarter, we're going to give it to you. Here, you need to read this." So people began to expect that paper every week. They'd look for us, and that's how it developed, over 250,000 copies printed every week. It entailed a lot of work that the Party members would spend twenty-four hours a day putting it together until we got it out and took it to press. So it was definitely a vital part of the Party's program.

DK: And were you involved in going and laying it out and getting it printed, and that kind of thing?

EBMH: Yes. Once again, it was a learning process for me, because I'd never laid out a paper, but we had people that had done it before. Some people, very instrumental, like Emory Douglas, knew how to lay out and definitely produce the artwork for that paper, so people loved that artwork, that he had something different every week, something different and relevant. So you could look at it and say, "I can relate to this," and so we learned, and many [45:00] Party members who had skills contributed. They knew and they'd come in and they'd stay up all night, if necessary,

laying out that paper. Getting it right. We had trouble getting someone [to] print it, because the system told people, "Don't print that paper, it's anti---anti-American, it's communist," whatever they told people, so we had a hard time finding somebody to print it for a while.

I went up to Berkeley and talked with Max Scherr was his name, who ran the *Berkeley Barb*, and told him that we were having problems getting our paper printed. He said, "Well, we print our paper on some days of the week, so after that, bring your stuff up here and you can print it here, you can get it done." So that was a revolutionary step, as far as we were concerned, and this was a little hippie guy in the community, and that not only helped us get our papers done, but it also provided a coalition and a solidarity with other groups of people. Because we didn't have any phobia about him being a hippie, or whatever, because he was a progressive guy, letting us deal with getting our paper out.

Pretty soon, some of the big printers got wind of how much money was in it and how much we were making, so they opened up and let us do it. They didn't like it, because the FBI told them not to do it, but they knew that we would get on them and print some negative shit about them if they didn't. So rather than fight that bad publicity and get pounced on by the government, they would allow us to do it because it was our, I don't know, Fifth Amendment right, or whatever. But they would tell their people, "Don't help them with anything." And we would be in their office laying out our paper, but then we had people who weren't sure where we were coming from. And a guy would come by and look at us, look at the desk we were working on, articles, and say---he

wouldn't let his boss see him do it--but he said, [whispers] "Why don't you put that down there? Looks better." That was progressive, you know?

And so eventually, we began to loosen that up, and was able to mass produce our paper. We had massive distribution, and we had to fight the government, because the government told the airlines that they should double charge us, and do whatever to make it hard for us to ship our papers, so it was always some hardship, but we overcome it. We were determined to go around it and stuff, and we were able to get that paper to people on a weekly basis, and it began to not only grow nationally, but we would begin to get people from Asia, from Japan, from the African nations, wanting that paper, and so our distribution would broaden, really broaden. Right, today, I think, if you found one somewhere, it would cost you over \$100. But anyway, our friend, Billy X, got a collection.

DK: You mentioned early on, working on the [50:00]--I just want to follow up on this--working on the Ten-Point Program, and Richard Aoki. What happened to him?

EBMH: He went, well, in the beginning, as we began to develop the organization and began to build solidarity with various groups, we began to see we had a large Asian community in Oakland, a large Filipino community, as well as the Mexican Americans and Latino community, so things began to really develop. We told Richard, "Why don't you organize in the Asian community?" So he began to go up to Berkeley and get involved with the Red Guard, I believe, was the organization up there, and he did a great job in organizing. He would report back to us what was going on and stuff, so that's where he spent most of his energy. That's where we wanted him and where we needed him.

So we had, of course, a Puerto Rican community. We began to build solidarity with the Young Lords, and the American Indians Movement, and created a great coalition of American oppressed people, and of course that raised the anger of the FBI and the established politicians. But it had to be done. And Richard, he was an ally to the end. I could be somewhere, somebody asked me, "Can you get somebody from the Party, an ex-Party member, to come down and participate in this, that, and the other?" I'd pick up the phone and call Richard, and for me he would always participate and comply, right up until his health started failing. We were friends. We participated in different rallies and gatherings and so forth, and matter of fact, when he knew that he was not going to make it any longer, he sent me--or he gave me, at a meeting we were at--gave me a big pack of slides of different things, and so forth.

But he was a great member, a great ally, and a great guy. I love Richard. Some writer here, a few years ago, wrote something negative, calling him an FBI informant or something, and I took--the guy was trying to sell books, but anyway I took issue with that and I wrote a blistering critique of it, and he finally decided he wasn't going to have any benefit from that, so he dropped it. Rosenfeld was his name. That was something to irritate you.

JB: [Inaudible.]

DK: Yes, I'm getting there.

