



# RADICAL COMMITMENTS: THE REVOLUTIONARY VOW OF ERICKA HUGGINS





By Jaimee A. Swift

**At 15-years-old, human rights activist, poet, educator, Black Panther Party leader, and former political prisoner, Ericka Huggins (she/her) made a vow to serve humanity at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Now at 72, the revolutionary is still as dedicated and committed to the vow she made years ago.**

*Ericka Huggins' interview is a part of our March theme, "Sankofa: Honoring Our Black Feminist Pioneers." To read the descriptor, click [here](#).*

"We can together change the world. We are all threaded together like a huge tapestry of humanity. And we forget that we are interconnected."

— ERICKA HUGGINS, THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IN SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK | BIONEERS 2016

During my phone interview with Mrs. Ericka Huggins, I confided that it was "nerve-racking" to be speaking with her. Without hesitation and in a very direct but calm manner, she asked me why I felt this way (which made me even more nervous than I already was), as she noted her mother's characterization of "nerve-racking" was something not so positive. With my voice shaking, I told her I was quite nervous to speak with her because of the great admiration I have for her and her revolutionary work, citing her as one of my political inspirations. To that, Mrs. Huggins so kindly and compassionately responded, "I am honored to talk to you because of the work you do but it is not nerve-racking for me. It is inspiring. We are all just these humans, no more or less special than the other. I hope that makes sense to you because as we are interviewing, I am not interviewing as somebody on a pedestal. Do you know what I mean? What I did, I did because it was the right thing to do--that is what you're doing, isn't it true?"

From there, my “nerve-racking” dissipated. And it became clear to me that beyond what I’ve read of and about Mrs. Huggins and especially during our conversation together, that at the core of it all she truly is and will always be concerned about community and humanity.

Ericka Huggins (born Ericka Jenkins) was born on January 5, 1948 in Washington, D.C., the middle child of three. Raised in Southeast D.C., her life would change at age 15 when she attended the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, much to her mother’s dismay. Inspired and moved by the congregation of Black people from all over the nation unified in the movement for justice, it was there she made a vow to serve humanity. And this vow would and continues to lead her to a lifetime commitment in the struggle for freedom and liberation of all oppressed peoples around the world.

While reading an article about Huey P. Newton, co-founder and the chairman of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (later the Black Panther Party) (BPP), Huggins was moved by the mission and values of the Party. While students at Lincoln University, she and her husband, John Huggins, left the university and drove to California, along with a friend, in 1968 to join the Los Angeles Chapter of the Black Panther Party and quickly became leaders of the movement. However on January 17, 1969, tragedy would befall Huggins and her family, as three weeks after the birth of their daughter, her husband, John, and their comrade, Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, were killed. That day she became both a single mother and a widow.

Huggins moved to New Haven, Connecticut to bury her late husband and to be with his family. There, she was asked by Yale University students and community members to establish a Black Panther Party chapter there. She accepted and led the party chapter in New Haven. However in May 1969, she and Bobby Seale, co-founder and national chairman of the BPP, were targeted and arrested on politically motivated conspiracy charges, which sparked “Free Bobby, Free Ericka” rallies and protests across the country. A political prisoner for two years, in May 1971 Huggins was acquitted, charges were dropped, and she was released. While she was incarcerated and in solitary confinement, Huggins taught herself meditation and yoga and wrote poetry as a way to cope and survive her false imprisonment and her separation from her daughter, who she was only allowed to see for an hour during Saturday visitations.

Since then, she continues to incorporate meditation and mindfulness as a part of her spiritual and political practice. In 1971, the same year of her release, she became a writer and editor for the Black Panther Intercommunal News Service. In 1974, she published and co-authored a book of poetry with Huey P. Newton, Insights and Poems, that detailed her experience of incarceration and her struggle for liberation. Huggins also visited California state, county, and federal prisons and jails and shared her yoga and meditation practices. For over 20 years, she taught relaxation and mindfulness in California youth correctional facilities, as well in public schools and colleges.

From 1973 to 1981, she was the Director of the Oakland Community School (OCS), a community-led and organized elementary school and child development center founded by the Black Panther Party. The concept of the Oakland Community School was an extension of point five of the Black Panther Party’s 10 Point Program and Platform, which was written in 1966. The OCS served as a revolutionary model on the possibilities of innovative educational curriculum and on what community- and child-centered education can look like.

With her 14-year leadership in the Black Panther Party, Huggins held the longest tenure of leadership of any woman in the Party. Huggins also became the first woman and first Black person to be appointed to the Alameda County Board of Education. Working with the Shanti Project, a non-profit whose “mission is to enhance the health, quality of life, and well-being of people with terminal, life threatening or disabling illnesses or conditions”, and the AIDS Project of Contra Costa County, she helped develop citywide programs in support of LGBTQ+ youth and adults with HIV/AIDS. Huggins was also a professor of Women and Gender Studies at San Francisco State University and California State University, East Bay and was also a professor of Sociology and African American Studies in the Peralta Community College District.

Black Women Radicals spoke with Ericka Huggins about the March on Washington in 1963 and what she saw and felt that motivated her vow to serve humanity; the lessons she learned while in Black Panther Party leadership; on what it was like meeting Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, and Cesar Chavez, and more.

**Jaimee Swift (JS):** On your website you shared that the moment which spurred your activism was when you attended the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. Do you mind sharing with me a specific moment or moments at the March that led you to know serving your community was what you wanted to do?

