

Embracing Black Power Amidst the Struggle to Desegregate Milwaukee

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Introduction

It is no coincidence that Milwaukee is the most segregated city in the United States. This did not happen by accident, but through years of policies that denied minorities to have equal access to fair housing opportunities and opposition to neighborhood integration by whites. Unequal access to fair housing opportunities not only impacted racial isolation in neighborhoods, but also racial isolation in schools. The domino effect unfair housing policies had on school segregation was inevitable. Alderwoman, Vel Phillips and civil rights leader, Lloyd Barbee, two well-known advocates for fair housing and school desegregation in Milwaukee, pursued a fair housing law to resolve residential and school segregation well before the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed. Between 1962 and 1968, Phillips and Barbee simultaneously advocated for fair housing and school desegregation by introducing fair housing ordinances to the Common Council, introducing a state fair housing bill to the Wisconsin State Assembly, and filing a federal lawsuit against the Milwaukee School Board. Once the Fair Housing Act was finally passed, it felt like a victory for Milwaukee. It was a crucial step in the right direction to remedying both residential and school segregation; however, it was not a definite solution. Discriminatory practices persisted after the Fair Housing Act was passed, and white opposition refused to accept integration; therefore, racial imbalance in Milwaukee's schools and neighborhoods persisted. The continued exclusion of equal access to fair housing and adequate educational resources led members of the Black community to reimagine equality through the lens of Black Power. Black Milwaukeeans began embracing

Black Power as a solution, emphasizing self-sufficiency and independent Black institutions as the remedy to end the fight to residential and school segregation.

The False Hope of Fair Housing

Discriminatory housing practices against African Americans existed before the 1930s, but these practices were institutionalized after the establishment of the U.S. federal government's Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in 1933. The HOLC measured mortgage investment risk of neighborhoods using residential security maps¹ that assigned grades to neighborhoods on a scale from A to D, D being the most "hazardous" rating colored red and A being the "safest" rating colored green.² Historians have conflicting arguments on whether HOLC maps pioneered practices such as redlining and racial steering. Historian Kenneth Jackson argues that the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and private lenders obtained residential security maps to determine lending decisions.³ Therefore, it is possible these maps spearheaded discriminatory lending practices such as redlining and racial steering. Redlining refers to discriminatory lending practices that denied mortgages in neighborhoods of color.⁴ Similarly, racial steering refers to real estate dealers persuading potential home buyers to buy homes in certain neighborhoods based on their race.⁵ Areas with a majority African American population were consistently given a grade D,⁶ and lenders used this rating to reinforce redlining and racial steering. These forms of racial

¹Emily Lynch et al., "The Legacy of Structural Racism: Associations Between Historic Redlining, Current Mortgage Lending, and Health," *SSM - Population Health*, 14 (2021): 100793. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352827321000689>.

²Amy Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation," *Journal of Urban History* 29, no.4 (2003): 395. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0096144203029004002>.

³Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners," 395.

⁴Lynch, "Legacy of Structural Racism," 100793.

⁵Neil Bruce, "Real Estate Steering and the Fair Housing Act of 1968," *Tulsa Law Review* 12, no.4 (1977): 759. <https://digitalcommons.law.utulsa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1395&context=tlr>.

⁶Hillier, "Redlining and the Home Owners," 395.

discriminatory lending policies that denied African Americans access to loans and drew lines of where they could and could not live, institutionalized residential segregation practices that persisted into the 1960s and produced the segregated housing patterns seen in cities like Milwaukee.

In 1966, The Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations investigated the extent and nature of housing discrimination in Milwaukee. The commission asked Milwaukeeans to report if they experienced discrimination based on their race, religion or national origin when attempting to purchase a home, purchase a lot to build a home, or rent a place to live.⁷ In July of 1966, Lawrence Howard, Director of the Institute of Human Relations at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), testified before the Judiciary Legislation Committee of the Milwaukee Commission of Community Relations about the housing discriminatory experiences of members of the UWM community. The report concluded that landlords would take the name and number of interested Blacks seeking housing and dishonestly promise to call them back. For example, a Black UWM graduate student checked back two weeks later at places he inquired about renting and was promised a phone call back, only to find out that the places were still for rent. When the UWM student identified himself, and said he was still interested, the landlord responded that decisions had not yet been made.⁸ This is one example of the types of housing discrimination that occurred in Milwaukee. Even though it was subtle, it still impacted segregated housing patterns.