JB: [Inaudible.]

DK: So, tell me more about [him?]? So, can we pick up again--so, you were, as the editor of the paper [55:00] and then Eldridge came in. So, what did you, to move on, to focus on, at that point, your own journey in the Party?

EBMH: I had a billion things to do. So, we had other people step in, because Eldridge, he would write an article now and then, but he became a popular spokesman, and so he was always somewhere doing his thing. I had people come in and take responsibility for the paper. I had other things to do, because as many members started to get busted across the country and going to jail and everything, I was selected, if you will, to go and deal with that. I began to crisscross the country going to different penitentiaries and jails to see about Party members, to see what they need, if they had any needs, and also see what the legal situation was, and see how I could help with their legal defense, talk to lawyers and help lawyers, and what things that they needed.

[I] also talk[ed] to people in the particular community, wherever these people were in jail, and begin to try to organize defense committees in the community to deal with getting that person out of jail. I was quite busy with that for a long, long time. That was my job for a long time, and I would go from Denver to New Orleans, wherever. We had people locked up and stuff. Some of the big issues came up when they were framing Bobby Seale and all, and Ericka, and all those people in New Haven. I had to pick up and move to New Haven, and work on those issues. Lot of people didn't--wasn't public knowledge what I did, in newspapers and all that stuff, and that was fine with me because I had my hands full dodging the authorities and sidestepping traps that they might be setting for me, and moving and doing what I needed to do.

DK: Can I ask a little bit more about that particular period, when the Party was really being targeted and there was a lot of pressure on you, and you said you had people incarcerated, obviously, so how were people dealing? How were you dealing with all of that?

EBMH: Well, I like to think that I relied a great deal on people in the community. Because we had friends in different places, not a lot of friends that were public knowledge or anything like that. We had people that would contribute money for bail, and things of this nature, and if I was in a community and they needed more community support, I would engineer survival programs, if you would. Help with free breakfast programs, help them set up a free clothing program in their community, and get people to contribute to those things and as a result, it began to get community support behind these incarcerated Party members, to try to get them out of jail and get them through the court system and get them free. So it entailed a lot of different things.

DK: Was that high-stress times, [1:00:00] for you, trying to stay one step ahead of the feds and all of that?

EBMH: Of course, but I didn't bother about that, because I, in doing what I did, I always sidestepped the obvious bullshit that would get you busted. I didn't leave myself open to any of the traps that they laid. So, for instance, in New Haven, I got very little sleep because in the house I would stay at. They would telephone all night long and, with shit like "I've got cash," or weapons, "I've got some dynamite," and all this shit, and I never responded to it. Just hang up the telephone, because it was all entrapment, and you begin to know these things, and you just don't deal with them.

DK: These would be people calling pretended to offer these things to the Party?

EBMH: Yes. I knew it was the FBI and Hoover's people. I knew that, so I didn't accommodate any of it. I [would] just hang up the phone, or leave it off the hook, get a couple hours sleep, and get up and start strategizing on what needed to be done, who I needed to see, who I needed to talk to. It's a matter of endless meeting with people

to explain crap and explain what our programs were, and why they should support it, and stuff like that, you know? You just had to keep going.

DK: So, since you--I wanted to ask you this question--since you were travelling around the country in this way, are there certain--were there certain chapters of the party or certain places that most people don't know about that are sort of dear to you, or interesting--that you would like people to know about, places where the Panther Party existed and did good work?

EBMH: There are a lot of different situations, like down in Memphis, that was a group of young college kids that called themselves the Invaders. I think they picked that up from some TV program or something, but they were trying to do something in the community, you know? They heard about us and knew about us and we got with them and started explaining our programs to them, and suggested things that they should be doing and everything, and they got with that program and we eventually inducted them and steadily integrated, and they became a chapter of the Black Panther Party. So it was a matter of communicating with people and giving a little advice where needed, or whatever and learning what their ambitions were, what they could contribute, and making suggestions and so on.

Building, I guess you'd call it solidarity. Communicating with, like I said, the Latino community, who were doing things in their community, and we forged solidarity with them. As well as the anti-war movement. All that. Just a matter of becoming involved with anything that was oppressing people. And give a damn about the consequences, who cared. Go to jail? So? You go to jail and use that as an equipment tool, because every time that I went to jail, I'm sitting on a bunk talking to people about

the Black Panther Party, and explaining reasons, political reasons, of why they're sitting in jail. So when they got out of jail, they'd come around the Black Panther Party office, and [1:05:00] so you never quit.

