

## FOCUS A RADICAL REFLECTS

Expanded coverage in the Chicago Tribune Nation &amp; World report

## In exile, a life saved

Still, ex-Black Panther O'Neal seeks an elusive prize: The feeling of belonging

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Tribune Newspapers

IMBASENI, Tanzania — The fugitive shuffles to his computer and begins typing out his will. He is about to turn 71, and it is time. "My life," he writes, "has been a wild and wicked ride..."

All Pete O'Neal has amassed fits on two pages: a small brick home with a sheet metal roof. A few road-beaten vehicles. A cluster of bunkhouses and classrooms he spent decades building, brick by scavenged brick, near the slopes of Mount Meru. Everything will go to his wife of 42 years, Charlotte, and to a few trusted workers.

He prints out the will late one Saturday morning and settles into his reclining chair to check the spelling. He signs his name. Then, to guarantee its authenticity, he finds an ink pad, rolls his thumb across it and affixes his thumbprint to the bottom of the page.

"I think that'll do it," he says. When last O'Neal walked America's streets, he was a magnetic young man possessed of bottomless anger. He was an ex-con who had found a kind of religion in late-1960s black nationalism, a vain, violent street hustler reborn in a Black Panther uniform of dark sunglasses, beret and leather jacket. With pitiless, knife-sharp diction, he spoke of sending police to their graves.

This morning, he sits in his living room, uncapping medicine bottles. A pill for high blood pressure. Another for the pain in his back and one knee. An aspirin to thin his blood. Time is catching him.

He pushes through his screen door and into the brisk morning air. The slightly stooped, thickset man with long, graying dreadlocks moves unsteadily down the irregular stone steps he built into the sloping dirt.

His 4-acre compound bustles with visitors, many preparing for a memorial service for Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, a former Panther who died in June in his farmhouse down the road, his affairs untidy, a sharp message to O'Neal not to put off the paperwork any longer.

Most of O'Neal's big dreams have faded through the years, or have come to feel silly. Like beating the 42-year-old federal gun charges that caused him to flee the United States. Like the socialist revolution he was supposed to help lead. Like winning citizenship in his adopted African country, and the prize that has eluded him on two continents: the feeling of belonging.

## No time 'to be happy'

A group of American high school students, mostly white, is gathering in the dining pavilion. They've been coming by the busload for years, many drawn by the intrigue of staying with a former Panther. They pay O'Neal \$30 a night for a bunk.

The students pause before the poster featuring O'Neal as a fierce young militant, rifle in arms. It's hard to reconcile that image with the grandfatherly host who greets them in Swahili as if they were longtime friends, booming, "Kari-bu!" Welcome!

He asks where they're from. A girl says Missouri, which happens to be his home state, and he hugs her theatrically. Everyone laughs. "All of you are welcome," he says, "even if you're from strange places."

He plants them before documentary footage about his life. It's easier than explaining the whole story himself. Where would he start? His childhood in segregated Kansas City, Mo.? Should he start with the stabbings and shootings in the projects where he grew up?

"I lived in the streets," he says. "I didn't have time to be happy."

After one arrest, he was given a stark choice: reform school or the armed services. The Navy threw him out after he plunged a butcher knife into another sailor's chest because of an insult, nearly killing him. He drifted in and out of lockup. He pimped girls in three states.

To the FBI, the Panthers were homegrown terrorists who romanticized lawbreaking with overheated Marxist rhetoric. To O'Neal, who founded the Kansas City chapter of the party in 1969, it represented a lifeline. He blazed with purpose: End racism and class inequality, fast.

"I would like very much to shoot my way into the House of Representatives," he declared in a televised interview, angry at a congressman who was investigating the Panthers. Pressed to clarify, he added: "I mean it literally."



BARBARA DAVIDSON/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTOS

Joshua Emmanuel, 6, is one of the dozens of orphans former Black Panther Pete O'Neal has informally adopted while living in Imbaseni, Tanzania.



A wall around O'Neal's compound contains a memorial to Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, the Panthers' former field marshal who died in June at age 63 in his farmhouse down the road from O'Neal's residence.