**Ericka Huggins (EH):** “I was 15-years-old when I went to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom against my mother’s wishes and my father’s. But my mother was most frightened for me, even though she was the one who would continually tell me to always work to uplift our people. As a child, she told all of us; there are three of us--my sister, my brother, and me--but I was the one most concerned with that and the most wanting to do that. And she knew it. That day when I went to ask her--tell her--I was going; I lived in D.C. and grew up in D.C. I grew up in Southeast D.C., so I had to take two buses to get to Northwest. And I told her I was going to get on the bus and go to the march. She knew the march was happening--everyone knew it. It was like the talk of the town because people were coming in from everywhere, especially from the South. And she didn’t want me to go because she said something could happen to me. And I said, ‘Yes, but you are the one who always told me I should uplift people and if I don’t go, I will feel like I am not participating in that.’ She was quietly angry with me for telling her what I was going to do at age 15. But it was a strong feeling and she knew me well enough to know that if you said no, I would do it anyway and would suffer the consequences, whatever it may be. I wasn’t sassy, as she would say about other people she knew, but it was strong conviction and she knew it. And this strong conviction was something she got to know more about as time went on.”

“So, I went. And to honor her, I went by myself. There was no one else in the neighborhood or in my school who I could think of that would even want to go. I was so inspired when I got there. There were busloads and truckloads and pick-up trucks and by bus I mean, school buses, church buses, Greyhound buses, Trailways buses--some of those buses don’t exist anymore--of mostly Black people and the crowd just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And I stood there by myself on the grounds. They had cleared some earth so there could be places for people to stand. I found this big mound of dirt. I was a tall girl--I am a tall woman--but still I wanted to stand there by myself so I could sort of see everything. And I looked out into the faces of people and [they were] so reverent, so proud, so inspired, and joyful. There were children there and there were people with their babies. There were people dressed in their best church clothes. There were men and women in their coveralls and other farm clothes. There were just all kinds of people. There were white people there, too, and I didn’t pay attention to them because I got to see them often enough in D.C. and in Maryland but what I did get is that they were respectful. It was a peaceful day, of which inspired me also.”

“I did make note of one thing, which I’ve never forgotten. Later in time when I began to understand the ways in which gender and race connect--or as we say these days intersect--I had words for it but then I didn’t. I noticed there on the big stage where all the speakers were that I could see Martin Luther King and I could see Rosa Parks. I could see Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne. If you don’t know who they are, then you can do some research. They were actors and vocalists and they were activists, which also inspired me about them. But all the men spoke and the women didn’t. I was curious about why that would be. Why would women like Rosa Parks and Lena Horne—who were capable of speaking about anything anywhere—why would they not be speaking? Why are they just sitting there? And that was like a precursor to my feminist understanding, that moment. But then Lena Horne did the most amazing thing. She moved really quickly to the microphone, grabbed it, and she sung two syllables--the

word freedom. And when she did that, a blanket of silence fell over the whole crowd. It was the most amazing feeling to not be in church, to not be at a concert, to not be at a ballgame, to not be somewhere celebratory in a different kind of way, and to feel this absolute all-pervasive peace. And as her words landed in our ears and as those words dropped into my heart, a vow arose: I would serve people for the rest of my life. I didn't think it. I didn't overthink it. I didn't try to analyze it. I knew it was coming from somewhere deep in myself. I accepted it. And that was a pivot in my life."



Ericka Huggins at the Black Community Survival Conference, March 30th, 1972. Photo Credit: Bob Fitch. Via the Erika Huggins Website.

“I got back on the D.C. buses and rode back home and I decided not to tell my mother about the vow at that time. I told her later but I just told her, ‘Mom, I am back home. I am safe.’ She was cooking something and she didn’t want to look at me because she was pissed off. I said, ‘I know you are angry but it was a beautiful day and I wished you had been there.’ And she kind of nodded like okay. But a few days later, she asked me about it and I told her about the vow. I told her that I was sorry to disobey her and disappoint her but I was about doing exactly what she encouraged me to do as a child. And that was that day. It was amazing. I can still see it as clearly as it happened.”

**JS: Wow. You make me wish I was there.**

**EH:** “Well, I want you to wish you were there. I want you to know that being with people, being beyond our phones and our computers, and so on but being in the middle of it, is so important for our work. Otherwise, it remains cerebral in a kind of way, do you know what I mean? That was something else I learned that day when I saw all those people. My mother was from North Carolina but from a huge family of 11 kids. So I would go to the South every summer and I knew what the conditions were like. I knew what the conditions were [and what] she grew up in. I hadn’t been to the upper East Coast but I had been to Baltimore and other parts of Maryland and Virginia but I knew how people lived. So to be there in that context, it was mind boggling for me because no one was feeling oppressed, do you know what I mean? But in all kinds of ways we actually were. So, I hope that answers your question.”

**You were in the Black Panther Party for 14 years and were the Director of the Party’s Oakland Community School. What was the catalyst that led you to join the Party? Do you mind sharing with me your favorable memories but also lessons learned and challenges from your experience?**

**EH:** “I joined because it was a part of that vow I told you I made at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom but specifically I was impressed about what I read in a magazine about the Black Panther Party. I was in college at the time. I was in my junior year at Lincoln University, which was an HBCU. And by the way, and I didn’t know it then, but one of the very first [HBCUs] to open during slavery. I was there and I was a part of a Black student organization and it was there where I met John Huggins. He was my friend and later, he was my boyfriend. So that vow was very present with me. I was always looking at how it would play out in the tapestry of my life. I read this article about the Black Panther Party and I was so impressed by it because what I was looking for wasn’t the NAACP. I wasn’t looking for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). I wasn’t looking for something that had been around for a while and had been prey to the understandings and directives of the United States government. I just wasn’t. I was looking for something new and I was also looking for something that wasn’t just about Black people because what I understood of D.C.--which was very Black and white at that time [and] now all kinds of people of color live in D.C., and a huge population of African people. It wasn’t like that then. It was very Black and white and where I lived in Southeast--I grew up in Southeast--and right on the borderline from one of the streets I could walk to was Maryland. I would go to the little corner store in Maryland and what I saw was really, really poor white people. That is not something I saw on TV. That is not something anyone talked to me about. But when I saw children with no shoes and rotten teeth who were only eight or nine years-old and yet mean to Black people and being trained in racist behavior, it was heartbreaking to me. This was another thing I talked to my mother about. She was always there to talk to me about how the world worked to the best of her ability because

she didn't have any--thank goodness--she didn't have any academic language. It was real down to earth. Very simple and plain so I could understand. At any rate, I knew there was something about poor white people that we needed to speak about. I knew that at a very early age. And if we could get to young people-- which is a part of what I was thinking as well because much of the existing organizations were much older."