We had people in prison, like George Jackson, who got murdered because he was an organizer of the prison system, nationwide, still considered a hero by incarcerated prisoners around the country. So, we just never stopped, and that's why they wound up, they couldn't bribe us out, they couldn't get people to not support us and all that, so it came right down to outright assassination and killings to wipe us out. A whole campaign, but that was why, because we had die-hard determination that we were going to do whatever it took to free our community, and deal with the problems of oppression. So it was quite a phenomenon, you know?

And some of the things that people don't know about it--don't talk about it, there's all these young people that come to the Party. Some of them came with heavy issues. From things that happened in their lives or didn't happen in their lives, and the Black Panther Party changed their perspective on things. We changed them. We had people come in that had been to jail, been to prison; they had major issues. And we politically educated them and showed them how, and why, these things were happening, and as a result they joined the Party and the Party's philosophy, and some of them went to prison and stayed in there forty years, and they never lost that perspective about what the Party was all about.

We took young people who were--didn't have anything to do but hang out and get into trouble, and we recruited them and taught them how to cook breakfast for children. They wanted a gun to go out and kill somebody but no, no, no, no, no. You come in, you

go in there, with some sister in the kitchen, and learn how to cook grits and eggs, and get up and go and serve breakfast for school children. You go out when--during the middle of the day, you got nothing to do--you go out and try to get donations for this program, try to get people to donate clothing for our clothing program. We gave them something to do, and we changed their attitude and people don't realize that some of these kids--we prevented them from crawling through their windows in their houses and taking their shit, and instead of doing that, they had some progressive work to do, some things to benefit the community. People don't realize that. They call it a bunch of thugs and crooks and this and that and the other, but we changed people's attitude. We changed their agenda in life.

DK: They had a lot of these--a lot of people had a lot of reasons to be angry, right?

EBMH: Yes.

DK: So they would come with this anger.

EBMH: Yes. So, we changed a lot of that. We channeled that into something beneficial to the community, and I think that was a major achievement, and people don't realize that, because we did not fill up the prisons with dope addicts and criminals. We didn't do that. We saved a lot of them from that fate, by giving them something to do, giving them a place to live, providing food for them, and the payoff for doing that was them going out into the community and doing stuff for people. [1:10:00] I'd tell them, "You live in the community. Go down the street and see a lady's grass, and you cut it. Cut it, and don't take a dime for it. Don't take anything for it. As soon as you see something come up and an issue come up where the Black Panther Party's supporting

some program, go vote for it." That would be payment enough for us. So as a result, people began to understand what we were about, and at the same time it caused the authorities to hate us more.

DK: So why were you so threatening to them, do you think, to the powers that be?

EBMH: Because we, first of all, exposed them. We can feed 250,000 children free food every single day that school's in session. Why can't the government do anything about it? If we can test people for sickle cell anemia, which is a disease that they pretty much ignored, if we can establish free health clinics where people could go and be tested and engage in preventative medical care, why couldn't the government do it? Things like that. It's what caused them to hate us. So, just on and on, all these survival programs, free. Education. We started liberation schools and people threw up their hands because their kids, they say, couldn't be educated and going to put out on the street and be candidates for going to jail or prison, we had liberation schools. Get them young and get them in and taught them relevant education, something that dealt with their reality. They were teaching them to read. Stuff like that.

At the same time, we were recruiting people who had the skills to teach, who were fed up with the bureaucracy of the educational system and who would come in and help us with these liberation schools, teach these kids. And we had some great successes. We got some kids running around now who were very appreciative that they went to the Panther school, and so, stuff like that. The government was very uncivilized about.

DK: And the Party, was that you went--you answered a call to, or an invitation to come to Japan?

EBMH: Yes.

DK: Can you tell us a little bit about how that arose and what that--.

EBMH: Yes, well, during that period there were massive student rebellions and protests and along with the anti-war movement, and so forth, so we had some Japanese students who got wind of the Party and what we were about and they wanted someone to come to Japan and they were very persistent. Kept after us. Finally, leadership said, "Ah, Big Man, you're going and take Roberta with you." And so, we took that long flight to Japan and--.

DK: And that's Roberta Alexander that you're referring to?

EBMH: Yes. And we got there not speaking the language or anything, and we hooked up with an English-speaking person that was living in Japan who helped us a lot, but more than that, these people wanted us to speak to the student protestors and I've never seen so many people at a rally. It was like I said. It was an anti-war rally, railing against the Vietnamese War, and [coughs] excuse me, and the students over there, they had [1:15:00] a, I guess, a repressive system where the younger people were trying to break out of that, and they were rebelling against their historical culture, where you couldn't talk back to elders. They had no say, and so they were breaking out. The students were closing down universities all over the place, and so we were introduced to some of the, I guess, more radical organizations and people, and they had us go around to different provinces and meet people, and attended these big gatherings, like that.