A fair housing law was needed to outlaw the discriminatory housing practices that produced residential segregation. Both Vel Phillips and Lloyd Barbee advocated for a fair housing

⁷ Pamphlet "An Investigation into the extent and nature of Housing Discrimination in Milwaukee" 2 August 1965, Box 19, Folder 4, Vel Phillips Papers, 1946-2009, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries' Archives Department.

⁸ Typescript of "Testimony Before the Judiciary Committee" by Lawrence C. Howard, 1 July 1966, Box 19, Folder 10, Vel Phillips Papers.

law between 1962 and 1965. Vel Phillips, the first African American and first woman elected to Milwaukee's Common Council, was a strong advocate for a fair housing law in Milwaukee and consistently pushed for the common council to pass an ordinance. Phillips first advocated for a fair housing law in Milwaukee when she introduced an ordinance to the Milwaukee Common Council in February 1962⁹; however, the council voted against the ordinance 18-1.¹⁰ In the following years, Phillips continued to advocate for a fair housing law. In July of 1966, she made a second attempt to enact fair housing legislation through the common council and was turned down again.¹¹ Phillips' third attempt was in October 1966. She proposed an ordinance that would go beyond Wisconsin state law and apply to all housing in the City of Milwaukee; however, this ordinance was turned down as well.¹² In December of 1967, the common council did pass a fair housing ordinance; however, the ordinance was a duplicate of the state housing law which Phillips stated "already covered Milwaukee, and would have continued to do so, with or without the city ordinance. So you see, the bill that was passed here actually does nothing, and means nothing."¹³ By January of 1968, Phillips had introduced a fair housing bill before the common council five times, and it was turned down all of those times.¹⁴

On the other hand, Lloyd Barbee, a civil rights leader in the effort to desegregate Milwaukee schools, worked as a legislator for the Wisconsin State Assembly from 1965 to 1977.¹⁵ As an assemblyman, he introduced a state fair housing bill concerning open housing¹⁶ which

⁹ Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 7, Vel Phillips Papers.

¹⁰ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Vel Phillips and the Struggle for Fair Housing," n.d," <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS16490>.

¹¹ Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 7, Vel Phillips Papers.

¹² Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 7, Vel Phillips Papers.

¹³ Letter addressed to Dave Jacobs from Vel Phillips, 04 January 1968, Box 10, Folder 4. Vel Phillips Papers.

¹⁴ Letter addressed to Dave Jacobs from Vel Phillips, 04 January 1968, Box 10, Folder 4. Vel Phillips Papers.

¹⁵ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Vel Phillips and the Struggle for Fair Housing."

¹⁶ Wisconsin Historical Society, "Vel Phillips and the Struggle for Fair Housing."

Barbee drafted on February 20th, 1965.¹⁷ Even though the fair housing ordinances and legislative bill Phillips and Barbee introduced to the common council and state assembly did not pass, they continued to advocate for fair housing and also school desegregation.

That same year, on June 17th, 1965, Lloyd Barbee demanded the integration of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) by filing a federal lawsuit, *Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*,¹⁸ against the Milwaukee School Board. Barbee argued that the Milwaukee School Board violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment¹⁹ by intentionally maintaining segregation in its schools.²⁰ The school board agreed that MPS was segregated but disputed the claims that the school boards' actions caused it. Instead, they argued that school segregation was a result of residential housing patterns in Milwaukee.²¹ Official data of 1965 from the school board proved how segregated MPS was. Of the 147 public schools, 106 had more than 90% white enrollment and 17 had more than 90% Black enrollment. The school board figures revealed, “. . . at least 86 of the city's elementary schools, all 15 junior high schools, and all but 2 of the city's high schools are segregated schools, either white or Negro.”²² Even though housing and school segregation are connected, Barbee addressed the institutionalized discriminatory practices in housing and schools separately. Barbee saw early on that successfully desegregating schools required more than a fair housing bill; other leaders noticed this as well.