"When I read this article in *Ramparts* magazine, I was 18 by then and I had gotten into college early because of my birthday and so on. So I kept reading the article and it kept saying, 'All poor and oppressed people' and in the next paragraph would say, 'Black and other oppressed people.' It didn't say Black and other people of color but that was inferred in everything that was written. It talked about and showed a huge picture of the co-founders of the Party, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton. It showed a picture of Huey strapped to a hospital gurney with a bullet wound in his belly and he was under police guard. And this picture-- visuals always stay with me. It's just the way I am put together. But that picture really struck me. If he has a bullet wound in his stomach, then why is he shackled to a hospital gurney? The story was telling me why--he had been accused of killing a police officer and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which was its earliest name, was all about what we call today [as] 'police watch.' It was the great-great grandmother of that. And so Huey, Bobby, and others would go out and when the police would be arresting, beating, or trying to kill Black men and women in the streets of any city of the United States, they would appear with guns without bullets and law books--well, Huey had a law book. 'Why are you arresting this man?' 'Do you know that the law says he has this right and that right?' The police hated it, so they stalked Huey and [tried to] kill him. And the article said that as well. The article didn't use that language but it was written furthermore by a member of the Black Panther Party, who was also a great writer. The magazine was called *Ramparts*. It doesn't exist anymore but it was the most amazing magazine of the times because it did feature articles on movements around the globe, which the articles always had built in what it [was] that we could do. I was sitting at the student union building at Lincoln and people were playing bid whist and billiards. I looked out on that crowd of young Black people, many of whom were my dear friends, and thought, 'What the hell am I doing here?' It was kind of like, 'Is anybody awake?' It wasn't judgmental, I was just curious. Who could I talk to about how I was feeling about this article?"



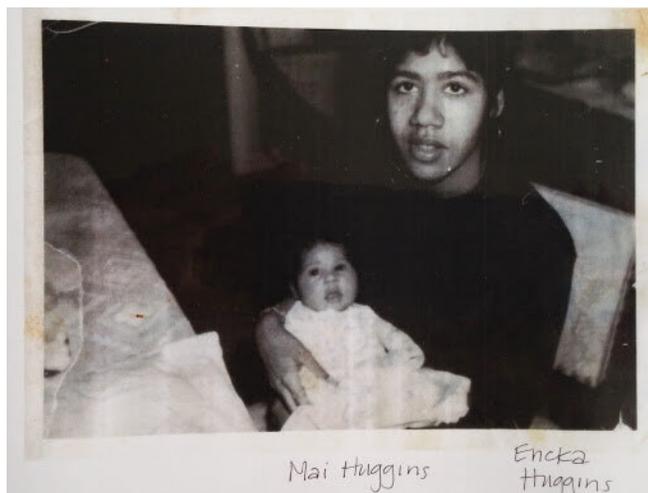


Ericka Huggins appearing at the Pacific Place Cinema in Seattle, Washington, during the 2015 Seattle International Film Festival, speaking after the documentary *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*. Photo Credit: Joe Mabel.

“The magazine had been passed around among the students among the Black Student Congress, which was what it was called. There was no such thing as the Black Student Union then because the Black Panther Party had not created that concept yet, which it did create in 1968 at San Francisco State [University]. But at any rate, I sat there re-reading the article thinking, ‘What am I doing at Lincoln? I should be working to free Huey.’ Right after I had that thought again [and] John showed up and I passed the article to him and I said nothing. I just gave him the article to read. And he did and looked at me and nodded. And I said, ‘I don’t know what we are doing here.’ Now, he’d come to Lincoln from a different place, he’d come from a Navy ship. After high school, he joined the Navy because he wanted to be of use but he didn’t want to go to college. And he didn’t want to be—he was unique. That is the best way I could describe him. He wanted to travel. But he was there on a Navy ship when the four little girls were killed in the church in Birmingham and it turned his world upside down—similar to the way in which the March on Washington turned my world upside down. He was a little bit older than me. And he finally left the Navy ship and he decided to go back to college and he chose Lincoln. That was how we met. That day in the student union building when we both read that article, we knew we were leaving Lincoln. It was just a matter of time and certainly it wasn’t too long after that, we both got into his little beat up car with another friend and traveled to southern California first and not to Oakland because the person who was dropping off in California was the one with the gas money and needed to go to southern California. We joined the party chapter there, John and I. There was no screening for joining the Black Panther Party, you just joined if you said you could do all kind[s] of stuff and if you [were] willing to serve. This is an important point to what happened later.”