So Roberta and I, we hung in there, all at the same time being followed by the, I guess, Japanese version of the FBI. They were under the FBI's instructions to follow and keep tabs on us, I guess. We know that. They weren't as slick as the Americans. We'd

be walking down the street and they'd be following us and I'd tell Roberta, "Let's make a quick stop, and turn around, quick stop and turn around." And these guys were acting like they weren't following us. It was comical, you know? [Laughs] We had some fun with that.

And they followed us everywhere, and we went to a lot of different cities. It was an experience, but we hooked up with [a] Japanese filmmaker. I never forget his name. Mr. Ogawa. He had a film company. He made, I guess documentaries, or whatever, you know. And he sponsored us going to different places. And it was an experience. I don't know, I guess we spent a month there or more, and it was something else. Of course, we were in all the papers. I had no idea what they said, but our pictures were all over the place. We were treated quite well. So, when time comes to leave, Roberta got to come home, but they told me, "You're going directly to Sweden," after that, so they wanted me to go there and work with the support committees that had developed. We had people that developed support committees in Denmark and Sweden, so I went there and of course paid visits to Paris, and went into Germany and spoke with a lot of GIs that were serving there that had our paper and knew about us, and wanted to hear about what was going on in the country, and wanted to know about the Party and stuff like that.

We went to one base. I forget where it was, but anyway in the city, and their base commander this army base, knew we were coming, and he blacked out the base. We were getting there in the evening, at night, and the GIs had [1:20:00] decided that they were going to host us, or something, but the base commander cut out all the power. No lights at all. I hear this thump thump thump as we were standing out on the street talking, and around the corner here come this formation of GIs. They say, "Base commander

heard you were coming and he called a blackout, so if you don't mind, come on, we'll go to this local village, and we can sit down and talk. We want to talk to you." So we did that.

We went and talked most of the night, and they wanted to know what was going on in America and what the Black Panther Party was all about. They got our paper and knew something about us, so they wanted to know more. So that was [a] really good experience, to sit down, and of course we talked about our feelings about the war and why they should rebel against it and shouldn't participate in it and so on. So that was--

DK: How were they feeling about things?

EBMH: They were in accordance with what they had picked up from the Black Panther Party. Matter of fact, they were forming some kind of organization of their own. [Laughs] In relation to that, and of course that didn't sit well with their commanding officer and so forth, but it was a great thing to see so far from home. Black GIs, got no business fighting the Vietnamese. It was good to talk to them.

DK: So you served as a kind of international ambassador for a while, and then you headed back home?

EBMH: Yes. Yes. I worked with those support committees and they set up speaking engagements all over the place, at schools and colleges and so forth. I spoke about the meetings. Exchange and the money wasn't that great, but they financed our travel and stuff while we were in their area, and so forth, but we stayed pretty busy going around to these colleges and universities and so forth, in Sweden and Denmark and I think we went up to Finland, I believe. It kept us pretty busy. I know that at one point Bobby Seale had got put in jail in New Haven. He'd been extradited to New Haven or

whatever but anyway he was under the charge of murder of Alex Rackley, and they sent me a message. "You need to come home right away. We need you once on the paper and also to help organize and do something to save Bobby," or whatever. I was very anxious to get back home when I got wind of that. What the hell? I came back and I had to move to New Haven and start dealing with all of that.

DK: And were you there during that whole time that he and Ericka were in prison?

EBMH: Yes.

DK: So that was fourteen months, or eighteen months?

EBMH: Yes. So we dealt with a lot of people, had a lot of people come in for support. Daniel Berrigan and Dr. Spock [1:25:00] and all people like that, we got to come to New Haven and have a big rally. I think I have a picture, some of it, up there, maybe, I don't know. But anyway, we had to generate support and on a daily basis, and people in New Haven were fighting that, and they thought things were going to explode. We said stuff like, "The sky's the limit," and nothing better not happen to Bobby Seale or New Haven would be in ashes. Rhetoric. [Laughs] Scared the hell out of them people in New England, though, and so you had people like Kingman Brewster at Yale. He said, "Revolutionaries can't get a fair trial up here," or whatever, so the judge and courts went through their routine under pressure from the FBI and the local law enforcement, who they rule, and so on.

Then they thought that the best thing they could do was get rid of this flock, get rid of it, they said, get it out of our nice, pristine New Haven community. Before something bad happened and get Yale burned down. [Laughs] So I think that had a lot to

do with the judge's decision to get rid of this case, because he didn't want to be responsible for any mayhem that might come about. Man.

