

# Rafael Viera on the Young Lords

Roland Young

1970

The following article is a reprint of an interview with Rafael Viera, Chief Medical Cadre of the Young Lords Organization (YLO), that first appeared in the *Black Panther* Newspaper. Viera is one of three men that were indicted following the New Bethel incident here in Detroit last March. At that time Viera was the only non-black member of the Black Legion, a paramilitary arm of the Republic of New Africa. He, along with Clarence Fuller, is to face trial on March 9 here in Detroit. Alfred Hibbitt, the third individual indicted, was acquitted on December 22 (see the Fifth Estate Jan. 22—Feb. 4, Vol. 4, No. 19). Viera is charged with assault with intent to kill and will be defended by Milton Henry, Ken Cockerel, and Chuck Ravitz. He is currently in New York City working in Spanish Harlem to maintain a recently established chapter of the YLO.

THE BLACK PANTHER: Would you run down what the Young Lords Organization is all about? How did you get together, where are you going, etc?

RAFAEL: The YLO started in Chicago in 1956 as a street gang, but they came under so much pressure and were tired of being beaten up by the White people in the area that they had to reorganize on another basis. Before that it was just the hustle and bustle of the gang days. They would go out and kill white brothers and black brothers another day, and Asiatic brothers the next day, and then when they didn't have anyone else to kill, they'd kill each other—that's what they were about at the time.

Then in 1967 Cha Jiminez, who was the president of the YLO at that time, reorganized the whole organization. It became political and changed its name from the Young Lords to the Young Lords Organization. They took over a church which they still have right now. They started community programs to help people in the streets and they just related to serving the people—which was their motto at the time.

B.P.: Was it just the motivation of one cat that brought about the change or was it a lot of different cats?

RAFAEL: A lot of various cats had a lot of different experiences together and they finally woke up. They said, "we're out here killing each other and we ain't even dealing with the system that's really messing us up." So they got it together and organized around that main base, that is, they stopped killing each other. That was around the time when the Black Stone Rangers became political and others started getting it together.

In January, 1969, the YLO started in New York. There was an organization in N.Y. named after Pedro Albizu Campos (he was a nationalist and socialist revolutionary who started the first armed revolutionary struggle in Puerto Rico twenty years ago). They were a group of college students, and a lot of them had been going back and forth from Chicago, digging what the YLO was doing and decided to start a chapter in N.Y. At that time they went out into the streets and started rapping with all the 'street brothers,' because that's where it's at. They got the support of a lot of dope fiends, hustlers, pimps and everything else, and these street brothers started a period of transformation. That was when the YLO got organized in N.Y.

We then had to think of something to let the people know that the YLO was there, and not only there, but there to serve the people of East (Spanish) Harlem. The thing that we thought of, and this is where our creativity came in, was the GARBAGE OFFENSIVE. We were out in the streets for three Sundays sweeping the streets. We would take the garbage and put it into garbage cans, cover up the lids and wait for the garbage men to come, but they never

came. The people saw this and they said 'what's happening?' On the third Sunday people got out into the streets and we put the garbage in the avenues. We piled it up on overturned cars that were abandoned on the streets as well as baby cribs and everything else we could find, and we blocked off traffic. You know how it is in 90 degree weather when all those businessmen want to get home, they were mighty upset. We did this two Sundays in a row and on the third Sunday they were going to lay for us. There were repercussions all along, like the pigs did vamp on people and people were throwing bottles and stuff. The pigs came down with guns in their hands, ready to shoot anybody, so we put the garbage in the streets, then we'd leave and when they came we had taken off our berets and we'd be standing on the corner, asking 'what's happening.' That was our first offensive.

B.P.: What are the conditions in East Harlem and how do they compare to the conditions with the rest of Harlem?

RAFAEL: The conditions are the same. The rats are so big that they pay rent, the cockroaches are hump-backed because they don't have room to move around. The buildings are completely messed up. Our children are dying from all types of diseases. One of the biggest problems is lead poisoning. Inside the apartments of Harlem they painted them with cheap lead paint until a year ago when it was outlawed. Our children tended to take the peelings off of the walls and eat them, causing lead poisoning, which would kill them or cause permanent brain damage. We went out in the streets and started doing something about that. This was our second offensive.

We went from door to door checking the children's urine and we organized a great deal around that. I'm the Chief Medical Cadre for the YLO and we've got doctors, nurses and medical students who would go into the streets and from door to door serving the people.

The oppression is there, the people see it but they don't know what to do about it, so that's why the YLO is there. We have people in East Harlem who live fourteen to a room and who have been denied public housing. The buildings in Harlem are from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and they should have been torn down a long time ago, but they're still there.

B.P.: Is your base primarily among the East Harlem lumpen proletariat?

