

Rapping with Mr. Richard Reginald Schell

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Abstract:

This interview was conducted with Mr. Richard R. Schell (aka Reggie Schell), former Defense Captain of the Philadelphia, PA, Branch of the Black Panther Party from its founding in late-1968 to early-1971. The interview highlights Mr. Schell's family background, educational experiences, the Philadelphia community, his role in the development of the Philadelphia Branch, and the BPP's legacy.

Keyword: Black Panther Party | Black Panthers | Reggie Schell | Richard Reginald Schell | Philadelphia branch

Article:

Mr. Richard R. Schell (aka Reggie Schell) was the former Defense Captain of the Philadelphia, PA, Branch of the Black Panther Party from its founding in late-1968 to early-1971. I had several conversations with Mr. Schell from September 30, 2005 to January 13, 2007. During this time, Mr. Schell provided me with a window into his family background, educational experiences, the Philadelphia community, his role in the development of the Philadelphia Branch, and the BPP's legacy. Although the BPP withered away long ago, Mr. Schell continued in his efforts to improve the Philadelphia community until his final transition on May 9, 2012.

Omari L. Dyson: Mr. Schell let's start with a little information on your background and experiences growing up in Philly.

Reggie Schell: Ok. Well, I was born on July 6, 1941 and was the second of five children. I grew up in a close-knit family in North Philadelphia with my parents.

OLD: Where are your parents from?

RS: My mother is from South Carolina and my father from Savannah, GA.

OLD: What about your experiences in school?

RS: Well, I went to West Philadelphia High School from 1953-54...it was predominantly Black. But it wasn't until my early teens that I came to understand

racism after I transferred to South Philadelphia High School, which was predominantly White, from 1954-1957 or maybe 1958.

OLD: Please tell me more about that experience.

RS: Well, while attending South Philadelphia, I began to associate myself with gangs when I experienced racial tension from White boys. This tension usually revolved around “territorial disputes.” By the time I was 17 years old, I was kicked out of school for playing hooky.

OLD: Oh...what happened then?

RS: After that point, I received my parents’ consent and enlisted in the Army where I served for 3 years. While in the Army, around 1959, I served in the infantry unit and was in training to become a foot soldier and drove an APC.

OLD: Did you serve in ‘Nam?

RS: No, I did not go to war.

OLD: So, what happened after your time in the Army?

RS: I returned to Philadelphia at age 22 and received my GED.

OLD: Now, when you returned to Philadelphia, tell me about the community organizations that were visible or prominent during this time.

RS: Around the mid-60s, I recall three functioning organizations—the Black Muslims, the NAACP,¹ and RAM.² Even though they were visible, they failed to address police brutality.

OLD: Can you elaborate?

RS: Yeah, I did not see direct action from RAM nor the Black Muslims, but I did see NAACP being the most vocal in respect to discrimination. The youth admired the fact that the NAACP was run by the church. They targeted police brutality, but did not want to get into direct action against it. I remember wanting to do something after watching television and seeing the Civil Rights protests in Alabama when the cops were beating down Blacks and letting their dogs attack them.

OLD: Were these factors the main contributors to a rise of the Panthers in Philadelphia?

RS: Well, the main catalyst that established a chapter was that Civil Rights moved to another level to address voting rights; however, police brutality was still rampant because Blacks continued to be shot. Black people had a miserable life. Eventually, 12 or 13 of us came together to address these issues. We contacted and met with Donald Cox, who was the Field Marshall from National Headquarters, and worked to officially establish the chapter by late-1968 or sometime in 1969...I can’t remember the exact date. But when we were established, I became the Defense Captain and Craig Williams became the Field Marshall. Shortly after that, I was placed on a committee to find an office for us in North Philadelphia.

OLD: What was the location of the office?

RS: 1928 W. Columbia Ave.

OLD: Ok. So, based on the original people that started, how were you all able to expand?

RS: Mainly through recruitment initiatives

OLD: What did that involve?

RS: Just talking to people in the community and inviting them to our events like our P.E. Classes and Free Breakfast Program.

OLD: How many members did the Chapter have?

RS: We had about 50 Panthers and 100 Panther supporters, and had enough members to band together and establish offices in other locations. However, in Spring 1969 we received a national directive to shut down membership due to infiltration. But we were able to expand throughout the state, specifically in: Redding, Harrisburg, and Pittsburgh. But they were set up as Black Community Information Centers.

OLD: How were you all able to stay in touch with National Headquarters?

RS: Well, we were in constant contact with the national office. We had meetings every Sunday with Regional Headquarters who met with David Hilliard. The Chapters from East of Chicago would send representatives to this meeting and it consisted of: D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Winston-Salem, North Carolina. All of us would report our newspaper sales, national programs, and discuss what was needed for events like the "Free Huey Rally." I also had to travel to Oakland.

OLD: Ok. Now, can you tell me more about the programs that you all offered the community during this time?

RS: Yes, first of, the Survival Programs were the heart of the BPP. In Philly, we had the Breakfast Program right across the street from our office. We started out serving 70 kids every morning. Soon, it was getting bigger, and we expanded to four or five different places in West Philadelphia, Germantown, and South Philadelphia.

OLD: Wow!

RS: By, I think Fall 1969, we established a health clinic with the help of some doctors and Quakers in the city. They provided medicine, treatment for basic ailments, and answered questions that the community had.

OLD: Where was the clinic?

