

IBEW Local 48's Keith Edwards retires after 44-year career

Keith Edwards feels like a truly blessed man.

"I've had such a good life. Think about it. Because I'm a union electrician, I've had health care since I was 20 years old. I've always had the best wages. I've had the best working conditions. A voice on the job. And now a great retirement — all because I'm a union electrician."

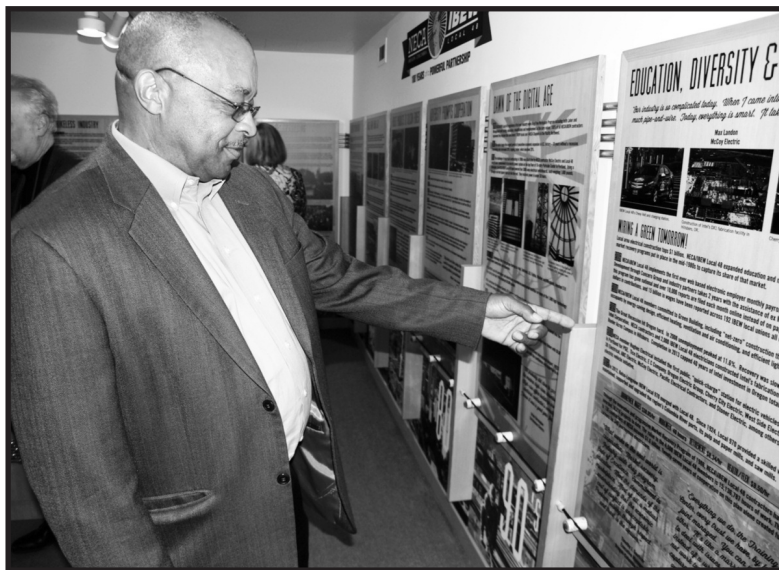
Edwards, 64, retired Nov. 1 from his job as an international representative for the Ninth District of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). He was honored at a retirement reception Nov. 23 at the IBEW Local 48 union hall in Portland.

Edwards got his start as an apprentice at IBEW Local 48 in 1969, a couple of years after graduating from Portland's Jefferson High School. In those days there was a one-year probationary period before you could join the union. His official active date was August of 1970.

During his 44-year career, Edwards broke many barriers, including becoming the first African-American business manager of a construction local in IBEW history. He also was the first black to serve as a member of the National Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee.

He got his first taste of union activism in 1974 when he co-founded the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus.

"My union embraced it right away," he said.



Keith Edwards, a 44-year member of IBEW Local 48, checks out an exhibit at the Oregon Historical Society featuring the 100th anniversary partnership of NECA/IBEW. Edwards, the first black business manager of an IBEW local in the nation, retired last month as an international rep.

Shortly thereafter the international union established a minority caucus for African-Americans and Latinos nationwide.

Edwards spent two years in New York and New Jersey working as a traveling electrician. He returned to Portland in 1988 to work at Swan Island building oil modules for Alaska. He was a regular at union meetings, and in 1989 he was appointed as a steward by then-business manager Ed

Barnes. That same year he also was appointed to Local 48's Executive Board, following the retirement of Gus Miller. Miller was the first African-American to serve on the Board.

In 1990, Barnes hired Edwards as a full-time business representative.

Barnes retired in 1995. He was succeeded by Greg Teeple, who a year later was hired by the international union. Local 48's Executive Board appointed Jerry Bruce to succeed Teeple,

and in 1996 Bruce tapped Edwards as his assistant business manager. When Bruce retired mid-term in 2000, the local's Executive Board appointed Edwards to succeed him.

Edwards won election to the job outright in 2001. He was the first (and only) business manager of Local 48 to be elected unopposed. He also was the first African-American to be elected business manager of an IBEW construction local nationwide.

Two years later the international came knocking again, hiring him as a representative for the Ninth District, which encompasses Oregon, Washington, Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and the northern portion of Idaho. Edwards was assigned to locals in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

Edwards said what he enjoyed most about his job was working with people — both on the union side and on the management side — and helping them resolve their issues.

"One guy might say the sky is blue, and another guy says the sky is green. The truth is somewhere in the middle," he said. "A lot of the time (finding a solution) it's just common sense."

Edwards says the biggest disappointment of his career is seeing labor's fall in both membership and market share. "The middle class is shrinking, and the rich ... the rich class isn't growing, only the net worth of a few individuals is growing."

On the bright side, as a community

activist Edwards says he sees more and more younger people starting to realize the benefit of having a union at work.

Known as "The Union Guy" in Portland's black community, Edwards says it's crucial that union members be active in their communities, letting people know what the union is all about.

"I'm always preaching about the benefits of being in a union. I'm proof of it," he said.

Outside of the union, Edwards is involved with the Coalition of Black Men, the Portland Workforce Alliance, and the NAACP, where he has served as president of the Portland chapter.

He also served eight years on the Oregon Electrical Board under appointment of Gov. Barbara Roberts.

"Keith has spent the last 44 years doing what he can to help the IBEW and make the lives of all those around him better," wrote Local 48 Assistant Business Manager Alan Keser in the union's newsletter announcing his retirement.

And though he says he doesn't have any aspirations to run for elected office, he will continue working to open doors for others. In fact, shortly after retiring he had business cards printed that read: "Keith Edwards. Community Activist. Retired Union Electrician."

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