Likewise, Phillips advocated for school desegregation during her attempts to pass a fair housing law. She was a strong advocate for fair housing not only because it would outlaw housing

¹⁷ Draft bill, 02 February 1965, Box 34, Folder 30, Lloyd Barbee Papers.

¹⁸ UWM Libraries March on Milwaukee, “Barbee, Lloyd A,” <https://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/barbee-lloyd-a/>.

¹⁹ Casetext “Amos v Board of School Directors,” <https://casetext.com/case/amos-v-board-of-directors-of-city-of-milwaukee>.

²⁰ UWM Libraries March on Milwaukee, “Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors the City of Milwaukee, 408 F. Supp. 765 (1976),” <https://uwm.edu/marchonmilwaukee/keyterms/amos-et-al-v-board-of-school-dir/>.

²¹ UWM Libraries March on Milwaukee, “Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors.”

²² Yellow Pamphlet with a quote by James B. Conant, Box 22, Folder 17. Vel Phillips Papers.

discrimination, but also because she believed it would naturally fix school segregation. Phillips stated in October of 1966, “‘fair housing’ in Milwaukee would allow families to move where they wanted, and integration of the schools would come naturally.”²³ Because of residential segregation, children attended schools closest to their homes, which produced a de facto segregated school system. In addition, Phillips argued that schools needed to be integrated for all students to reach their full potential. “Many experts in the field of education have suggested that the failure to mix schools with youngsters of all races results in harm to all children, since it is intermingling in the classrooms that produces maximum education.”²⁴ However, Phillips did not believe a fair housing bill would be a “cure-all” solution. In 1968 Phillips stated, “I certainly do not see fair housing legislation as a gigantic cure-all for the ills of our society. But it would be a big step in the right direction, and it would make almost all of the necessary steps so easier.”²⁵

Likewise, during a 1964 visit to Milwaukee, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. stated that residential segregation should not be an excuse for school segregation, but resolving residential segregation is needed to permanently resolve school segregation. “De Facto segregation in the schools can be alleviated to a degree even though you have housing and residential segregation. But honesty impels me to admit that the school problem cannot be solved permanently until the housing problem is solved.”²⁶ De facto residential and school segregation were two civil rights issues occurring simultaneously that Phillips and Dr. King believed could be alleviated with one bill: a fair housing law.

²³ Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 11, Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁴ Radio script, 31 October 1966, Box 1, Folder 11, Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁵ Letter to Mr. James Lennart from Vel Phillips, 4 January 1968, Box 10 Folder 4, Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁶ Newspaper clipping “King Rejects Excuse in School Segregation” by Donald H. Pfarrer, circa 1964, Box 74 Folder 34, Lloyd Barbee Papers.

After the assassination of Dr. King on April 4th, 1968, the President Lyndon Johnson administration pushed for the passing of a federal fair housing law, and finally on April 11th, 1968, the federal Fair Housing Act was passed.²⁷ In addition, the mayor of Milwaukee, Henry Maier, asked the common council for an ordinance to “keep pace with the federal law.”²⁸ On April 30th, 1968, Milwaukee adopted their own fair housing ordinance. Phillips pushed this ordinance through the common council, and it was described as “even stiffer than the new federal statute. While the federal law will cover some 80% of the nation’s housing by 1970, the Milwaukee measure, effective immediately, grants far fewer exceptions.”²⁹ Vel Phillips was met with many congratulations for the victory. However, the celebration did not last long as discriminatory housing practices, racial attitudes, and neighborhood and school patterns barely changed after the fair housing bill was passed.