DK: So after that, after New Haven, how much longer were you in the Party?

EBMH: Well, after the trial and everything, I was getting ready to come back to California and come home, and I get a telephone call and there's some more crap. Attica had exploded and the inmates had asked for the Panthers to come up and negotiate the peace, the settlement, or whatever, of that, and they told me Bobby Seale is coming, so don't go nowhere, he'll be coming through. And we want you to go with him to Attica, so we went up to the prison and went through all of that and talked with attorneys up there. We were trying to do something, and the prison warden and those people were hopeful that we would be able to quell it and all of that, but as a result, Rockefeller wasn't having it, and one thing that could've saved that explosion was for him to just show up, or say he was going to show up. And he, I guess he was getting ready for re-election or something, and he had a platform on being tough on crime, some crap like that, and so he refused to come, he refused to talk to the inmates, or make any concessions.

He pretty much hung the situation out to dry. A lot of people lost their lives without—needlessly. Didn't have to happen. So, we were there and I think after we went into the prison and listened to the inmates, the people that were occupying the yard and all of that, I think Bobby told them, "Well, I need to go and confer with Huey, the leadership of the Party, to see what we can do."

DK: You were able to go inside the prison during the occupation?

EBMH: Yes. And it was kind of a disheartening thing [1:30:00] to walk out on that yard. People were going, "Hey, Big Man." A few days later, people were dead. Just shit that take a strong heart to deal with it, but anyways, kill all those people, and to see how pitiful the families of the guards were. Before we went in we were outside the prison and there's people begging. "Please, please do something. Because my loved one is in there." And then when you go in there you see these guards that, the prisoners had made the guards change clothes with them, and they're sitting out there in the yard in front of a fire, and they're looking defeated and scared, and you look at that shit and you kind of take that away with you.

Then the next day, Rockefeller gave the order to take back the prison, and they just openly killed the people, like shooting chickens in a barrel or something, you know? It's all kind of shit, now. [Pause] And it was proven later on that the guards didn't kill anybody, and all these things that were propagated and put in the newspaper. So, anyway.

DK: So you were dealing with a lot of stuff at that point

EBMH: Yes. Yes. Wherever it come up. Couldn't avoid it, you just dealt with it, try to keep your sanity and keep your goals in your mind, and what you wanted to do. What you needed to do.

DK: Was that starting to wear you out at that point, or were you able to find reserves or start to think about moving onto something else?

EBMH: Well, you know, there was always something. In [19]69, you never knew what to expect and you get the call, and go ahead, this that and the other. So you just, I don't know. Something in my personality just made me deal with it and get

through it. Another devastating thing was I got a call from my, the uprising of COINTELPRO. We didn't know what it was called at that time, but anyway I get a call from New Haven to go down to New York and send Sam Napier home. They didn't say what the hell it was about. "Send Sam home." "What are you talking about?" And then they finally broke down and told me, "Sam's been killed." Why would somebody want to kill the newspaper distribution, newspaper distribution manager for? He had nothing to do with any military arm of the party or anything.

So I go down there and we go by the office where it happened, where they killed him and set the office on fire, which was a Panther distribution center. They set it on fire and someone was there, took us to a hotel and told us that there was some ladies and a group of children scared to death because this here was the beginning. I didn't realize how strong this was, but between East Coast, [1:35:00] West Coast, and this is what this shit was all about. These ladies had these children, didn't know if someone was coming to kill them or what. And so we went to this hotel where they were held up, and I told my two comrades that were with me, I'd say, "Well, first order of business, Sam is in the morgue. He's not going anywhere. The first thing we need to do is find a safe place for these women and these children."

So we made some calls and found the place that we could take them to that would be safe and all of that. As soon as we stepped out of that hotel, here's the cops everywhere, screaming, yelling like they do, guns drawn. I'm backed up against the wall, and I was able to pull out my gun and drop it behind me, and they took us to jail. They didn't take us directly to jail. They put us in a paddy wagon, and this was about, I don't know, 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon and they drove us around until about ten or eleven

o'clock at night, before they took us to jail to, I guess, to hold us until I don't know when. Until the lawyers stopped looking for us, I guess it was, I'm pretty sure it was. So we were out of touch. We couldn't call anybody, and wondered what the hell was going on.

Finally, they took us and booked us into jail and into the toms, I guess it was. Took us from a local precinct to the toms, and that's where they began the process of getting ready to charge us with something. But anyway, they had us in jail for a couple of days and finally the attorney finally found out where we were, and came and told me-- well, we had to appear before a judge and we got a sympathetic assistant DA, African American young lady. And she said, "Well, if you sit tight for a day or so, a judge is going to be on the bench that I can talk to, and we can see about what we can do." She knew that we were Panthers, and so in the meantime William Kunstler had located us and he came and told me that Party leadership told him to get me out, and that I would deal with getting my comrades out, and take care of that. So that's what they did.