“Immediately, I saw what we call male chauvinism at the time because *how could you not see it?* And so, I always spoke up about it to the best of my ability. One of the things I loved about John Huggins was that he didn’t believe that there was any difference between men and women, with exception of anatomical and some physiological differences but not in terms of intelligence or even physical ability. He was my perfect friend. And so in November of 1967, we, John and I, left Lincoln. I called my mother and let her know once again and she was upset with me and disappointed. And the way I explained to her what I was doing is that I felt called—you know how some people felt called to the church—I felt called to serve humanity. She wasn’t happy about the whole thing because she worked really hard to put me through school. There wasn’t much financial aid available to me. My parents were not wealthy. They were both working for government agencies at the time, you know, which is the way in D.C., if you are Black. That is why I left D.C.—you worked in some kind of federal department and you got some kind of relatively good paying job and you lived your life out like that and I could not see myself that way. I just knew that wasn’t me. But my mother said, ‘Well, I know you. I know that you are quiet [and] that you love me but you are going to do what you want to do anyway. Call me when you get to California.’ And I did. I told her about John but she never got to meet him because he was killed by the FBI. We were in New York City when I called my mother and we were there because one of John’s sisters was getting married. And we stayed for the wedding and we said good-bye. That was the last time John’s mother, father, and sisters saw him alive. We didn’t know that. We drove across the country and joined the Black Panther Party and we both battled internalized racism in the Black Panther Party, what we call colorism. We battled with others—not alone, we were never alone—infiltration by the FBI, which didn’t have that name yet of what we know now as the counterintelligence program of the FBI. It was more clandestine. But we knew there was a part of the FBI that was focused on Black liberation, we knew that much. I am not a real assertive person in a way but I ask direct questions. I don’t sometimes even care about the answers, I just know that it is important to ask

very important questions if you have them and discuss it with others. And that is what I did. It was within that year 1968, John and I were married, and we were pregnant and then in December, our daughter was born. It was three weeks after she was born that the FBI, counterintelligence program nicknamed COINTELPRO, killed him and my dear friend, Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, who was the head of the chapter in Los Angeles and also another unbelievable human being.”



Ericka Huggins with her daughter, Mai Huggins. 1968. Via the Ericka Huggins Website.

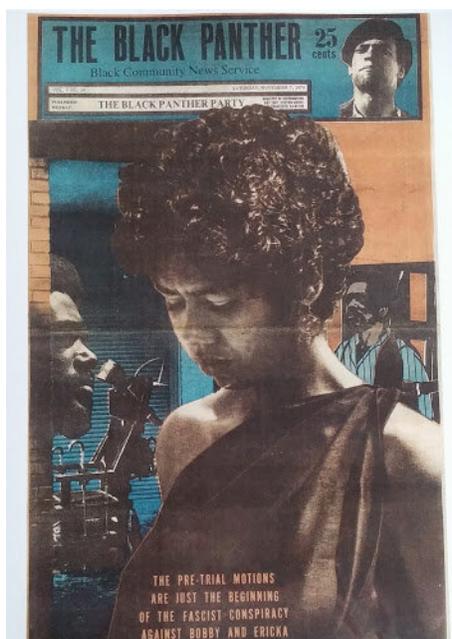
“The Party drew amazing human beings and it was in Los Angeles where Elaine Brown, Joan Kelly, and Gwendolyn Goodloe [were] and many, many others in the Los Angeles chapter but we were all connected to the National Headquarters of the Party in Oakland. I know you don’t know all those names but I keep saying them because we should know them. We shouldn’t just know the names that are now kind of visible to us.”

### **How does it feel to see today’s Black women leaders and Black feminist led social movements today?**

**EH:** “It makes me happy. I immediately became friends with Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors. I have spoken to Opal [Tometi] but I haven’t had the good fortune of meeting her and being with her in the same way. We have stayed in contact. They wanted to know what we could tell them and what we experienced as women leaders in the movement at that time. And I told them--and they talked to lots of us--but I told them; Alicia lives in Oakland so I was able to talk to her more often. We talked about our success and our failures. It is not good to romanticize anything, especially one’s relationship to community. We did beautiful work and we also made mistakes. One of them was not [only] pay[ing] strong attention to not just the women in leadership, that is one thing, but women in general who were running the Black Panther Party, because we lived in a male-dominated society and that male paradigm says in all of its institutions which have embedded racism in them--every institution in society including education and including the HBCUs--have some form of, some expression of racism embedded in there. Because of that, the local and national police departments--because there were 40 chapters of the Party in the United States alone and then it spread around the world--when the police targeted, they targeted men first. Why? Because men are believed to be stronger and more powerful. Well, that was a big ole’ mistake they made because we were running everything behind the scenes. Elaine [Brown] actually talks about this in her book, A Taste of Power. But that is a different kind of book than the one I am writing. But the thing is that you know nobody walks into the door of any organization, any campus, any job, any family, and leaves behind all the stories of their life and all the socialization they had. Other words, a man does not walk into the Black Panther Party and immediately drop their sexist and misogynist understandings, language, and behavior. That is just a ridiculous notion. And I experienced that in the Black Panther Party and I also was able to in talking to--I use Black Lives Matter as only an example because I have worked with lots of young people and organizations intentionally and whenever I am invited to do some intergenerational summit, I do it. Not for money but because I feel it is important, it is so incredibly important. Otherwise young people will think, ‘Well, those old people don’t know what they’re talking about.’ And then the older people will say, ‘Those

younger people, they ain't doing shit.' Both those ideas are based in ignorance. It's always been young people who've led the way, the trailblazers. The ones who bring the light. It's young people everywhere around the globe. Always."

