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PANTHER EXPERT ON THE PROWL

Richmond filmmaker offers lectures on Black Panther Party

By Shay Totten | *Vermont Guardian*

For nearly 40 years, Roz Payne has archived some of the defining moments of her generation on film and on paper.

During the 60s, one of the most controversial groups she and other members of the Newsreel Collective followed and filmed were the Black Panthers.

Now, 40 years later, Payne has condensed hundreds of hours of archived footage and interviews and has produced a 12-hour, four-disc DVD collection — *What We Want, What We Believe*. The collection is being distributed by AK Press.

Payne, an instructor at Burlington College, has been documenting civil rights movements since the 60s as part of the Newsreel Collective.

Of particular interest to her was the Black Panther Party, and over the years she befriended many of them, gaining closer access to its key figures and leaders, as well the government agents who tracked the party.

“For the past 40 years, I have collected and maintained an archive of Newsreel films and materials related to the Black Panther Party. Both of these groups are part of me. In the years since, I began to record the stories of my friends. Their experiences formed an important history of the movement from the inside; after several years to reflect, their observations were unique. The interviews only happened because the interviewees were my friends,” Payne said.

Aside from three films produced by Newsreel — *Off the Pig*, *Mayday*, and *Repression* — the four-disc collection provides behind the scenes details on the Black Panther Party and additional footage on their history and legacy. Some of this Payne gathered from Newsreel footage, but she conducted interviews on her own over the past 40 years, following up with Panther members who left the country and now live in exile.

Formed in 1967, the Newsreel film collective was dedicated to chronicling and analyzing current events. In their time, they produced more than three dozen films throughout the United States and abroad. By working directly with the Black Panthers, Newsreel was able to explore realities often ignored by traditional media outlets, while producing documents that the Panthers and other activists could use in organizing their own communities.

Accompanying the Newsreel films in the DVD collection is a massive quantity of rare and exclusive materials culled from Payne’s extensive collection of FBI documents, cor-



As part of Black History month, filmmaker Roz Payne will present a program on the history of the Black Panther Party, including excerpts from her documentary *What We Want, What We Believe*. Patrick Brown, of the Greater Burlington Multicultural Resource Center, will introduce the evening. The free and public event will take place Wednesday from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Burlington College.

Payne will also present portions of the film at Barnes & Noble in South Burlington on March 7, 7-9 p.m.

Pictured above: Demonstration outside the Panther 21 trial in New York in 1969 (top); Chicago Democratic National Convention in 1968 (bottom left), and former party spokeswoman Kathleen Cleaver at a 1969 Panther rally (bottom right)

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response, and interviews with Black Panthers and their supporters, and even the agents charged with neutralizing the group.

“Several years ago, someone suggested that I put together a DVD and so I began thinking about how it would be put together, raising money for it, and hiring editors to put the footage onto this new format,” said Payne. “I wanted this unique material to be used and DVDs were not around years ago, and this is just a perfect format for this material to be redistributed.”

Payne said the Panthers continue to draw attention, and academic scrutiny, largely because they were an important part of the African American identity in the 1960s.

“They were very famous and today every college studies black history and Panthers are specifically important, because of how they looked as a group — with black jackets and berets — but also because of the breakfast programs and lunch programs and clothing programs they started in Oakland,” Payne said.

The Panthers were formed initially as a self-defense group after African Americans in the community witnessed their teenage boys being shot at by police. So, Panthers began to follow the police around.

Payne has already shown the film in Oakland, at the Panthers’ 40th anniversary party in October, where it received a warm welcome.

“The invaluable movement documen-



taries Newsreel produced furthered the work of the Black Panther Party and now provide the essential visual record of the party’s early days,” said Kathleen Cleaver, a former spokeswoman for the party, about the DVD collection. “This new DVD collection offers an extraordinary compilation that includes historic behind the scenes details taken from a wide range of interviews and contemporary events as well as the classic Newsreel films.”

Aside from interviews with Panthers, and members of the FBI who tracked their movements, Payne also includes footage of Newsreel members talking about the making of the three short films on the Panthers, and what it was like to follow and befriend the party and witness their

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impact in the community and on the nation.

Payne said the Panthers were much different, in style and presentation, than groups like the NAACP and other leading African American-led organizations.

“It was because of how they presented themselves that the government tried to crack down on them,” said Payne.

In fact, it was after the Panthers marched on the California capitol in Sacramento that they become a national phenomenon, and gained the attention of then FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.

Hoover ordered field agents to begin tracking the Panthers, and Payne interviewed the former agent who opened the case files on the Panthers and led the office that tracked their moves and reported back to officials in Washington.

“He had never given an interview before,” said Payne of William A. Cohendet. “And, he was just a great source and offered a very unique perspective. He didn’t

think they were a threat, but Hoover was the boss and there was nothing he could do.”

Payne said the Panthers were not without problems, but on the whole were trying to be an organization that helped its community.

“In the end, the Panthers played a part in their own demise; they were human and they had fights and problems among themselves and they were only damaging themselves then,” said Payne. “But, you have to look at all the good they did. When they started it, there were no schools that had breakfast and lunch programs, and now, if you look around the country, there are programs like that in almost every school.”

A portion of the proceeds from this project will go to support Black Panther Prisoners through Books Behind Bars, the Jericho Movement, and the Human Rights Research Fund.

Featured Non-Profit

To provide area residents with the very best medical care close to home, BMH is planning to build a state-of-art 27,000 square foot Out-patient Center. When complete, this new facility will house a number of outpatient units including:

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- Women’s Imaging
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- X-ray & Nuclear Medicine
- Pre-operative Assessment
- Physical and Occupational Therapy
- Orthopedic Physician Offices
- Comprehensive Care Clinic (for HIV patients)
- Outpatient Cardiology Testing

The estimated cost of this project which includes total renovation of the Ambulatory Care Unit, is \$11 million. Funding will be provided by a combination of local donations, borrowing and internal resources.



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