In January of 1970, almost two years after the passing of the Fair Housing Act, there was a proposal to build 450 to 500 units of public housing on the south side of Milwaukee. Two kinds of housing were proposed: 300 units of housing for the elderly and 200 units for low-income families. The south side wanted the public housing for the elderly; however, they did not want the housing for low-income families. Because adjectives such as “poor” and “low-income” are often associated with Black people and other minority groups, south side residents feared that Black people would move into the low-income housing and disrupt their neighborhood. Mayor Henry Maier responded to proposal of building elderly and low-income housing. To the proposal of building housing for the elderly, Maier responded, “There is no doubt in my mind that the city is

²⁷ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “History of Fair Housing,” https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/aboutfheo/history.

²⁸ Time magazine article “Victory for Mrs.Vel,” 10 May 1968, Box 11 Folder 1, Vel Phillips Papers.

²⁹ Time magazine article “Victory for Mrs.Vel,” Vel Phillips Papers.

going to move on housing the elderly on the South Side.” In response to the proposal of low-income housing, Maier stated, “We cannot be in the position of accelerating the flight of middle income families to the suburbs.” Furthermore, he stated the city should be wary of “self-negating” programs.³⁰ Maier insinuated in his response that the building of low-income homes on the south side would increase white flight because current residents did not like the possibility of Blacks moving into their neighborhood. This is just one example of how housing discrimination and negative racial attitudes towards Blacks moving into white neighborhoods persisted after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed.

Moreover, in February of 1970, the League of Women Voters of Milwaukee wrote a letter to Vel Phillips about their concerns with the lack of low-income housing in the Milwaukee area. They identified two obstacles to equal opportunities in housing: “(1) the lack of low and moderate income housing at this time and (2), the patterns in which such housing exists.”³¹ Even though the fair housing law prohibited housing discrimination against minorities, the lack of affordable housing perpetuated segregation because of the inability of all people to afford homes in the neighborhoods they desired to live in.

On the other hand, school segregation patterns did not change after the fair housing law was passed. Leaders like Vel Phillips and Martin Luther King Jr. thought school desegregation would be alleviated and come naturally after a fair housing law was passed. In 1975, seven years after the Fair Housing Act, the Chapter 220 program was created which provided busing for inner-city Black students to attend suburban schools and busing to suburban students to specialty schools

³⁰Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper article “South Side Split on Housing for Elderly, Poor,” 19 January 1970, Box 12, Folder 10, Vel Phillips Papers.

³¹ Letter from League of Women Voters to Vel Phillips, 3 February 1970, Box 12, Folder 10. Vel Phillips Papers.

in MPS.³² The Chapter 220 program was designed to integrate MPS. The need for this program shows that the fair housing act failed to help desegregate schools like many leaders thought it would. The passing of the Fair Housing Act was a false hope. It was a necessary step in the right direction, as it accomplished prohibiting discriminatory housing practices; yet, it failed to alleviate housing and school segregation, which continue to persist in Milwaukee today. However, the Fair Housing Act was not the sole reason patterns in housing and schools did not change, white opposition substantially contributed to this issue as well.

Refusal, Resistance, and Regression

Amid the struggle to desegregate neighborhoods and schools, white resistance and backlash persisted. White opposition to both housing and school desegregation came in many different forms. First, white parents opposed school desegregation by transferring their children out of schools with Black students. During the trial of *Amos et al. v. Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*, 113 applications of pupil transfers between 1957 and 1968 were gathered. These applications showed the reasons white parents stated they wanted to transfer their children. Each pupil transfer application had a racial reason: “too many colored children,” “only white child in his class,” “negroes,” “children will get along better between their kind,” and “colored element.”³³ The reasons white parents transferred their children out of schools shows how adamant they were about keeping their children out of school with Black students.

Second, white residents opposed housing and school desegregation through white flight. In 1960, Milwaukee had 668,000 white residents; in 2000, this number decreased to 298,000.³⁴

³² Emily Files WUWM 89.7 FM, “The History and Impact of Wisconsin’s Only School Integration Program,” February 18, 2019, <https://www.wuwm.com/education/2019-02-18/the-history-and-impact-of-wisconsins-only-school-integration-program>.