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Shortly afterward, a federal judge sentenced him to a four-year prison term on a conviction of transporting a shotgun across state lines. Out on bail, he decided to run. He and Charlotte fled in 1970 to Sweden, then to Algeria, and finally, in late 1972, to Tanzania, whose socialist government welcomed left-wing militants.

The O'Neals had \$700. After a few years, they bought a patch of inhospitable brush and volcanic rock in Imbaseni, a cobra-infested village of thatched-roof shacks in the country's remote northern interior.

Soon they had four walls, a roof and little else. Plastic hung over the windows. No toilets. It was the back-to-Africa experience so many black Americans talked about, minus the option of escape.

Exile was supposed to be temporary. O'Neal corresponded with other Panthers and planned to return to help lead the revolution. He watched from abroad as the party collapsed from infighting, arrests and an FBI campaign of surveillance and sabotage.

O'Neal's exile became permanent. His fury abated. Some of it was age. Some of it was Tanzania.

"It is so laid-back, so reasonable, that to be otherwise makes you look, even to yourself, like a damn fool," O'Neal says.

Around that first crude brick structure, the fugitive improvised a little island of hope. He built a small recording studio for musicians and a workshop for artists. He gathered castoff computers



O'Neal is pictured on a poster along with his wife, Charlotte.

and invited locals to come learn. He sank a well and opened the spigot to the village. It was, as he saw it, in the spirit of the free breakfast program he had run as a Panther.

"He's had a chance to grow in a way that very few people get here," says his brother, Brian O'Neal, 58, who lives in Kansas City.

Had he stayed in the States, Pete O'Neal believes, he'd be long dead from a shootout or street fight.

For his radicalism itself, though, he won't apologize, even if, as he suspects, it is the one thing that might gain him safe entry back into the States.

"They will never convince me in my life," he says, "that what I was doing wasn't right."

## Man with no country

A few years back, an ambition seized O'Neal. The village had scores of destitute children, orphans from dirt-floor shacks and subsistence farms. He collected donations and built a bunkhouse near his tomato and pepper garden.

He spread word that he had room for a few children. More than 100 appeared at his door. He had to send away the majority. The most desperate, a couple of

rediscovered a lost brother.

Pratt was hospitalized with high blood pressure in May. He hated any confinement. He pulled out his IVs and went home. Days later, O'Neal found him on his side, dead in bed, at age 63.

"People are dropping, man," he tells the students. He doesn't say that his thoughts were circling his own mortality so relentlessly that he couldn't sleep the night before and climbed out of bed to tally up what he would leave behind.

## A breathtaking find

O'Neal remembers discovering the ocean.

He was in his late teens, a heartland kid who believed his fearful precinct of Kansas City was the center of the world, its ugliness and bigotry a true picture of the world. It is why, to his mind, violent revolution looked logical and inevitable.

Then he arrived in California to report for duty in the Navy, and he turned his head and saw the Pacific Ocean. His breath was caught short by the immensity of it, all that blue stretching out into other lands, other stories. It was the start of a decades-long lesson that the world is bigger, more complicated and interesting than his little plot of bitter experience had led him to suspect.

His orphans have never left this inland region. They've never tasted salt water or felt hot beach sand between their toes.

"They have no idea — no idea — what the ocean is," he says.

Nights and weekends, they pile into his living room and watch documentaries about sea life. He tells them about whales, giant squids, blind fish in the lightless deep. He regales them with shark stories.

Will they eat me?

If they're hungry enough, they'll try.

Because they don't like me?

No, it's the natural order of things.

Now and then he indulges in what he calls "Kansas City exaggeration." The sharks in his stories grow bigger than houses.

The children study the TV. The sharks don't look that big.

OK. But they do have sharks bigger than that car.

## 'Highest point' in life

The old 29-seater bus is ready by late summer. The engine has been replaced, the dents in the body hammered out. The exterior has been sanded and smoothed, primed and painted, with a Panther emblem beneath the big front window.

One day soon O'Neal hopes to take the children across the country to the Swahili coast, with its coral reefs and pale sand. He planned to do it around Christmas, but a new pill regimen left him enervated. And money was short.

He'll need \$2,000 for diesel fuel, food, tents. He hates to beg but believes the trip will be the culmination of every good instinct he ever has had — "The highest point in my life," he says — and he's calling in every favor.

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