RS: It was in North Philadelphia: 16th and Susquehanna.

OLD: How many people frequented the Clinic?

RS: I would say around 20 to 25 people on a daily basis.

OLD: Anything else?

RS: Yes {laughs}! We established a clothing...we contacted people in the community and convinced them to give us their old clothes instead of donating them to Goodwill. After a while, the program expanded and we continued to give clothes, and eventually, donated food to those in need.

OLD: What did you do when you would run out of items?

RS: Well, we would get the people's information and when we received more food or clothes, we would contact them.

OLD: That was a nice gesture... [yes!]. Were there any other programs that you can remember?

RS: Yes, we offered Political Education Classes that met every Tuesday to educate the community on the 10-Point Program, discuss current events, police beatings, city council doings, and stopping gang wars.

OLD: Ok, so describe what a typical P.E. Class was like for someone coming off the street.

RS: Well, usually our classes were done on a community event. Some of them were very intense. So, we had to bring a level of consciousness and explain what terms like this [consciousness] meant. We had to break down the "Red Book" in terms that they could understand. Some meetings involved current topics in the news, police shootings, police beatings, things like that.

OLD: So, it was a constant flow of information that kept people in the loop?

RS: Right...we wanted People to understand the rules of power and make connections between current situations and slavery. For example, the overseer and the police. [ok] So, a question that we would ask is: Bwhy do you think this took place?^ And from there, we would enter a discussion to understand domination and racism. Our sessions focused on unity versus domination, so we taught from an approach that had a Blove for people^ who were fractured and brutalized across the country. We would sit down and educate on terms like Bcommunalism^ and would break it down for people to understand. Or we would take the Red Book, read a chapter, and ask people what they thought it meant. We would then facilitate discussions so everyone could get a picture on what took place...we even read something from Fanon or something else and would discuss it.

OLD: That's very detailed.

RS: Well, yeah. We were "hands-on," not abstract about trying to reach a piece of freedom.

OLD: I can relate to that. Now, I wanted to return to a point you made about gangs because it reminded me of an article I read in the Philadelphia Tribune that talked about your work with gang members. Can you elaborate more on your efforts?

RS: Well, we would attempt to make truces with them and some members worked with us to raise money and participate in the Breakfast Program. We had good

rapport with them. They were our outside supporters and came to us whenever they had problems.

OLD: Based on your social relief efforts, how did the community respond?

RS: I can say that Black people appreciated our programs and showed their support.

OLD: Ok, so I am curious, especially since there is a lot of talk on sexism in the organization, what were relationships between men and women like?

RS: Well, you must understand: we were all young and we were street people, so we had a tendency to support certain sex roles. We had male chauvinism, and I attempted to alleviate it by putting the focus on one's duties and responsibilities. In other words, the women had many skills and played various leadership roles.

OLD: So, you were one of the founding members of the organization, what would you say led to the demise of the Panthers in Philadelphia?

RS: Well, I left in 1971, shortly after the Plenary session.³

OLD: Why?

RS: Well, I began to see things that were becoming explosive, so I had to do what was good for me at the time.

OLD: What do you mean by "explosive?"

RS: New York was going to explode with Oakland, and David Hilliard was catching hell. The division stemmed from mistrust and bad information. We did not realize that agents were playing a part through COINTELPRO. And around 1970–71, things began to escalate. So, when I decided to leave, 10 to 15 other members left with me.

OLD: They were loyal?

RS: Yeah. So, I was asked to go to New Haven to work after a regional meeting in NY. But I noticed that the Organization was coming to a division, especially after going to the West Coast and seeing the rift. I thought that after Huey's release, he would do something about this, but he didn't and things got worse. Personally, I felt that once Huey got out of jail, he did not seem like the same person. So eventually, Huey sent West Coast Panthers to assist with organizing East Coast. And then, there was a focus on Huey being the Supreme, god-like character, not the Minister of Defense and it seemed like the organization became cult-like. And while all this was happening, Donald Cox was gone, David Hilliard was in jail, Bobby Seale was in jail, and Eldridge Cleaver was in exile. So, I left the Chapter around 1971 after Plenary meeting and a raid on our offices.⁴

OLD: That seemed like a stressful situation...I can understand your rationale for departing. What did you do after you left?

RS: Well, in 1972, I worked to establish the Black United Liberation Front which focused on the same things as the Panthers. We continued to organize for the community and educate people. We participated in the Breakfast and Busing

Program. We stayed together until about 1975–76 because we went broke and members had to tend to the needs of their families. And by this time, the Philadelphia Branch was gone and members traveled to the West Coast to assist in Bobby Seale’s campaign. But members were also leaving nationwide.

OLD: Based on this, I can tell that your love for the community did not end with your departure from the Panthers.

RS: Right!

OLD: Ok, Mr. Schell, thank you for taking time to speak to me, but before we depart, I would like to know: what is the legacy of the Panthers in Philly?

RS: Well, the community was wiped out drugs. I can say that the people in the community have a deep respect for me and the members and can still relate to us. I am still recognized as a member of the Party and Black United Liberation Front, and continue to keep in contact with old Panthers.

OLD: Thank you for sharing your story with me!

RS: Anytime!

Notes:

1. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
2. Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).
3. The Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia, PA, from September 4–6, 1970.
4. In the early morning on August 31, 1970, Philadelphia Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo orchestrated raid on three of the Panther’s offices in the city.