"And we just did our best--to those of us who are still alive and well and who have done some healing. This is very important. To heal the very wounds of your own life so you can serve. And I think this is something that doesn't get talked about enough. It is being talked about now, thank goodness, as radical self-care which is different from a manicure-pedicure or a day off. This is different. We didn't know how to do that in the Black Panther Party. This was one of the things I talked to Alicia about and to Patrisse. And I also talk to young moms. Patrisse was a new mom when I first met her and she wanted to talk about how to balance activism and raising children. She didn't want to talk about men. That wasn't important. What was important was, 'How do I raise this boy? How do I raise this child and do all that I am doing?' That is a feminist conversation to have. The reason why we end up raising children alone and like the women, for instance, of the Black Panther Party were not fully supported in taking care of their children because men were socialized to think they had [no] responsibility. We brought that to the forum at the Oakland Community School. The men learned how to braid hair. The men changed the diapers for the little ones in the Child Development Center, the daycare, that was connected to the schools. The men could teach just as the women could teach. The men could cook. As a matter of fact, the heads of the kitchen were men. But if a woman came in and had more expertise, then she became the person who'd take the lead on the menus and so on. So we just didn't play that game as much as we could and whenever it arose outside of the school and in others in the community's survival programs; of which by the way there were 65 throughout the United States and the focus of mass media, local law enforcement, and the FBI and the CIA was on [what I call] 'the hands of men with leather jackets and guns.' That was to frighten the community but the Black community was never frightened of us, not the working class, the working poor, and those living in conditions of poverty. That might have been middle class and upper class, quote-on-quote Black people, who were frightened because we were talking about redistribution of wealth."



Ericka Huggins and Bobby Seale on the cover of the Black Panther Party paper, discussing their trial and charges in New Haven, Connecticut after Huggins and Seale were targeted and arrested on politically motivated conspiracy charges. Photo via the Ericka Huggins Website.

“So, we handled it. As an example, John and I had conversations all the time about our relationship and what it would mean. We didn’t know any term called ‘polyamorous’ but we decided how we would be in relationship and to the best of our ability before he was killed, how we would manage taking care of our baby. He never really had the opportunity but for those three weeks before he was killed, he spent a lot of quality time with her, taking care of any need that she had. So we did the best we could. There is this book called, *Want to Start A Revolution: Radical Women In The Black Freedom Struggle*. What made me think of it now is that there is a chapter in there on the Young Lords. The Young Lords Party, as well as the Brown Berets, patterned themselves after the Black Panther Party. Many organizations did and some of the women’s organizations did as well and many people don’t know this. That chapter on the Young Lords was also about Denise Oliver [Velez] who was the leader of the Young Lords Party. I am not sure if you know about them but they were Puerto Rican communities here in the States and on the Island. And the Brown Berets was started in the West coast--the Young Lords in Chicago and in New York, and Brown Berets in California and the Pacific Northwest of Chicanos and Mexicanos. That is how it started. Both those organizations patterned themselves after the Black Panther Party. In that chapter on the Young Lords Party, you will read how they handled machismo and the papers they wrote and the work they did because they were a little younger and lasted longer than the Black Panther Party did. In that same book, *Want to Start a Revolution*, I co-wrote chapter seven which is about the women of the Black Panther Party but also about our community schools. But you will love this book because it is about radical women of the 1920s until the book was published around 2010.”

**I saw a photo of you with Mrs. Rosa Parks. May you please share with me what it was like to talk with her and meet her?**

**EH:** “Well, she spent a day at the Oakland Community School. She put word out that she wanted to see the school that the Black Panther Party created and that she heard it was wonderful. People visited all the time. We didn’t invite her but when she wanted to be invited, oh my god, we were so happy! And the children did a play for her called, ‘Get on the Bus’. They wrote the play and we helped them with it but this is how the community school was, it was student-centered. We were the supports for the children. We were not like public school. Anyway, our principle was that children should learn how [and] not what to think. So, they put the play together and it was adorable. That picture is in the book--the same woman who wrote the article on Rosa in the anthology, *Want To Start A Revolution* [and] after doing that research, she was so inspired and wrote the book, *The Rebellious Life of Rosa Parks*, and that picture is in that book. She is a dear friend of mine, Jeanne Theoharris. Anyway, so that day Rosa came and one of the girls presented her with flowers. She was so happy and she was so touched by the children and I know why because those children were being cared for in such a wonderful way. There were primarily Black kids and a couple of Latino families and two white children and that kind of represented the demographics of East Oakland at the time; East Oakland [similar to] Southeast D.C. and parts of Baltimore. So anyway, she walked in and she just looked at everybody and she was just so happy to be there. I was just so happy to meet her. We told the children, ‘Now when you see her, don’t just rush up and hug her all at once. Let her be and let her be at the school, okay?’ The children were all like, ‘Okay.’ [Laughs]. The whole staff was excited. We gave her a tour of the school and the children led it. She hadn’t come there to chat with adults—she had come to be with the children and we knew that. The children who were there that day never ever in their lives have forgotten it.”





Rosa Parks (left) with students at the Oakland Community School. Standing to the left of Parks is Ericka Huggins. Photo via the Ericka Huggins Website.

“Anyway, then we went to the auditorium and this was not a school building, this was an old church building, so the church chapel, so-to-speak was what we made our auditorium. We went into the auditorium and the play was going to start in about 10 minutes. I was sitting next to Rosa and we were just talking about the children, the school, and how it started, and so on. I was very respectful of her space because she’s quiet. Not in a submissive way, she was just a quiet person and I am, too. I thought I am not going to chat her up here. Then I noticed that two of the girls were missing. I love to tell this story because it tells you something about Rosa and it tells you something about the school and it tells you something about the children in the school and the respect that we gave to the girls in the school. Matter of fact, we told them, ‘You can do anything. Don’t let anybody tell you anything different.’ And we told the boys the same thing and we told the boys the same thing about the girls. It was a gender-neutral, race-neutral [and] sexual orientation-neutral campus. We did not affirm any, as we call them social constructs, as normal. There is no normal. And the children knew it.”