³³ Pupil transfer requests submitted to defendants, 17 June 1968, Box 155, Folder 13, Lloyd Barbee Papers.

³⁴ Wisconsin Historical Society, “Vel Phillips and the Struggle for Fair Housing.”

Many white residents left the city when their neighborhoods and schools desegregated. A 1978 study of white flight by David Armor concluded, “Desegregation can cause accelerated white flight, particularly in larger school districts with substantial minority enrollments (over 20 percent or so) and in districts with accessible white suburbs.”³⁵ Furthermore, in a 1972 Milwaukee school board meeting with the Special Committee on Equality of Educational Opportunity, many attendees discussed the impact of white flight and the open enrollment policy on the inability to integrate schools. The open enrollment policy allowed parents to apply for their children to attend schools outside of the district they lived in.³⁶ One attendee named Robert Lochner stated,

White parents become concerned about the quality of the schools when minority families move into their neighborhood. Then they either transfer their children into another school under the open enrollment policy, or if this is not possible, they sell their homes and move to another school district. Either action results in perpetuation of our segregated school system.³⁷

Another attendee discussed white opposition and the impact of the open enrollment policy:

“I have talked with many white parents who say, I’m not about to send my kids into an all black school, and I’m sure there are many parents that feel the same way.” The attendee continued and discussed how the open enrollment policy allows “panic stricken whites” to transfer their children to any school.³⁸ White parents moving out of the city and transferring their children to schools through the open enrollment policy prohibited the integration of schools and neighborhoods.

Even more, white opposition was rooted in the stereotypical beliefs of Black people being violent, loud, unlawful, and destructive of property. In January of 1968, one white resident of New

³⁵ “White flight, Demographic Transition, and the Future of School Desegregation” by David J. Armor, August 1978, Box 216 Folder 11 p.40, Lloyd Barbee Papers.

³⁶ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction “Public School Open Enrollment,” <https://dpi.wi.gov/open-enrollment>.

³⁷ Meeting minutes of Special Committee on Equality of Educational Opportunity, 7 December 1972, Box 145 Folder 5, p.22, Lloyd Barbee Papers.

³⁸ Meeting minutes of Special Committee on Equality of Educational Opportunity, 7 December 1972, Box 145 Folder 5, p.18, Lloyd Barbee Papers.

Berlin, a city located on the Milwaukee County border, expressed they did not mind having Black neighbors if they maintained a certain standard of living:

I would not care should a colored family buy a home next to mine and thus become my neighbor. There is a qualification to this however. I would want a guarantee that this colored owner would keep the property in the same good condition that I keep mine, that he not immediately convert the place into a rooming house with a multitude of residents, that he keep his garbage IN his cans, that he not disturb the neighborhood with raucus laughter at all hours of the night, that he not have family fights which wake up the whole neighborhood.³⁹

Even though some white residents were okay with having Black neighbors, their stereotypical views on Black people remained, and they required Blacks to live up to their standards of living if they were going to live in the same neighborhood. In addition, Vel Phillips received opposition mail following the passing of the Federal Fair Housing Act in 1968. A letter addressed to Phillips on May 20th, 1968, from a Michigan resident expressed their feelings about living among Black people:

The Nigs are rapidly ruining this wonderful nation; since their bad actions, it is deteriorating until we decent law-abiding citizens wonder where we can move to next (the suburbs aren't really far enough way). If YOU PEOPLE won't go back to Africa, maybe we will have to, to get peace of mind – and most importantly, some degree of safety. As matters are present, our streets are unsafe, even in broad daylight, to walk upon, and our schools (since integration of undesirable children) are unsafe also.⁴⁰

Despite the progress that was made with the passing of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and Milwaukee's own fair housing ordinance, progress in desegregating schools and neighborhoods remained stagnant because of white opposition. The unlawfulness of housing discrimination and school segregation did not prevent white opposition from finding their own ways around the law. In 1967, recommendations were given to MPS and the Milwaukee School Board on what quality

³⁹ Newspaper clipping "Negro for Neighbor," Box 10, Folder 3, Vel Phillips Papers.