We finally went to a judge and he said, "Well," told me, "I'm going to dismiss the charges and let you go, under one condition. That you leave New York and never come back." I said, "Yeah, right," to myself. This motherfucker thinks he's Judge Roy Bean, he can [laughs] he can post me out of town. So anyway, I said OK. I went back up to New Haven and started back working [on] what I was doing. But anyway, that was some of the devastating things. In the meantime, I never did get to Sam but Pauline, his wife, came down, and she claimed the body and made arrangements to get him back to California. Just all kinds of stuff, man. Unbelievable [1:40:00] repression.

And during that period, the East Coast, West Coast thing was escalating due to the press and so on. Somehow the New York Panthers thought it was, let's see. They

thought it was that Sam had been killed by East Coast Panthers, so Robert Webb, who was actually from the West Coast, was working the East Coast was shot in the head on the streets of New York as supposedly retaliation for Sam. So, then the killing began. And devastating times. [Pause] We loved Sam. There was nobody I ever met worked as hard as him, because he took control of distribution of that paper early on, and at any time, I could--"Sam, how many papers we got going in New York?" And he would rattle off the exact number, and he would tell me who had sent their money and he was just, just a phenomenal guy. Seemed like he came out of nowhere with those skills, you know? He put together a dynamite crew to help him, his cadre, and he'd say stuff like, "Circulate to educate. Get the papers out." That was a great waste, killing him.

DK: So after all of this and handling all this, what did you do?

EBMH: After I was able to finally come back from the East Coast, I pretty much worked, I guess, out of Central Headquarters and just began to work on programs. In the meantime I had been selected by the president of Merritt College as an ombudsman, as they called it, but anyway he put me in charge of a work-study program to be able to run the budget on that--had a budget that I had to work with on that. And so I saw an opportunity there to benefit the community. I knew that out at the Santa Rita Jail they had a system where in order to get out, a person had to be eligible for parole, but you couldn't get out unless they had a job. I said, "Well, that stinks. How you going to get a job sitting in jail?" I talked to Dr. Young Park, who was the president, and who had hired me, and I told him, "I would like to use some of the work-study funds [1:45:00] to provide educational opportunities for some of these prisoners." He said, "Well, all right." I said, "Well, I need somebody to help me with the adult authority to get them released,"

so he went with me to sit down with the California adult authority and we put the perspective to them that we would take on these people on probation.

We would enter them into the college and those that didn't have a high school diploma, we would get them into a work-study program and get them on a GED program, and those that had some high school, had finished high school, if they wanted to pursue going to a four year college, we could enter them into a program and they could work toward that. So it was an offer they couldn't refuse, so we set that up and I had parolees coming to the school and enrolling in classes and they knew it was pretty much a Panther program. Because I was in charge of it, so I told them, "You've got to abide by your educational requirements, and you're going to get a stipend every two weeks to help you live, and we also have an on-campus food program where we've got food, meal tickets for you to eat twice, a breakfast and a lunch, while you're on campus. And in the meantime you pursue your studies, you keep up with your attendance, and if we need you to work to help the library move something or move things around, you go and help with that." That would be about the only type of labor that you would have to do, and you just maintain the program.

That worked pretty well for a while. And what killed the program was we had an instructor, his name was Felix Porner. I think his name was Felix Porner, yes. And he was definitely a critic of the Party, and he would say things in his classes critical of the party, and in the meantime we had some Panthers in those classes and one day, it kind of exploded and they jumped up and they knocked him on his ass in the classroom, so that was assault on a county employee, I guess you call it, so they got to Dr. Park and Dr. Park told me, "I can't save you on this one," so that ended the program, but it was quite

successful for quite a while. So, at least the thing that I thought that was beneficial to people in the community, and it helped these people that was in jail to come out and contribute a little bit to their families and have a viable program that took them somewhere.

So anyway, I did things like that. Attended endless meetings, dealing with endless programs. I remember having to go to a meeting [with] all these people in [1:50:00] different forms of disability, people with a room full of wheelchairs and stuff, and I was wondering, "What the hell is this?" And once again, someone told me, "Keep your mouth shut and your ears open and you'll learn something," and so these people were protesting not being able to get their wheelchairs on sidewalks or get them into federal or county buildings where they had a right to go and stuff, and we talked and eventually [it came] down to threatening to go out into the street with these wheelchairs and stop traffic, and so protest that way.