“So anyway, I looked around and I am sitting there with Rosa and all of a sudden while I’m quiet, I realize two of the main girls in the play are missing. Since I knew all 152 children and where they should be at any good given day [and] at the time of the day like a mother hen, I got a little concerned. I told Rosa I would be right back and I quickly went around the school to try to find them. They were nowhere in the building and I knew they couldn’t leave the building which made me relieved. There was only one place left and that was the girls’ bathroom. And I went in there. And there were the two girls holding hands and crying. I said, ‘Oh my goodness girls, what has happened?!’ And they were crying with snot running out of their noses and wailing [Laughs] and said, ‘Ms. Rosa Parks is at our little ole’ school in East Oakland and she’s a hero.’ And I said, ‘Well, yes she is but she wanted to be here.’ Then they said, ‘We know but we didn’t want her to see us all crying and everything. She is at our little ole’ school, Ericka.’ They just kept saying that. I mean in their lives, where on earth would that have happened? They didn’t have any reference point for somebody so wonderful and famous in a way and good to be there with them because a lot of the children didn’t have very much good in their lives. Their parents were good people but society wasn’t good to them. So when they said that, then I started to cry and we were all holding hands standing there crying [Laughs]. I said, ‘Well girls you are in the play though, so we are going to have to blow the snot out of our noses and wipe our eyes and go on back out there because you are two of the main characters on the bus.’ They said, ‘We know but we just had to come back here and just cry.’ We had a little hug and then we walked out. No one could tell but me that they were crying and they took their seats with their teacher. She let them go to the bathroom together because she knew they were buddies but she had no idea why it was taking so long. I didn’t

tell her then. But as they were walking down the aisle to the front where the children in the play were sitting, they stopped at the aisle where Rosa was and they sort of leaned their heads toward her and waved and then they went and sat down. Isn't that the sweetest thing? I love how pure children are. They are just so pure! And we allowed them to be like that. In the public school I went to in D.C., if you were in the bathroom crying--'Girl, wipe your face and get back to class. You know you are not supposed to be in this bathroom!' It's so ugly. And those were all Black women teachers."

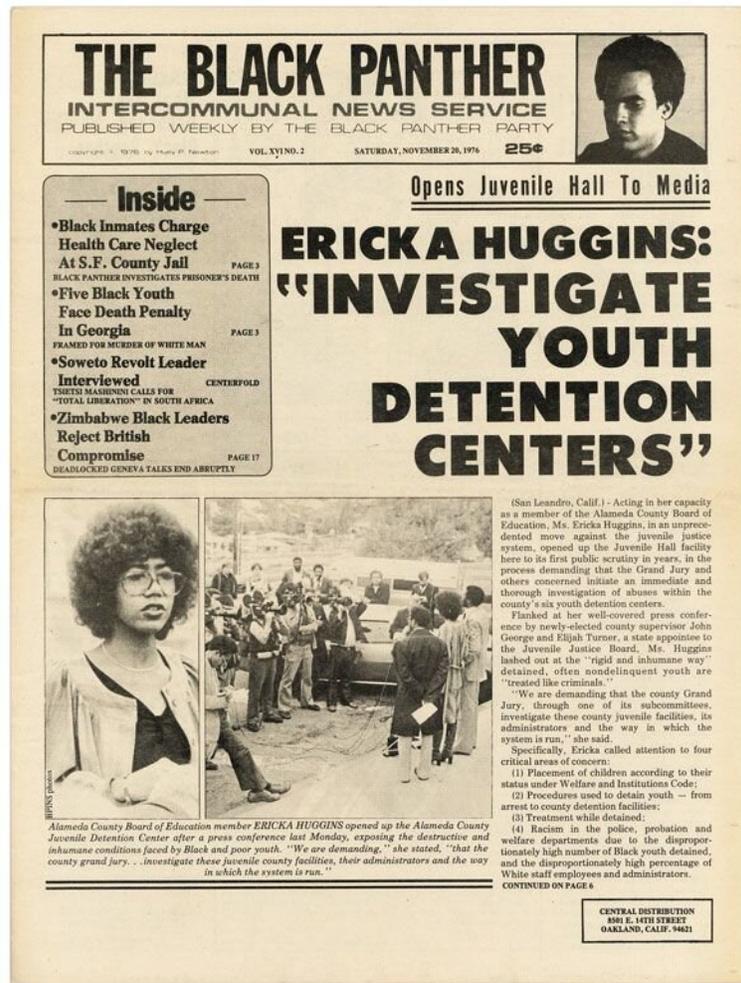
"We need to learn a new way to be with one another as part of the work we do to uplift humanity. We have assumed all kinds of inner and outer postures about how we are supposed to be because there was no healing after Africans were removed from slavery on paper. There has been no healing ever! Not even an apology. So here we are sitting with the wounds of history in a multigenerational way, you know what I mean?"

**Yes, I do. Sometimes I ponder and think about the generational trauma and how do we correct it? How do we address it and how can we transform it?**

**EH:** "Through feminism. If we call ourselves feminists, we must address it directly. Who are we waiting on? I know we are not waiting on the government to do it. Or leftist political officials? Some of them could if they would. Barbara Lee, for instance, who was the Congresswoman from California, talks about it all the time. She wrote a biography and it would be an interesting biography for you to read. By the way, my documentary film is coming out about her life, starting from her childhood all the way through--did you know she was a volunteer with the Black Panther Party before she went to D.C. to become an intern with Ron Dellums? She told me when she was going. You see, I think we think and we are taught to think of history as a set of separate decades and separate moments. History is a continuum. The Black Panther Party didn't come from out of the sky. The Civil Rights Movement didn't end and the Black Liberation Movements began. The one led to the other. It is a natural flow like an evolution and we are taught to think in a very male and European kind of siloed way."

