

Features 2: The Daughter of a Panther – A discussion with Erika Abrams

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During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time of intense animosity and racial conflict, resided a group of bold radicals by the name of the Black Panthers. Led by the famously boisterous and militant Huey P. Newton, the Panthers were often seen as a troublesome Black Power group that served as the resisters of government and rule, dominated by the iron fists of Black men. However, when Newton served time in the penitentiary, he was forced to choose someone to guide the Panthers in their quest of obtaining equal rights for Blacks. In a very unconventional manner at that time, Newton chose the headship of Elaine Brown to carry the torch. As a potent voice during her term, Elaine Brown became known as a “Fierce Angel” in the fight for civil rights for Blacks in America. On January 17, 2011 our very own Center for Intercultural Programs invited Brown to be the keynote speaker for their annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast. As an additional bonus, Dr. Katrina Caldwell, Director of the Center, invited Brown’s daughter, Erika Abrams, to converse with students and faculty on her experience as the daughter of the only woman to lead the Black Panther Party.

The discussion was very informal; wherein Abrams was asked questions and answered them as candidly as she felt necessary. Abrams explained to the on-lookers her childhood growing up in the Black Panthers community. They had their own schooling and housing systems. She then explained how she lived her adolescent years in Beverly Hills, California, which added to the causation of her liberal and open-minded persona. Abrams continued her studies at Spelman College, where she ventured more into understanding the world around her and the fight that she was going to pursue.

Erika Abrams opened the eyes of many by negating the common hostile Black Panther image that is heavily portrayed in the media by allowing the audience to understand the Black Panthers were about servicing the community and advancing the well-being of Black people, all while embodying the philosophy of Malcolm X. Abrams portrayed the Panthers to be kind hearted individuals who welcomed anyone to help with the movement, including auxiliary groups like the Yellow Panthers (Asian Americans) and the Gray Panthers (Elderly White Americans). Taylor Moody, a second year student and the Secretary of External Affairs for the Black Student Union at DePaul University, expressed her opinion of the event by stating,

“I thought Erika Abrams was extremely inspirational. She touched on many topics that opened my eyes. I thought she was a very kind and strong woman that broke all of the stereotypes I had of the Black Panther Party. Being at lunch with her was a great

experience and I will remember it forever.”

Erika Abrams, like her mother Elaine Brown, impacts many with her passion and service for those underrepresented populations. She now works with mentally challenged and disabled people while simultaneously aiding the community in any manner she sees fit. The dialogue between Erika Abrams and the community of DePaul University not only provided much meaningful insight on the inner workings of efforts during the Civil Rights Movement, but it also presented much inspiration to everyone who participated, for the words of motivation stemmed from a zealous and persistent activist for justice and human rights.