

Ex-Panther leader: King was 'moral center'

'60s radical tells Santa Rosa crowd that preacher showed things could change



“Through Dr. King, I found my moral center,” said Elbert "Big Man" Howard. “Stay the course. Stay united. All power to the people.”

JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

By [JULIE JOHNSON](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Sunday, January 15, 2012 at 3:00 a.m.

Last Modified: Sunday, January 15, 2012 at 9:09 p.m.

Page 1 of 2

Two very different men held court in Santa Rosa Sunday evening — one a radical who wanted action and revolution, the other a preacher of peaceful resistance whose memory lives on long after his death.

Though their tactics appeared radically different, former Black Panther Elbert “Big Man” Howard told more than 500 people in Santa Rosa High School's auditorium that Martin Luther King, Jr. fueled his belief that people could demand change.

“Through Dr. King, I found my moral center,” said Howard, who lives in Forestville. “Stay the course. Stay united. All power to the people.”

Howard spoke at Santa Rosa's annual celebration of the slain civil rights leader's birthday. The holiday is recognized Monday and used by many as a day of volunteering and service.

Howard and King represent two forces that galvanized African American men and many others to have the courage to march, said Rev. Donald Pete with Community Baptist Church.

“We all felt we needed to be free, but how you do it was the question,” Pete said.

King carved a path of dignity and morality, he said. The Panthers showed young men things could be different right now.

Howard told the crowd that King laid the groundwork for his group's activism. He remembers walking to the back of the bus where he was forced to sit, well aware that he was still paying the same fare as white customers.

“Then along comes this Baptist preacher, speaking bravely and clearly on our issues,” Howard said.

“He taught us, no matter what, the most important thing is to stick together and not allow the forces of oppression to deter us.”

Howard and fellow Merritt College students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in October 1966.

They were tired of watching the Oakland police harass young black men, he said. They wanted the right to vote without intimidation. They wanted poor children of Oakland to have access to food and good schools.

They formed free medical clinics specializing in sickle-cell anemia. They started work-study programs for parolees. They organized men to trail officers, and when they pulled over African American men, to observe the interactions, holding law books and guns.

Outside the high school auditorium, Will Morris, 54, of Bodega said he was “deeply moved” by Howard's recollections of being a young man in the south.

The chimney sweep said he was nearly brought to tears hearing King's words echoed in speeches given by two high school students after Howard spoke.

“If the youth get it, you can be sure we're headed in the right direction,” Morris said.

Maria Carrillo High School sophomore Erika Chang-Sing and freshman Lauren Smith were honored at Sunday's event for winning a speech competition. They each gave speeches on the theme “freedom and dignity for all people,” and elicited cries of “Amen” from the crowd.

Chang-Sing spoke about the impact of the recession on opportunities for teens as well as the outlook they hold for their futures.

“Dr. King once said, faith is taking the first step even if we don't see the whole staircase,” Chang-Sing said.

Howard and fellow Merritt College students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in October 1966.

They were tired of watching the Oakland police harass young black men, he said. They wanted the right to vote without intimidation. They wanted poor children of Oakland to have access to food and good schools.

They formed free medical clinics specializing in sickle-cell anemia. They started work-study programs for parolees. They organized men to trail officers, and when they pulled over African American men, to observe the interactions, holding law books and guns.

Outside the high school auditorium, Will Morris, 54, of Bodega said he was “deeply moved” by Howard's recollections of being a young man in the south.

The chimney sweep said he was nearly brought to tears hearing King's words echoed in speeches given by two high school students after Howard spoke.

“If the youth get it, you can be sure we're headed in the right direction,” Morris said.

Maria Carrillo High School sophomore Erika Chang-Sing and freshman Lauren Smith were honored at Sunday's event for winning a speech competition. They each gave speeches on the theme “freedom and dignity for all people,” and elicited cries of “Amen” from the crowd.

Chang-Sing spoke about the impact of the recession on opportunities for teens as well as the outlook they hold for their futures.

“Dr. King once said, faith is taking the first step even if we don't see the whole staircase,” Chang-Sing said.