⁴⁰ Letter addressed to Vel Phillips from Detroit Michigan, 20 May 1968, Box 10 Folder 3, Vel Phillips Papers.

education looks like in Milwaukee's future. The recommendations concluded that to eliminate school segregation there needs to be a strong public commitment to it and equal support from both whites and Blacks.⁴¹ These conclusions are accurate since neighborhood patterns and school patterns did not change much after 1968. As a result of the exclusion of Blacks in neighborhoods and schools, some members of the Black community began to embrace Black Power as a means for equality.

The Emergence of Black Power

The Black Power Movement emerged during a 1966 speech by Stokely Carmichael at the Meredith March in Greenwood, Mississippi.⁴² James Meredith, a civil rights activist, was shot and wounded during a solitary "Walk Against Fear" from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. At the time, Carmichael was the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a student led civil rights organization that challenged Jim Crow laws through nonviolent sit-ins, boycotts, and protests.⁴³ Carmichael and other SNCC volunteers continued James Meredith's walk on his behalf.⁴⁴ Once they reached Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael addressed a rally of 1,500 marchers encouraging them to embrace Black Power. "We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin. What we got to start saying now is Black Power! We want Black Power."⁴⁵ The slogan and philosophy of Black Power does not have one definition,

⁴¹ "Quality Education in Milwaukee's Future," 1 August 1967, Box 216 Folder 9 p. 1-17 – 1-19 Lloyd Barbee Papers.

⁴² Joseph Peniel, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006), xiii.

⁴³ History.com Editors, "SNCC," History, August 24, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/sncc>.

⁴⁴ History.com Editors, "Stokely Carmichael," June 19, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/stokely-carmichael>.

⁴⁵ Tina Ligon, "'Turn this Town Out': Stokely Carmichael, Black Power, and the March against Fear," June 7, 2016, <https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2016/06/07/turn-this-town-out-stokely-carmichael-black-power-and-the-march-against-fear/>.

but overall, it emphasizes racial pride, self-sufficiency, and liberation for all people of African descent.⁴⁶ In 1968, Carmichael defined Black Power in his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* as “a call for Black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for Black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations.”⁴⁷

Even though Carmichael’s speech sparked the movement, the movement’s ideological framework began as early as the 1940s. Black women began knitting together this framework as early as the 1940s in their roles as domestic servants.⁴⁸ Black women were working in roles such as maids and cooks while simultaneously being involved in Black radicalism. Black women reimagined their roles as Black domestic workers by not limiting themselves to that identity. Instead, they used it to frame themselves into what they called the “Militant Negro Domestic.” As Militant Negro Domestic, they advocated for community control, Black self-determination, self-defense, and independent Black institutions⁴⁹ which aligns exactly with principles of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. Following the framework produced by the Militant Negro Domestic, leaders such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Huey P. Newton, and Bobby Seale built on top of this framework with their philosophies and beliefs centered on Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism.

The ideology of Black Power was embraced by Black communities and leaders internationally, including in Milwaukee. Because of the inability to see equality through legislation

⁴⁶ Lakisha Odlum, “The Black Power Movement,” 2015, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/the-black-power-movement>

⁴⁷ History.com Editors, “Stokely Carmichael.”

⁴⁸ Ashley Farmer, *Remaking Black Power and How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 21.