"One of the things Rosa liked about the Black Panther Party was that we formed coalitions with everybody. As a matter of fact, two things: one, we formed a coalition with the Young Lords. The Young Patriots, who were poor white Appalachian men and women, many of them young, and they formed at the suggestion of Fred Hampton, and we worked in coalition with them. And the American Indian Movement, the Third World Women's Alliance--we couldn't work directly with the Second Wave Women's Movement because they were very, very racist and their notions of feminism it opened but at that time they were not open to see issues of women of color as feminist issues. In the early days of the Liberation Movements around the country, when the word feminism was used you got an allergic reaction to it because of that racism. I am sure you know that but we lived it. The Third World Women's Alliance was Asians and Latinas who started it, and that was their response to the narrow focus of when you say women, it equals white and then there are all these other people. And we formed coalitions with them and as a matter of fact, as a result of our coalition with the Third World Women's Alliance, we formed a coalition to end infant mortality in Oakland. Oakland in the seventies had one of the highest rates of infant mortality and maternal death in the country and rates similar to sub-Saharan Africa. That says something about the structure of healthcare."

“It was the Third World Women’s Alliance that went with us to the County Board of Supervisors here in Oakland and changed the county’s hospital ways of handling pregnant and birthing women when they came for care. And some of that translated to private hospitals as well. We also worked with all kinds of organizations. We worked with Chicano/Chicana organizations and names of which I can’t even remember. Once the concept of the Black Student Union [BSU] was created, that expressed itself everywhere across the country. Then Latinx people created their own organizations and worked in concert with the BSUs. Now, it is different. Black folks are in this silo. Feminist Black folks are in this silo and Latinx people are in this silo. And Indigenous People are not often thought apart as well as Asian-American people. We worked with some really amazing Southeast Asian and Central Asian organizations and they were very revolutionary. We also worked with various organizations to end the war in Vietnam. I still feel like if we could form coalitions today with like organizations, especially women, that we would be a force to contend with. That is why we did it because we were all being stalked, infiltrated, jailed, killed, and so we formed coalitions to have strength in numbers and to support one another. We saw the beauty and the power of it.”



Huggins on the cover of the 1976 Black Panther Newspaper.

What are you the most proud of in regards to your work as a leader, organizer, and activist?

**EH:** “That I am still doing it and that I work with anyone who wants to work with me. Pride is a funny, funny thing but I know how you mean it. I don’t feel puffed up about it but it is humbling actually that whatever it is—maybe it’s that vow I made at 15—makes me want to serve anybody who wants to serve. That is why I said yes to this interview. I think that working in coalition with other women, especially other communities of women of color, no matter who they are, no matter how they identify—if they were born male and now they are identifying as a woman, fine. I will work with them. And I did. My first entry in working with trans women and trans men was during the AIDS epidemic, when gay and lesbian people were not willing to work with trans people and they would say, ‘We can’t coalesce with them.’ It was ignorant. I did a lot of work with them in the San Francisco Tenderloin, which is where primarily people who live in the Tenderloin are Southeast Asian but the Tenderloin also had a huge population of transgender people. I created an organization in the Shanti Project, which was one of the first organizations at the height of the epidemic to serve LGBTQ+ youth and adults of all races. I started a program called ‘Crossings’ and we named it that because it was absolutely the crossing over from one racial/ethnic community to others and also in terms of gender and sexual identity.”

“In working with the trans population, they were often traumatized in multiple ways that don’t affect a man who identifies as gay or a woman who identifies as a lesbian even if they are interventionist drug users, do you follow me? What happens with the trans person when they begin to create the medicine cocktails that stop the progression of the virus and in its work to suppress the immune system, those drugs were not compatible with the hormones trans people were having to take. So, do I need to spell out what the trauma was? I really got to know a lot of the Black and Brown trans women in a really humanly intimate way. I got to understand what their lives were like. I can’t participate in those ridiculous conversations about how they are not really women and they are not really this, especially coming from lesbian women. I was proud that the Crossings program did the work that it did. We also worked with Latino women and their children in the Mission District of San Francisco [which has] a huge Latinx population, although gentrification has been creeping, creeping, creeping. It was a site where people were migrating from Mexico to the United States and to Mission, San Francisco. I feel very humbled by and honored to serve in that kind of way. The Oakland Community School sort of stands out in my mind. It always does. I learned so much how to be with people there and I was so young. You know the median age of people in the Black Panther Party was 19?”

**JS: Wow, that’s my sister’s age. [Laughs]**

**EH:** “How old are you?”

**JS: “I am 28. Lord’s will, I will be 29 in a couple of weeks.”**

**EH:** “What’s your birthday?”

**JS: “My birthday is March 31st.”**

**EH:** “Aww, that’s wonderful! That’s wonderful.”

**JS: Thank you so much!**

**EH:** “That age you are in now and up to when you are about 30, is said it is a time in one’s life—and you may be experiencing it already—when that which you haven’t looked or considered carefully, you’ve known that you need to but you haven’t, you must do it. Do you feel that sometimes?”

**JS: “I do. It is an urging.”**

**EH:** “It’s because you know you’re not a child. You are not just 20 anymore. So people find the courage and the stamina to sort of stay focused with [those things] that need your focus. Like the work you are doing now.”

