

Email Interview with Mary Williams

Conducted by Dewi Zarni

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When did you attend the OCS and for what grades?

I was there from 1971 until 1978. I had six siblings (I'm number 5) and they all attended the school. My oldest sister was in the first graduating class.

Could you describe what you remember as a typical day at the school?

In the Party, in the early days, we lived in communal housing. Children of similar ages stayed in the same house. So because there were so many kids in my family, I mostly lived with my three younger siblings and other Panther kids in that age range. I only saw my older siblings at school.

The days began early. I remember it would be dark out when we were woken up to get ready for school. We traveled to school in a van. Once at school we had breakfast in the dining hall. It consisted of sausage, English muffins, grits, Orange juice, milk, a banana. My mother was a cook. After breakfast we did calisthenics out in the yard. We sang the Black National Anthem instead of The Pledge of Allegiance which was the norm in public school. Our classes were small. No more than 10 kids which was unheard of in public schools back then that were often overcrowded.

I remember not being limited to one classroom and one teacher. For social studies I was in a different room with a different teacher, the same for science and history and music. The school had new books and lots of resources. For example in my science class there were animals to take care of, rats, chickens, rabbits, fish and every kid had a microscope. In music class we got to choose the instrument we wanted. I chose the clarinet. In social studies we had globes and colorful text books. In math class we had calculators.

Sometimes we had assemblies in the middle of the school day. Families who were not Panthers were invited to attend. They were given food to take home and around Christmas an assembly was held and every kid got a present. There were also assemblies where we Panther kids performed songs, poetry or dance. Sometimes doctors would come to give immunizations or check ups. One year Governor Jerry Brown came to visit.

For lunch we had hearty meals with meat and veggies at a time when free lunch was not available in public schools. After lunch we played in the yard. Then we had afternoon classes. Around 3pm classes ended. But we did not go home. We played, did art, did our homework or read until the adults were finished with their work and drove us back home. It was often night time when we got back home.

Back at home we watched TV together. I clearly remember watching the miniseries *Roots* with my Panther family. It came out in 1977. We were in bed by 9pm.

The picture you sent me shows the uniforms students wore. What did the uniform mean to you at the time?

We were encouraged to think of ourselves as soldiers, as revolutionaries. The uniform was a mini version of what adult Panthers wore. The Beret in particular. It gave us an identity and a sense of self worth, empowerment. Everyday we were told that we were special and important. As black children this was crucial messaging we needed to combat the stream of negative messaging that bombarded us from the mainstream media. The uniform distinguished us from Buckwheat, Sambo, Aunt Jemima and other common stereotypes. The uniforms made people respect us and made us respect ourselves.

How would you describe the relationships between the students and the teachers?

I don't know if it was because I was a very compliant child eager to please and loved learning, but I do not remember a negative experience with my teachers. Panther teachers or teachers in general. I was what other kids would call a brown-noser. I adored my teachers at the school. After class I helped clean and put things away. I was that kid.

Did the school provide meals? What do you remember about this?

Providing nutritious food to school children was a very important part of the school. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, The Panthers free lunch program was what got public school to start serving free lunches. As a Panther kid we got free breakfast, lunch and dinner. As I mentioned before my mother was one of the cooks. Having access to quality food was a big deal. Back then so many in the black community were underfed and malnourished. Panthers believed good soldiers/revolutionaries needed to be well fed in order to do anything. Keeping people hungry meant that they could be controlled.

How did your experience at the OCS compare to your experience at other schools you attended?

When I left the OCS and went to public school it was an extreme adjustment socially. I went from being told everyday what a beautiful, smart, important person I was to being just one of many. Academically I was able to do well. As a Panther I was encouraged to be curious and believe anything was possible. This helped me get through the public school system. I did experience quite a drop in self-esteem when I entered the public school system. I was no longer protected from negative imaging and even the negativity of other black people who had never been told they were special. That the black community was special.

How do you think attending the OCS has impacted you today? Are you still in touch with classmates?

My formative years as a Panther meant I was able to be a healthy child. I was fed well, cared for, nurtured. A real privilege at the time. Psychologically I was also nurtured. Not just by my

parents but by a community. The OCS, and by extension my Panther family, has made me hopeful about empowering communities in need. It has made me a person who values volunteerism, social work and activism. It has made me fearless in the face of power. My classes and teachers made me a curious lifelong learner. Unfortunately many of my classmates have passed away. I have a casual acquaintance with only one of my schoolmates from back then.

Is there anything else important about your experience to share? Or a lasting memory you have? a story?

I'm often saddened when people, especially black people, don't know what the BPP was really about. They often think it was a violent, separatist hate group. They have no problem with the blatant violence that was directed at our communities by the state but lots to say about the Panther philosophy of self defense. I am also saddened by how the party was destroyed from the inside out by the state. My most lasting memories are those of belonging and community. Being together 24 hours a day and knowing everyone was family regardless of genetics.