

A gathering of heroes: Harlem street naming honors Black Panthers

written by Bill Dores
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From left to right: Yasmeeen Majid, James Tarik, James Haskins, Claudia Chesson-Williams, Bilal Sunni Ali, Shep Olugbala, Cyril 'Bullwhip' Innis, Bill 'BJ' Johnson, Jamal Joseph and Kim Holder. SLL photo: Bill Dores

African drums and the words “All power to the people” echoed in Harlem, New York, on Sunday, Aug. 20, as the blue flag emblazoned with a black panther flew again.

On that day, veterans of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army and supporters old and young assembled to rename 122nd Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard as Black Panther Way. The Harlem Headquarters of the BPP stood at 2026 Adam Clayton Powell from 1968 to 1976.

Other Panther veterans present included Rosemarie Mealy, Sam Anderson, Shaba Om and longtime political prisoner Sundiata Acoli. Panther veteran and New York City Council Member Charles Barron addressed the gathering by telephone. State Senator Cordell Cleare, City Council Member Kristin Richardson Johnson and Community Board District Manager Shatic Mitchell, who had worked for the renaming, also attended and spoke.

Senator Cleare read a proclamation honoring the Panther veterans and legacy and describing the brutal campaign against the BPP by the state apparatus. “I am justly proud to honor all distinguished members of the Black Panthers’ Harlem branch,” she said.

Honor and tribute was given to the fallen comrades of the Harlem office, to Black Panthers martyred in captivity, and to six freedom fighters still imprisoned by the racist U.S. state apparatus – Ed Poindexter (52 years), Veronza Bowers (50 years), Kenny “Zulu” Whitmore (45 years), Mumia Abu-Jamal (41 years), Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, aka H. Rap Brown (23 years) and Kamau Sidiki, aka Freddie Hilton (22 years).

A multigenerational crowd of over 200, including veterans of the Young Lords Party, turned out to honor the Panther freedom fighters, their work, sacrifice and legacy. When the 10-point program of the Black Panther Party was read aloud, the chant “Stick to the platform” rang out.

Speakers described the work of the Harlem-Bronx branch of the Party, including the free breakfast for children program and community health programs. They explained the vicious attack launched against the BPP by federal and local state apparatus. “We were at war and still are,” Rosemarie Mealy declared. She described the powerful role of the Panther women in sustaining the work of the party in the face of severe repression.

“The government unleashed total terror against us,” said Jamal Joseph, who was the youngest member of the framed-up and exonerated New York Panther 21. “Because of that class struggle we were building a united front against fascism.” Joseph stressed that the work of the Panthers was guided by their creed, “undying love for the people.”

The ceremony concluded with the release of blue and black balloons into Harlem’s skies and the unveiling of the street sign naming 122 Street and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard Black Panther Way. In the words of Council Member Charles Barron, it was “a glorious day, long overdue.”

