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Mumia Abu-Jamal's fight for freedom

written by Gloria Verdieu

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Rooted in Black liberation struggle

"Philadelphia is the city that imprisons the majority of Black and Brown youth. It is the city that has also imprisoned and attempted to silence the most important political prisoner in the history of the United States, essentially the Nelson Mandela of our time ... a man who has been demonized for essentially illuminating the truth about Black oppression, about the predations of capitalism and imperialism, a man who is mild mannered but is unwilling to compromise with justice." — Johanna Fernandez (Democracy Now!, Dec. 28, 2018)



Mumia Abu-Jamal

The international movement to Free Mumia has been working hard to make Mumia Abu-Jamal's name as well known as Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, Nelson Mandela, Marcus Garvey and a host of others who have fought for justice and equality. Freeing Mumia will open the door to freedom for all political prisoners and intensify our efforts to dismantle the prison-industrial complex, end the racist death penalty and illuminate police brutality by redefining the whole purpose of the police — if there is any at all.

Mumia was sentenced to death in 1982 and remained on death row until 2011, when the prosecution agreed to a sentence of life imprisonment without parole. Mumia has been in what he describes as a hellhole for 37 years. While in prison, his mother, sister, daughter and many of his supporters, including Safiya Bukhari and Veronica Jones, have died. Jones was one of the witnesses who came forward to reveal that their testimonies were coerced during the 1982 trial.

Mumia Abu-Jamal, born Wesley Cook to William and Edith Cook, grew up in the housing projects (PJs) of Philadelphia. His mother had come to Philly from North Carolina, part of the continuing migration of Blacks to the North seeking a better life and future for their children.

Mumia's mother taught her children those good old-fashioned manners. His father

spent a lot of time with the children, teaching and encouraging them to read. Both wanted the best for the children and thought that education would be the key to their futures. One of the goals set for all the children was that they finish school.

William died while Wesley and Wayne, Mumia's twin brother, were still in grade school, leaving Edith to raise six children.

Lessons learned early

The PJ's were public housing and a lot of the families were getting public assistance. Caseworkers made regular visits to the projects. When they came to Edith's house, she would tell the children to help hide everything that was worth anything. These visits were the welfare system's way to keep you down, to humiliate you. The police also came into the neighborhood, taking people away and using any excuse for an invasion to cause fear.

Wesley was extremely inquisitive. He was often seen telling stories to the neighborhood kids. He had many nicknames. One was "Scout" because he was always venturing out. He knew there was more to the world than what was in the PJs. Another was "UN" for United Nations, because when he read or heard about other countries and places he would talk about them.

Wesley was fortunate to have some very strong African teachers. One of them, born in Kenya, gave students their Kikuyu names. Wesley's Kenyan name was Mumia. Wesley liked this name and insisted that he be called Mumia. Abu-Jamal was added later, when he fathered his first child. Abu means father and Jamal was his first son's name.

Another teacher had pictures of W.E.B. DuBois and Malcolm X on the classroom wall to show the students that Black people are leaders. He told the students that Black people are great builders, mathematicians and scientists, and that Africa is the

cradle of civilization.

Mumia grew up at a time when Black people were fighting on all fronts for civil rights, equality, justice, the right to sit anywhere on the bus, to use public facilities and just plain basic human rights. Martin Luther King was struggling in the South and racist Gov. George Wallace was running for president. At 14, Mumia convinced a couple of his friends to participate in a protest against Wallace.

At the protest, Mumia and his friends were punched, kicked and beaten by resentful, angry white people. When they called out for help, police came and joined in kicking and beating them with nightsticks. They were handcuffed, arrested and charged with assault. Fortunately, the case against them was dismissed by a sympathetic judge.

Mumia tried to work within the school system by getting some of the students together to rally for a curriculum that included African Studies. Good try, but it didn't work out. It just caused him problems at school.

Meeting the Panthers

Mumia was also introduced to the Black Panther Party when he was 14 years old, by someone who handed him a copy of the Black Panther newspaper. He read about people like Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara and Mao Zedong. He read about South Africa, Cuba, Vietnam and people fighting for justice all over the world. He learned about Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver and other Panthers recognized as world-class revolutionaries.

At the time, the Philadelphia police were instigating a program called "The Cops are Your Friends." They called Mumia's house and told Edith Cook to watch her son. Keep him in line and if she needs help, they are around.

How do you explain to Mom, who wants only the best for you, that the police are not

your friends?

Mumia began spending a lot of his time organizing with the BPP, passing out flyers and distributing papers. He became the Philly chapter's lieutenant of information and started writing articles for the Black Panther newspaper. At that time — in 1969 — the paper was selling 100,000 copies a week.