“But my favorite thing now is when I am invited to speak with fourth and fifth graders. That just makes my day because they are so direct, honest, pure, and funny! There is a part of me that is like that too, so when I talk to them and I don’t care who they are—I don’t care if they are white, Black, Brown, it just doesn’t really matter—you know? I am interrupting socialization by talking to them and they know it! And they love it. They want to know the truth. One little boy asked me in a fourth grade class. I

think it was this year in January, and he asked me, “When you were incarcerated and you lost your husband and couldn’t see your daughter, were you sad?” Do you see what I mean? But do college students do that? They are taught not to do that and I don’t know why! When I was a professor and I was teaching on college campuses, I was asking why we use all this language that only we know what we are talking about. What is the point of understanding intersectionality or positionality and anti-Blackness and any of these terms if we are not going to be able to talk to students about it so they can understand it? It all becomes code. For me, it is difficult. Let me just leave it at that. But those fourth and fifth graders, they want to know. One little girl with long brown hair and big blue eyes said to me, “What is wrong with people? Racism is the stupidest thing I ever heard of in my life!” And her teacher stiffened. I watched her. Because it meant that the teacher is going to have to continue to talk to that little girl. That is how we want children to feel—we want them to feel that fear based saying, thinking, and doing is ignorant. I said, “Well, I wouldn’t use that word stupid but I do understand how you feel about it.” And she said, “Yeah!” She was such a stand up. I said, “Well, talk some more with your parents about it” and she said, “I do and they think it’s ignorant too and I see other people who don’t and I just don’t understand it.” And she was very—her heart was really open and I could tell. She wasn’t just spewing. She just didn’t get it and she shouldn’t and she should never make excuses for it. And we don’t want her to make excuses—we want her to be as knowledgeable as we are because our parents have had to have that conversation with us very intentionally in order for us to walk out of the door and navigate the world. But there she was, having that conversation. And all her little Black friends would smile and they were so proud of her. That is my new favorite thing. I always walk away from them feeling like that song—what’s that song? ‘We gon’ be alright!’ [Laughs].

“I always feel so uplifted. They always invite me back and they write little notes about why it is important I came to their school. And I always remember those two little girls in that bathroom crying because Rosa Parks was there. I am not Rosa Parks but I kind of get—we live in a world that is full of lies and full of miseducation. Full of craziness. Can you imagine being nine-years old right now trying to figure this out? You can’t. You wouldn’t want it. So, anyway those are some of the things. And also my daily practice of meditation. It keeps me sane. It gives me balance. When I mean sane, I don’t mean as opposed to insanity, what I mean is it keeps me focused, alert, and aware and kind as I walk through the world.”



Author and poet Maya Angelou at the Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School in the 1970s.

“Oh, and I didn’t tell you the day Maya Angelou came to the school and read poetry to the children! Some of the children weren’t even old enough to know who she was but they just liked her because she was a poet. And the older children were floored. We became very close friends at a point in history when I was having a rough patch. I forgot to say this but thinking of Maya just reminded me but we must be mentors, I don’t care how old we are. If someone needs mentoring in our family, we should put ourselves out there some kind of way. Maya became a mentor to me when I was really going through a horrible patch in my life and she helped me through it. I don’t know what I would have done. It wasn’t like she talked me up or something or preached at me or said a whole bunch of wise things. She just let me talk and she just listened. I met her the day she came to

Oakland Community School. She wanted to come. I am telling you people were asking to come because they had never seen anything like it! And Maya and I created an after school program and a number of public schools as a result of this.”

“This is a funny story [Laughs]. Maya called me to say, ‘Dear, I hear there is something called the Bay Area Black United Fund.’ I said, ‘Yes, there is.’ She said, ‘These Negroes should give us some money to start our program!’ [Laughs] I just fell out laughing! I said, ‘You are right! They are kind of snotty.’ She said, ‘Well, they are not going to be snotty with me. Let’s start this after school program.’ And she did—she got them to give her some money! [Laughs] We did wonderful work. Anyway, she came that day and she spent the whole day at the school and she loved it. She was just blown out because none of us had any degrees to mention, we just had a lot of love. And we hired people who were educators who were willing to take a cut and pay from the public schools. That has to tell you we didn’t have a lot of money but we learned how to grant write. But at any rate, she left that day and she said, ‘Dear, when I come back I am bringing Jimmy.’ And I knew who she meant and I said, ‘Maya!’ And she said, ‘You just watch.’ And she came back with James Baldwin. And that was one of those days. I wanted you to hear this. He has always been one of my favorite-ever people in the world. And when I met him, I had read all of his books up until that point, that was 1976 or 1977. He was the dearest and kindest. And I will tell you what he said to me, in tears, he was in tears as he was leaving the school that day. He said, ‘I am so glad Maya brought me. I want to say that every little Black child, every one of them should have this kind of school. I didn’t have this. You didn’t have this but I am so glad this exists.’ And I said, ‘That is how we intended it. We intended it to be a model so people can use it wherever we are in the world.’ And he said, ‘Let’s hope they do.’ And he gave me a big hug. And I don’t think I ever saw him again in person but it stayed with me. He is a hero of mine. I have a picture of him right in front of me as I am talking to you. He was fierce, he was clear, he was direct, he was poetic, and he was all those things and he was such a tender heart.”

“SunRa, a famous musician came, an abstract jazz musician. Richard Pryor came. Cesar Chavez, another magnificent human being. He was doing farmworker’s work in East Oakland and he asked if he could come by with his contingent and he did. And he was in awe of the school. I am telling you that makes me feel so humble and with pride. It is just that all these people got to see what could be done that we don’t have to be sitting around complaining and whining about public school. Do something—that is what the Black Panther Party said. If you can’t figure out what to do, then that is your problem. If it is in front of you and it needs your attention, give it attention. And so we started clinics. We started schools. We started free busing to prisons programs; free coat programs on the East Coast; food giveaways; free breakfast for children; and police watch. And there were people who challenged us and said we weren’t proper because we were giving people things and they should have to work for it. This was from socialists and communists who said this at the time but that was because they were in their heads. They had never experienced or maybe they had never experienced poverty or been with hungry children. That is no joke. So, anyway I just wanted to tell you about Maya and Jimmy.”

For more information about Ericka Huggins, please visit her [website](#).



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