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**The Oakland Community School, Oakland, CA / The Hope Is Our Young People  
In Struggle Spotlight**

**By Larry Pinkney**

**BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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This is the 3rd and final part of an interview in late June 2008, with Ericka Huggins, former national Minister of Education for the Black Panther Party. In this portion Sister Ericka continues her very informative narrative about the Oakland Community School, Oakland, CA.

Sister Ericka Huggins explained that the Oakland Community School was in fact "an oasis, [a] kind of a haven" for its students, "untouched by the outer challenges of the community while school was in session." Though it was well known by the greater community that the school was administered and staffed primarily by Black Panther Party members, and fully supported by the Black Panther Party's leadership; there were also students enrolled in the Oakland Community School whose parents and /or guardians were not [Black Panther] "Party members." A parent or guardian did not necessarily have to be a Black Panther Party member as a prerequisite to enrolling

one's child into the school. The Oakland Community School was about serving the community as a whole.

The Oakland Community School was, as Sister Ericka delineated, "*There for the children...*and it also, until its final year [of] 1981, remained *untouched* by the clashes and imminent end to the Black Panther Party." Thus, for approximately ten years the Oakland Community School had, as Brother Huey P. Newton sometimes remarked, had strived to 'serve the people body and soul.'

As I listened to Sister Ericka Huggins' words during my interview of her I could not help but think of the words of Huey P. Newton when he said, "To die for the...racists...is lighter than a feather. But to die for the people... is heavier than any mountain and deeper than any sea." [Reference the introductory pages to the book titled, [To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton](#)].

Sister Ericka emphasized that the Oakland Community School "was a remarkable expression of the action that one can take if a person understands point 5 of the Black Panther Party Program. [Point 5 of the Black Panther Party Program reads:

"We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have [*or woman*] does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else."

Sister Ericka also explained that the Oakland Community School "was loved not only by the Black community but...had Latino students...Filipino & Black, Latino & Black, Black & White, multicultural students from multicultural families...and [the Oakland Community School] also had White students...Out of the hundreds and hundreds of students who came to the school over the years only one family was wealthy. The school was so loved by the community that people placed their unborn children on [its] waiting list."

It was especially uplifting when Ericka remarked that, "When society, any society, or even a community, or a tribe, or a village...When any social group decides to give *whole* being education to its children...that education, the love and care given to those children leaves an immortal stain on that community—a beautiful stain - -in the sense that the children raise their children in the way that they were raised."

Sister Huggins noted that today our society exists "helter skelter," with adults being interested primarily in themselves, and lacking a sense of "longevity", particularly as related to today's children. Ericka poignantly stated that she "wants the planet to exist long after [she] is gone not just for her children and grandchildren but for *all* the children."

I asked Ericka if what was done at the Oakland Community School is "possible" today. Her answer was and emphatic "yes!" She noted that people today "are already trying to do it" though she cautioned often people don't quite know how to do it "without bringing in *huge* sources of funding that *restrict* their curricular and programmatic movement, but people *are trying*." She further indicated that presently "there are, for instance small high schools all over Oakland [CA]" and that she mentors students in them and they are incredible; but either [such schools] "are under resourced, under staffed, and those staff are under paid... or they are over funded, over staffed, and over administrated...and the middle ground - the no tuition community school - like Oakland

Community School doesn't really exist." She further noted that the charter schools "have become big business" and "the church schools...spend way more time convincing children to love a particular version of God than to love themselves." Ericka pointed out that if and when a funding source dried up for the Oakland Community School, the staff and administrators "did *not* close down the school. Rather, they hit the pavement" doing whatever had to be done in order to keep the Oakland Community School [OCS] open and functioning, which included OCS teachers who had come from various school districts taking enormous "cuts in pay," and some teachers even "going on welfare" in order to survive, *not* draw funds from the [Black Panther] Party, and simultaneously keep the Oakland Community School up and functioning. Sister Ericka Huggins said, "Yes, it *can* be done [today] *if* people have the *passion* for young people; and we need to have that *passion*."

Sister Ericka, made it quite clear that education to the "*true nature of our society*" (as point 5 of the Black Panther Party Program refers to), brings about "consciousness." She said that, "Whenever people are educated they will speak from a *whole* place, not a scattered, fractured, broken place."

"There is," as Ericka described it, "a national hemorrhage [today] in our youth and they are dying." She made the case for *not* waiting for "government, churches, or elected officials" to take action in this regards, but to take action ourselves *as a community and/or communities*.

The fervor and passion for our youth still burn deeply in Ericka Huggins. She is of course but one brilliantly stalwart representative of the many passionately dedicated "family of staff, parents, students, and their children" of the Oakland Community School whose historical example is indelibly stamped in the hearts and minds of so many right down to the present.

As the late great Marvin Gaye, sang in his clarion song entitled, "Save the Children," from the [What's Going On](#) album / cd: "Children today, really suffer tomorrow. Oh what a shame. Such a bad way to live...Live for life. Live life *for the children*. *Save the babies*. *You will save the babies, all of the children*. But who really cares? Who's willing to try?..."

The Oakland Community School *did* "really care" and was in fact "willing to try," and in so doing has provided all of us with a sterling example of what can be done yet again.

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**The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog**

**BlackCommentator.com** Editorial Board Member, Larry Pinkney, is a veteran of the Black Panther Party, the former Minister of Interior of the Republic of New Africa, a former political prisoner and the only American to have successfully self-authored his civil/political rights case to the United Nations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In connection with his political organizing activities in opposition to voter suppression, etc., Pinkney was interviewed in 1988 on the nationally televised PBS NewsHour, formerly known as The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour. For more about Larry Pinkney see the book, [Saying No to Power: Autobiography of a 20th Century Activist and Thinker](#), by William Mandel [Introduction by Howard Zinn]. (Click [here](#) to read excerpts from the book). Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Pinkney.

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