RAFAEL: Yes! The people who live in East Harlem are from the lumpen proletariat. But we do have a small group of Puerto Rican people who have 'made it' up the so-called 'ladder' and who are supposedly assimilated into the system, but they really aren't. Our people must remember that they are Puerto Ricans no matter what, and that they should be out in the streets doing their stuff for their Puerto Rican people.

B.P.: Is the YLO primarily a Puerto Rican organization?

RAFAEL: Yes, it's predominantly Puerto Rican, but we also have Black brothers, Asiatic brothers and some Chicanos. We refuse White people admittance into the YLO for the purpose that we are out there to serve the community, the Puerto Rican community.

If White people want to serve their community then there is the Young Patriots in Yorkville or other respective organizations. Unlike us, our people are still hung up on this thing of believing that it's not the system but that it's the White man who is oppressing them. It takes time and effort to teach people it is not the White man but it's the system that oppresses them.

B.P.: Is the YLO based primarily in N.Y.?

RAFAEL: No. Our National Headquarters are in Chicago. We have an office in N.Y., Puerto Rico, one opening up in Hayward, Calif., one opening in 'Philly' and a new one that just opened up in Newark. So we're expanding.

B.P.: What kind of solutions does the YLO offer to the problems that confront the Puerto Rican people in this country?

RAFAEL: We're getting down to the needs of the people, no matter how little they may be and no matter how big. The main problems right now are food and clothing. We've got four breakfast programs going. When a mother comes up to us and says that her children are hungry and they need shoes on their feet, we can't pull out a Red Book and say Mao says this, this, and this, cause the lady is going to close the door in our face or maybe laugh at us. So we go out and we tell them, 'you and I together, we can put food in your children's stomachs and we can put shoes on your children's feet, if we join together. You alone can't do it and we alone can't do it, but both of us together can do it.'

B.P.: Is there a group similar to yours in Puerto Rico, and have any of your members recently arrived from or gone to Puerto Rico?

RAFAEL: We've got some brothers who are in Puerto Rico right now. I just got back a few months ago and I'm going back there next week. They've got a lot of small organizations going in Puerto Rico. There is a group called LIBERATION that is organizing the grass roots people—JIBAROS. These are the people that all of us stem from. Jibaro is the man who would be cutting sugar cane, picking coffee, his coffee and his sugar. Felipe Luciano, our N.Y. State Chairman, has a poem that reads:

Coming home with the smell of sweet sugar on you  
You don't need no perfume and no cologne to bathe yourself in  
And your woman loves you—Jibaro.

The biggest thing in Puerto Rico is the ARMED COMANDOS FOR LIBERATION, who in the past year and a half, have torn up \$35 million worth of ameriKKKan enterprise. This organization is not underground, it's just people who represent the military faction of the Puerto Rican liberation movement. They have done some beautiful things, but they have jumped one step ahead of the people. They started engaging in armed struggle before the people were educated to the need for arms. That's where organizations like LIBERATION come in—they educate the people.

B.P.: Are a lot of brothers and sisters from Puerto Rico still coming to Harlem in large numbers?

RAFAEL: I would say that more are going back now. The people who came up from Puerto Rico looking for milk and honey found that the milk was sour and there was no honey.

B.P.: Would you run down some of the specifics relating to your recent bust.

RAFAEL: I was arrested March 29, 1969, in Detroit for the alleged murder of a policeman. 147 of us were arrested after the attack upon the church. We were later released by Judge Crocket of Detroit. A week later I was rearrested stemming from information given by a 'concerned citizen.' This 'concerned citizen' was David Brown, Jr., from Compton, Calif, who is a 19-year-old 'Mod Squad nigger.' He said that he saw me shoot the policeman, but all the evidence is completely contradictory in itself. I spent five months in jail and I'm out now on \$5,000 bail, pending second degree murder charges. My trial starts March 9 in Detroit.

B.P.: Are any demonstrations planned in Detroit or elsewhere?

RAFAEL: What we're trying to do is organize a whole month of demonstrations for all political prisoners throughout the month of March. A lot of brothers and sisters are on trial now and their trials will be running all through March; the Panther 21, Rap Brown's trial will start in March, the Brooklyn 19 trial will start in March, Huey's appeal comes up this week, which might run for a while, Los Siete de la Raza's trial started February 16. We are going to try and organize around all these trials. The reason all these trials are in March is so they could split up the support into different factions. We want a month long demonstration to support all political prisoners.

B.P.: Before we close would you run down some of the things the YLO plans to do in the future?

RAFAEL: We plan to try and get our church back, plus we are organizing hospital workers and hopefully soon we are going to take over a hospital. That's most likely our next offensive.

One of the main reasons Rafael went to the West Coast was to raise funds to help defend their political prisoners, all contributions may be sent to:

The Young Lords Organization  
1678 Madison Ave.  
New York, New York 10029

# fifth Estate

Roland Young  
Rafael Viera on the Young Lords  
1970

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/100-march-5-18-1970/rafael-viera-on-the-young-lords>  
Fifth Estate #100, March 5-18, 1970

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**