⁴⁹ Ashley Farmer, *Remaking Black Power and How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 21.

and white resistance to integration persisted, members of Milwaukee's Black community began to embrace self-sufficiency. Everyone was not comfortable embracing the concept of Black Power because of its radicalism and the negative media portrayal of the movement.⁵⁰ However, Vel Phillips began publicly promoting Black Power activists and their ideologies during radio broadcasts in 1967. First, on April 17th, 1967, Phillips discussed the Black Power ideologies of an Indianapolis Black school teacher named Mrs. Mattie Rice Coney. Mrs. Coney applied principles of the Black Power Movement to improve her community in Indianapolis. Phillips shared statements from Mrs. Coney about her community work because she thought her suggestions would be impactful in Milwaukee just as they had been in Indianapolis. A statement Phillips shared from Mrs. Coney bluntly emphasized self-sufficiency from the Black community:

We Negroes should quit feeling sorry for ourselves and take advantage of our opportunities. We should get out and work and do the best we can with what we have. I think we've taken the wrong approach in attacking the problem of the ghetto. First, we've got to learn to live in the house where we are. Then, when we get into a better one, we'll appreciate it. Slums are made by people, not by plaster or bricks. Bad neighborhoods develop because individuals who live in them fail to do what they can . . . be independent. Instead of sitting down and waiting for something to happen, we've got to get up and do something for ourselves.⁵¹

Mrs. Coney passionately declared independence and self-sufficiency for the Black community. Moreover, Phillips shared the Black Power ideologies of Dr. James Comer, a well-known Black psychiatrist of Yale University on another radio broadcast on May 17th, 1967. Dr. Comer's believed the most important need of the Black community was a positive group image. Phillips shared Dr. Comer's thoughts on the tangible forms Black Power could take that were rooted in forming independent Black institutions and developing racial pride:

⁵⁰ Joseph Peniel, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006), 151-153.

⁵¹ Radio script, 17 April 1967, Box 2, Folders 1-2, Vel Phillips Papers.

Suggestions range from developing housing and business cooperatives owned by Negro people and institutions – churches, fraternal groups, civil rights groups, athletes, entertainers, and professional people, for example – to conducting Negro culture schools to improve the Negro child’s self-image and prepare him for high level academic work and citizenship achievement.⁵²

Furthermore, Phillips expressed her approval of Black Power while giving the keynote address at the 1969 Annual Conclave of Lambda Kappa Mu Sorority. Phillips stated, “The truth about the Black Power concept is that it may not be a very good concept for some folk, but for us – Black people – it is truly the best there is!”⁵³ Phillips continued, “The concept of Black power is one of the most legitimate and healthy developments that has come upon the American political scene in a long time. And we should do more than merely welcome it.” As much as Phillips embraced the concept of Black Power and promoted Black Power activists’ ideologies of independent Black institutions and self-sufficiency, she still believed integration was the main goal. Later in the same keynote address Phillips stated, “Now, I too like perhaps most of you believe in color blindness – and therefore integration must be our ultimate goal.”⁵⁴

Even though Phillips advocated for Black Power and supported the concept, it was not an acceptable concept among all Milwaukeeans. In 1972, the Milwaukee Urban Observatory conducted a study on citizen attitudes in Milwaukee. The study sampled 95 Black arrestees and 24 white arrestees. When asked about their thoughts on the development of Black Power in Milwaukee, only 10% of Black arrestees and 50% of white arrestees thought the development of Black Power was bad. Furthermore, 54% of Black arrestees and 13% of white arrestees thought Black Power was “good for conditions among Negroes.” On the other hand, the study sampled another control group of Blacks and whites who had not been arrested and asked the same question

⁵² Radio script, 17 May 1967, Box 2, Folder 12, Vel Phillips Papers.

⁵³ Keynote address transcript, 10 July 1969, Box 67, Folder 5, p. 3-4, Vel Phillips Papers.

