

Ex-Panther leader focuses attention on people projects

By JANET GOETZE

of The Oregonian staff

"In the trend the world is taking, the people will have to cast off their negative ideas and see the negative ideas are stagnated

"We're not interested in integration or assimilation but seeing that blacks and whites can work together for all mankind. . . .

"People have to come together and work out their own program to survive . . ."

Kent Ford, 30, hasn't always been everybody's idea of a spokesman for togetherness. A few years ago, he was making waves, and sometimes raising hackles, as leader of Portland's Black Panthers.

But these days, he isn't interested in discussing the local party.

"We're kind of off by ourselves now," he said, a wry smile showing beneath his short beard. "Ever since the split in the Panthers between Oakland and Chicago, well . . .

"We're just concerned about Oregon, now, and the Indians at Wounded Knee," he said.

Ford's conversation turns to wars of national liberation, overthrowing imperialism and ending the oppression of the ruling classes.

Not black ideas

These concerns are not the black separatist ideas, frequently associated with the party, but they are topics that have appeared in Panther literature for at least three years.

"We have to eliminate racism and imperialism all around the world," he said. "We know we have to go through emergency social changes . . . to liberate ourselves from 400 years of racism and imperialism. I'm not talking about just blacks, but Chicanos, Indians and poor whites. It's a struggle against the ruling class."

He said he feels as much enmity toward "the black bourgeoisie propped up by the Nixon administration to oppress the black masses" as he does toward the white ruling class . . .

The struggle he sees as necessary is not one for civil rights but basic human rights, he said.

"You can't make any racial statements when it's a class struggle," Ford said.

No job now

While Ford has been called a firebrand, among other things, his conversational tone is low. His manner is casual and his eyes are wide, almost quizzical.

He looks down at the floor, as if embarrassed, when he says he isn't working now. His last job was with computer programming at a grocery store chain, he says. He seems relieved to change the subject.

"Personally, I'm in favor of anything it takes to gain freedom for all oppressed people in the world," he said. "In the meanwhile, we have to have programs that serve the people in the right manner."

One of the programs he helped initiate in Portland was free breakfasts for school children in Albina. Black Panthers in other cities also sponsored meals in poverty areas.

Some Portland schools received federal aid for a similar program and the Panther

project ended, but Ford said federal cutbacks may necessitate its revival.

A sickle cell anemia testing and educational program began in April, 1970, to inform blacks of the inherited blood disorder most commonly found in the United States among persons descended from West Africans.

Ford said he joined with other people in forming a local Sickle Cell Anemia Foundation chapter, which now has an office, and funding through Emanuel Hospital, at 3620 N. Vancouver Ave.

In 1969, he helped mobilize volunteer physicians for a People's Free Health Clinic, named for Fred Hampton, a Black Panther leader shot in Chicago during a police raid.

A dental clinic was started two months later, staffed with volunteers from both private practice and the University of Oregon Dental School.

During its first two years, the medical clinic was open five nights and the volunteer doctors and nurses saw between 75 and 100 people a week, Ford said. Recently, it has been open only three nights a week.

"The numbers began to decrease after Portland Development Commission began to relocate people," Ford said. The relocation was undertaken for the Emanuel Hospital expansion project.

'Black removal'

"'Urban renewal' has become 'black removal' from this area," he said.

The dental clinic now makes only referrals, Ford said, and the medical clinic is faced with eviction from 109 N. Russell St. because of the hospital expansion.

The hospital found a former plumbing shop near N. Williams Avenue on NE Shaver Street for the clinic, Ford said. But renovation would cost \$17,000, and PDC has offered only \$2,500 in relocation aid, he said.

People working at the clinic aren't interested in becoming part of a government agency, Ford said, "because you get a program one day, and tomorrow you don't."

"If a program is truly a people's program, the government can't take it away," he said.

He scoffed at Model Cities and Portland Metropolitan Steering Committee for their current distress over federal cutbacks.

"They're crying to Washington for more money. We don't have to," he said. ". . . That's not saying we wouldn't take funds from a government agency. We would, if there were no strings attached."

The clinic is supported by donations of time and supplies and local contributions, he said. Federal rules on how funds are spent sometimes deprive needy people of services, he said.

"If they have the equipment, and they're paying a doctor \$20,000 a year, they should take everybody who comes," Ford said. "These people (coming to the free clinic) aren't trying to beat out anybody or get by on the cheap. The social and economic situation is such they have to have this kind of care."

"The doctors are all true humanitarians," he said.

For him, the clinic is a "survivor program . . . for survival pending liberation."