As a result, we got sidewalk cut so people had ramps. We got these ramps put on city buildings, and people don't know that there was Panther involvement in that. [Laughs] Just things like that, and helping people organize rent strikes where they had paint on their walls and their housing, lead-based paint that makes kid sick and stuff like that, and we had to organize rent strikes and tell landlords if they didn't repaint these places and get rid of that stuff, that they wasn't going to get paid. Our rent strikes caused some redevelopment there, and they painted. They redid--they complied with it, but it took pressure to do it. Just trying to meet the needs of the community, what it was all about. Things of this nature.

DK: So, a tremendous amount of work in different programs.

EBMH: Yes.

DK: You did eventually decide to leave the Party.

EBMH: Yes, well, that kind of happened due to some political differences, I guess, you would call it. In that different things happened with Huey when--I think Huey had a dislike for the organization, as it were. And I never heard him say this, but he disbanded all the chapters across the country, and it was supposed to bring organizers all into Oakland, under the guise of having these people work on the Bobby Seale for mayor campaign. That was viable, but at the same time, I don't think he wanted to deal with the responsibility of a nation-wide organization and all the things it needed--had to be done. So in my opinion, he did a disservice to the people who had followed the Panther philosophy and had worked their tails off to develop programs--to gain resources, to do that in their communities, and all of a sudden you're telling them you're closing down the chapters, and the people in the community that benefitted from what happened in those chapters. So, that was one of my personal criticisms of that move.

Then of course, people began to leave, all of that, and it got to a point, [1:55:00] even Bobby Seale left, without any explanation as to why, but it was all a result, or due to the ramifications, of closing the Party down, really, if you will. And it was just a top decision, rank and file, and people like myself had no say in it, and I say, well, if Bobby Seale left and didn't say goodbye, it's over. As far as I'm concerned, it's over. And I think it limped along a little while, where people out of themselves in aggrandizement, called Party and called themselves chairman and the new leadership, or whatever, but Elaine Brown became the chairman as a gift from Huey, but other than that it was nothing. There was no party, so the people that were last minute hangers-on, who took

advantage of what financial resources there were left over, or whatever and using the party's name, because it was out there, to do whatever they wanted to do.

I decided it's time to go. I fulfilled my mission, and time to look for some other things, and see if I have any other talents. [Laughs] Small group of people came to me and told me, in confidence, that the Party's over and there are people that are taking it over, and if you want to leave the party, we'll follow you, we'll back you. And I said, "No, you're some of the best organizers in this country, and you just get out of Oakland and go back to wherever you want, because you have a talent to do whatever you want, and I know that. And if you ever need me for anything, you know where to find me." We did that, and I left. Never looked back. Billy X kept after me for years to participate in reunions and stuff like that.

In the meantime, I went into retail. I got a job. Without anybody knowing my background, I got a job with K-Mart. Started as an assistant manager and--.

DK: Back in the South?

EBMH: --worked for them for about thirteen years.

DK: You went back to the South?

EBMH: Yes. Yes. I got sent to some little town in Virginia on a train, and they move you around quite a bit. Wherever you're needed, and so I went through their training program and became successful at that, and it afforded me doing a lot of things that, I think, that I had done as a Panther in terms of being a mentor to young people. Those people come in and they're working for K-Mart for little or nothing, and they would have grievances against the supervisor and stuff like that, and I'd have to pull them aside and say, "Look, you need a job, you need money. So just hang in there and don't

fly off and do anything that will damage you. Keep this while you've got it, because [2:00:00] it's paying you something, and I'm going to do what I can to help you," and that's all. I developed, I think, some young people's character and taught them how to do what was good for them and how to sidestep the snakes that were there to bite them, and like that. I went from there.

I think I got tired of the place that K-Mart sent me. Fayetteville, North Carolina, I think it was, down there with all those crazy GIs, and I got a job with an outfit called--a retail outfit--called Service Merchandise. And that had a different merchandising philosophy. It wasn't so much great big box stuff, and dealing with a whole lot of little stuff. It was mostly the place where you go and buy gifts, and I learned their system and went from, I guess, a trainee up until I got appointed store manager, ran a couple of my own stores. I finally got to the point where they had different philosophy in their management and stuff like that. It was pretty much like what's going on now. You get up to management, where you're making a nice buck or two, then they would fire you and use a lesser person to get the job done, and the person at the top would get the damn big bonus, the money that you used to make. I gave that up, and it was time where I would get close to being able to draw my social security, so I said, "I'm out of it."