⁵⁴ Keynote address transcript, 10 July 1969, Box 67, Folder 5, p.13, Vel Phillips Papers.

about Black Power. 35% of the Black control group and 8% of the white control group thought the development of Black Power was “good for conditions among Negroes.” The view on the development of Black power by the Black arrestee and the Black control group differed. This study shows that one, everyone in the Black community did not accept the concept of Black Power equally or viewed it as a positive way to help the Black community and two, many whites disliked the development of Black Power.⁵⁵

Vel Phillips talked about Black Power ideologies and the potential for these ideologies to promote change in Milwaukee’s Black communities; however, other leaders participated in incorporating these ideologies in the community. Father Groppi, a civil rights activist and Catholic priest, advocated for Black Power in Milwaukee and developed a community group that embodied the ideologies of Black Power. In October of 1966, Groppi announced the formation of a militant, NAACP group of Black men called the Commandos. The group was formed from NAACP Youth Council (YC) members. Groppi formed this group to “cultivate leadership and self-respect among poor, young African American men in the core and to channel their rage in constructive ways.”⁵⁶ The Commandos were established because of violence incited against the NAACP: there was a bombing at the Milwaukee NAACP Office and violence against NAACP YC members at protests. In addition, there was a lack of faith in police protection against white opposition during protests and aggression by white officers.⁵⁷ The Commandos protected civil rights demonstrators against violent whites and aggressive police officers. The Commandos wore a uniform to stand out from other demonstrators. Originally their uniform included black berets, black ascots, green army

⁵⁵“Citizen Attitudes in Milwaukee . . . A Further Look” by Henry Schmandt and Harold Rose, Summer 1972, Box 216, Folder 23 Lloyd Barbe Papers.

⁵⁶ Patrick Jones, “The Youth Council and the Commandos,” in *Selma of the North* (Harvard University Press, 2009) 132.

⁵⁷ Jones, “The Youth Council,” 132.

fatigues, and black boots. However, the uniform eventually changed to lettered gray sweatshirts because the original clothing was too expensive.⁵⁸ The Commandos followed the philosophy they called “not-violent.” A Commando leader named Joe McClain stated, “‘Not-violence’ meant we didn’t carry weapons and we didn’t start nothing, but we also didn’t take nothing. If the police or the white crowds came after us or the marchers, we weren’t afraid to mix it up. We fought back.”⁵⁹ The Commandos was one way Father Groppi and the Milwaukee Black community embraced Black Power.

Milwaukee embraced the concept of Black Power in its own way. As stated earlier, the philosophy of Black Power does not have one, singular definition. The Commandos unique embodiment of Black militancy and unarmed self-defense proved this. The Commandos were comparable to the Oakland, California militant group the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, later shortened to the Black Panther Party (BPP), founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in October of 1966. BPP members used armed self-defense and police patrols to protect Black community members from police harassment. The Commandos similarly protected community members from police and white agitators at protests but did so unarmed. The Commandos wanted to learn from BPP and expand their knowledge to improve their organization; however, they did not agree with many of the things BPP did. Squire Austin, a member of the Commandos stated, “We sat down [with Stokely Carmichael] and listened to him talk. We did that to broaden our minds as to what we were doing. But a lot of stuff they were doing we didn’t agree with.”⁶⁰ The Commandos realized how they embraced Black Power did not align with how other organizations embraced Black Power, and there was nothing wrong with that. The Commandos is an example of

⁵⁸ Jones, “The Youth Council,” 131.

⁵⁹ Jones, “The Youth Council,” 133.

⁶⁰ Jones, “The Youth Council,” 213.

how Milwaukee embraced Black Power in its own way and used Black Power as an alternative to seek equality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the passing of the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was a false hope to many Milwaukee leaders that believed this law would help remedy school and neighborhood segregation. Although it was known that this law alone could not fix everything, there was a belief that segregation would improve. The law was not as effective as it could have been because of white opposition and their ability to perpetuate segregation through their negative racial attitudes towards Blacks. As a result, segregation patterns did not improve as quickly as leaders hoped, and Milwaukee remains the most segregated city in the U.S. present day. Black Power was an ideology Black community members embraced when the law was not enough to gain the equality they wanted. Equality through self-sufficiency was the goal, and the Black Power Movement proved that this goal could be accomplished in some ways. At the same time, it is not proven that the Black Power ideology is the solution to permanently alleviating segregation. Nevertheless, there is no clear solution as to how to desegregate neighborhoods and schools; however, the most important step towards progress is ending negative racial attitudes towards desegregation.