At 15, Mumia was already known nationwide for his journalism. The local police, FBI and CIA added this information to their existing file on him. Some of what he wrote in the paper and said at various rallies was used against him at his trial years later.

BPP organizers in New York took notice of Mumia. He was sent to New York and then to Oakland, the Party's national headquarters. He reported on the police assassination of 21-year-old Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois BPP chapter, and many other actions by the capitalist state against the BPP.

Edith worried about her son running off with some militant organization with no interest in school. Mumia told her his education was coming from the Party and he was following the program of the Party.

Mumia organized with the BPP for close to two years. When the Philly branch broke with the BPP, he attempted to return to high school and became active with a new organization called the Black United Liberation Front.

Mumia led a campaign to change the name of his high school to Malcolm X and got elected president of the student body. This effort was unsuccessful; he ended up getting kicked out of school instead. He went to New York to try to hook back up with the Panthers there, but things had changed — the Party was in decline thanks to the intense repression of the FBI's Cointelpro program.

Revolutionary journalist

Mumia, at 17, was a young father trying to figure out what to do with his life. Some of his teachers, knowing his intelligence and talents, suggested he get a GED and go to college. He earned his GED, applied to Goddard College in Vermont and was accepted. At Goddard, he was able to study, concentrate and develop his natural communication skills, though the FBI was still tracking him.

After a few semesters, he put college on the back burner and went back to Philly. Combining his writing and vocal skills, he started working for a local radio station.

Mumia evolved into an award-winning journalist: the voice for the voiceless. His voice was and still is amazing, not only in content, but in presentation. When he speaks, people listen.

He had many opportunities to work for some of the big radio stations, but when he revealed his dreadlocks and insisted on keeping his name, it was always too ethnic, too Black.

Nevertheless, he interviewed many famous people: Angela Davis, Alex Haley, Bob Marley and even President Jimmy Carter. He used the skills learned with the BPP and perfected at Goddard to enhance his writing and speaking. He was a journalist in high demand, living up to his childhood nicknames of Scout and UN.

The revolutionary MOVE organization, demonized by the government and corporate media in Philadelphia, allowed Mumia to cover them because he was direct and honest. He attended all the MOVE trials. He took off his hat, revealing his dreads, expressed his outrage on the radio show and was then fired because he was not a “team player.”

He continued to report on MOVE activities, turning stories in to the Mutual Black Network and National Public Radio, doing interviews and attending press conferences. At one press conference, notorious racist Mayor Frank Rizzo —

formerly the chief of police — exploded and warned Mumia about his reporting. Rizzo told him that he would be held responsible for what he said.

Mumia also worked part time as a cab driver. That's what he was doing on the early morning of Dec. 8, 1981, when he went to the aid of his younger brother, who was involved in a physical confrontation with a Philadelphia police officer.

In that confrontation, Mumia was shot and beaten into unconsciousness. He awoke shackled to a hospital bed, charged with the first degree murder of Daniel Faulkner, the cop who had confronted his brother.

Mumia had predicted his fate 10 years earlier, when he was 16. He told his girlfriend at that time that he would be a political prisoner one day. His death warrant was signed twice, on June 1, 1995, and October 13, 1999, by Gov. Tom Ridge. Both times, a militant people's movement stopped the execution and eventually won his removal from death row.

After nearly four decades of struggle demanding that Mumia get a new trial, he may finally get his day in court — which means he could eventually be physically free.

When Mumia's freedom is broadcast around the world, but especially in the United States, the people who are the product of this country's worst housing, worst education, worst medical facilities and worst environment will stand up and say: "We have the power to change this system. This is our world.

"We say: No to war! No to racism! Money for health care, education, jobs and housing! No to war and imperialist world domination!"



Photo: Gloria Verdieu

Mumia Abu-Jamal is the author of several books and hundreds of written and recorded commentaries. Go to PrisonRadio.org for more info. More biographical

information is available in the book “OnaMove: The Story of Mumia Abu-Jamal” by Terry Bisson.

Mumia is one of many political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, prisoners of war and exiled freedom fighters — they all are important: Leonard Peltier, Sundiata Acoli, Dr. Mutulu Shakur, Russell Maroon Shoatz, Romaine “Chip” Fitzgerald, Jalil Muntaqim, Imam Jamil Al-Amin, Ed Poindexter, Joseph Bowen, Ruchell Cinque Magee, members of the MOVE 9 (Chuck Africa, Delbert Africa, Edward Africa, Janet Africa, Janine Africa), Ana Belén Montes, Nina Droz Franco, Rev. Joy Powell, Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, Siddique Abdullah Hasan and Assata Shakur, to name a few.

Gloria Verdieu is a longtime leader of the San Diego Coalition to Free Mumia.