Anyway, Billy kept after me, kept after me, and he finally had one of his reunions in Washington, DC, and I was living in Maryland at the time, so I decided to attend. All these old comrades, and I thought you were dead! Stuff like that, so I began to realize I guess, somewhat, that I had a legacy going. Or whatever. I began to relate to that and--.

DK: And you hadn't talked about the Panthers in years, right?

EBMH: No. No. Nobody knew that. None of those people in retail that I worked with knew anything, because I never would have got the job.

DK: Did your children know? Did your family know?

EBMH: No. Well, I guess my immediate family--no, I didn't tell them, because I had FBI agents go down and talk to my old aunt and try to figure out where I was, and stuff like that, and she'd say, "Well, I don't know," and then I was in some store in Virginia and a couple of suits came. "Can we talk to you outside? We don't want to jeopardize your job or anything." And then they handed me a packet, and it was something from the Freedom of Information Act, from Washington, and it was a whole lot of shit that they had accumulated on me. They took a black magic marker and marked out anything that I could sue their ass for, and I said, "I'll keep this for my archive."

But then [2:05:00] I had a kid, too, in 1980, a daughter. I kept myself under wraps from her because I knew that the government had no shame. They would fuck with her to get to me, if they could, so she didn't know anything about that until, until she was, I guess, sixteen or seventeen or something, and that's when I finally relented and went to one of the reunions that Billy kept after me to go to. It was in Washington, DC, and I was living in Maryland at the time, so it was easy to get to and stuff, and that's when I went and all these people, "I didn't know what happened to you, I thought you was dead!" So forth. I'm here. From then on, as my daughter got up to [an] age where none of this stuff would affect her, then I began to let her know about that and send her stuff. Old stories and things like that. Nobody could harm her about, for anything that I'd done, so it was kind of the way that went.

DK: If I could just ask, what it's been like now that you are telling your story, and what do you want to accomplish with it? What kind of feedback you're getting from feedback?

EBMH: Oh, I'm getting a tremendous amount of feedback because everywhere you go the legacy follows you, pretty much. You get in the habit of dealing with people and trying to address some of the same issues that you were addressing before that somehow--me, anyway, I can't help but become involved. I came back to California after I had moved around the South for a while and stuff, and I reconnected with Carol, who was a nurse, had been a nurse for years and years. And anyway I had developed a--I didn't know what it was, but some physical ailment, and it turned out to be prostate cancer, so here in California, I got the best treatment for that that I could get. But anyways, I didn't think up here there was any kind of political repression but I found out very differently.

You had a combination of state troopers, country sheriffs, and local police forces that were killing people, and people were all up in arms about what to do about it, so naturally I had to get involved in it. So, we had big meetings and stuff like that, and people were just really at their wit's end as to what to do about that, and then we also had the immigration problem with the ICE cops, and stuff, and so we began to get together with these people and try to iron out something that we could do. So, we had a big meeting and held some workshops and so forth, so out of the workshop that I held, we came up with the idea of creating a Helpline for people who had no recourse when they were abused by the cops and so forth. We called it PACH, the Police Accountability Clinic and Helpline, and we established like a twenty-four hour telephone line where

people can call and make a [2:10:00] report, and we would take that report and put it in the database, and if some point people wanted to file suit against a police or whatever, we could go to that database and provided that information for them to take to court or whatever. So, that's still going.

So, there's always--and there's issues that come up that, to me, you can't ignore. Really upsetting that they killed thirteen-year-old Andy Lopez, cops shot him in the back. He was walking in his own neighborhood in the middle of the day, not bothering anybody, and he had a toy weapon that this cop that shot him said it looked like an assault rifle. But you can tell how a kid carries a heavy weapon as to a toy, and so they opened up with him and all they did was shout at him. And before the words got out of their mouth, they opened up and shot him about seven or eight times and killed him. So that became a major issue and created demonstrations and stuff, and the bad part about it is that the sheriff deputy it was not indicted and he was put back on the job--put back on the streets, and so it seemed like it never ended.

Since that happened, we had all these other killings. Just endless names, reverting back to what originally caused us to organize. I get involved as much as I can with them, and criticize the DA and the county prosecutor and all those people, and give a voice to the people. So--.

DK: The fight continues. The struggle continues, yes.

EBMH: Absolutely. I don't know about--some of the people in the Civil Rights Movement could quit, and I guess get wealthy or get rich, and find their peace and their heaven in that. Not me. I'm not so blessed.

DK: [Laughs] Got to keep fighting. Well, we have to end there, I'm afraid, so let me just say thank you. Thank you for all of your work over the years, and--.

EBMH: Hope this horrible story didn't--.

DK: No, no, no, it was an important story, so--.

Female 1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, March 17, 2017