

Racism in Oregon: An Egregious History *continued from page 8*

early 1970s, due in part to continuing discrimination, inner city poverty, and the rise of the Black Power movement, with riots leading to wide spread violence and damage to neighborhoods. A riot erupted in the Albina neighborhood of Portland on July 30, 1967. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, followed by the killing of Robert Kennedy on June 5, led to even more unrest across the country. At the Summer Olympic games in Mexico City in the summer of '68 U.S. track sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised black gloved fists in a "black power salute" and bowed their heads on the medal stand during the playing of the National Anthem. Their image became a symbol of the troubling times and the continuing oppression of blacks in the United States.

African Americans weren't the only ones dissatisfied with the American government in the late 1960s and early 70s. Protests broke out on college campuses against the Vietnam War, often leading to violence. On May 4, 1970 National Guard troops at Kent State University in Ohio opened fire on students during a protest and four students, all white, were killed, and nine other students wounded. That event received a wave of publicity and notoriety. Less remembered is an incident at Jackson State University in Mississippi, eleven days after Kent State, where state police fired on black students, killing two and wounding 11. Also mostly forgotten is the Orangeburg Massacre in February 1968 where South Carolina highway patrolmen shot and killed three black students and wounded 27 others during a protest on the campus of South Carolina State University.

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Amidst all this civil unrest, the University of Oregon in Eugene started a unique program in 1968 called Project 75. The program was designed to increase their African American population on campus, giving scholarships to 75 students each year for several years as a way to accomplish their goal. In 2018, on the 50th anniversary of the start of Project 75 OPB did an interview with one of the alumni, Carla Gary.

Gary was an Oregon resident who, along with the other students recruited from across the country for Project 75, knew there were high expectations for them. "We were to be, first and

foremost, academic scholars, working toward degrees," said Gary in the OPB interview. "But we knew, without anyone having to tell us, that we were going to change the culture of the institution. We were going to ask different questions because we lived different experiences. Being black in America, you live dualities all the time, so we knew what was expected. It was a chance for us to represent ourselves as both students and our community."

Gary later returned to the University of Oregon to work as an Assistant Vice President, and now runs a consulting firm in Eugene. When asked her "big picture view" of what has changed at the University of Oregon since she started there, she noted that a new Black Culture Center was getting ready to open on the campus. "I never imagined that that would have happened," said Gary. She also noted the large number of black students from Portland attending the University and the increase in black faculty members, as exciting changes.

When asked how the white college community, as well as the community of Eugene, responded to the African American students, Gary noted that it was an interesting time for the City of Eugene. "It was very disconcerting and people were really frightened that we had overrun the city," said Gary. "There were comments in the newspaper. In a grocery store a white woman asked me, 'Where did you all come from - there are so many of you.' I was from Oregon and I wasn't surprised, but some of the students were from places like Mississippi and they bristled at that, because they knew what that meant and they thought they had come to a place where that wasn't going to be an issue. I remember one of my friends saying, 'This feels like home.'"

Off campus, Gary said things were even worse for the Project 75 students. "I don't feel this way today - I still live in Eugene - but there were parts of Springfield, and parts of Eugene we did not go. We did not go because we did not feel safe. I know there are people who can't believe this, but when we went to school here there were still 'sundown laws' that said African Americans and Native Americans - 'off the street' by sundown, or no one could be responsible for your safety. There are still people who don't know the history of this state."

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Today in Oregon, African Americans, along with other racial and religious minorities, still face discrimination and abuse. But while a culture of white supremacy still exists, changes are happening.

In March of 2019, Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum testified in the State Senate in favor of SB 577 which would give assistance to individuals and communities impacted by hate crimes, and would modernize Oregon's hate crime laws. It would place Oregon among a very few states that address "bias incidents."

Currently under Oregon law, the crime of intimidation can be charged in the first degree - which is a felony, only if two or more people harm another person because of "that person's race, color, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or national origin." If a person motivated by prejudice acts alone, it's only intimidation in the second degree - a misdemeanor. That's what happened in the case of Russell Courtier when he ran down and murdered Larnell Bruce, Jr. It was also the case with Jeremy Christian who stabbed the two men to death on the MAX after his racist rant. Neither were charged with a felony hate crime. Rosenblum is hoping to change that. "While the number (of hate crimes) is frightening, the truth is we don't know as much as we should be able to about hate and bias crimes. The only thing we do know is that they're consistently underreported," Rosenblum said in her testimony.

Representative Janelle Bynum, who had police called on her when she was canvassing in her district, is also taking action. She sponsored HB 3409, which passed unanimously in the House in April of this year following the incident at St. Helens High School where black student athletes were subjected to racial taunts and slurs. HB 3409 limits school districts in Oregon from becoming a member of any organization that administers or facilitates interscholastic activities if they do not implement policies to address and transparently respond to incidents of

derogatory or inappropriate behavior.

Representative Bynum has also sponsored HB 3216 which would make it an offense to unlawfully summon a police officer, with fines of up to \$250, "for reasons other than a suspected criminal activity with intent to cause specified harm," - similar to what happened to her when she was canvassing. HB 3216 also passed in the House unanimously this April.

Bynum's take away from the canvassing incident says a lot about, not just what kind of legislator she is, but also about what kind of person she is. "What constitutes suspicious behavior, and on whose part?" asked Bynum during her interview with OPB.

"When trying to understand what happened - and race is a component in it - I think the most important thing that I'm really fighting for is for people not to jump to conclusions based on race," said Bynum. "People want me to say this is completely about race. And I'm not completely there yet because I don't know what the woman [who called the police] was thinking. I don't know what her experience was five minutes before she saw or felt like she needed to report. I don't know. The same grace I am offering her is what I would like for people to be offered when they are in front of a judge, or in front of a jury, or when I come to the door and I ask for your vote. I want you to assume the best in me. I don't want you to fill in the blanks about how bad I might be."



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