

The candid candidate

Jeri Williams offers up her own brand of politics as she puts herself into the race for Randy Leonard's City Council seat

BY JAKE THOMAS
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Longtime community organizer Jeri Williams faces a tough battle against Steve Novick for the City Council seat being vacated by Randy Leonard. But this isn't the first time Williams has faced a tough fight.

Decades ago, Williams was pimped by a gang and coerced into walking 82nd Avenue every night into the early morning hours. After escaping, Williams went on to become a labor and environmental justice organizer, and now manages a program in the Office of Neighborhood Involvement aimed at getting under-represented communities involved in city governance.

Now Williams hopes to make the jump from organizing to making policy. Williams is confident she has a fighting chance to win the seat if she can activate communities that often shy away from the political process. So far, she's gotten the endorsement of former Mayor Tom Potter.

Jake Thomas: *You said you're disappointed with some of the things you see going on with the city. What are those things?*

Jeri Williams: One of the frustrating things is the Last Thursday event and how long it's been going on and how long the city has been paying for this party and just the inequity of it. There are a lot other things the city should be spending money on, not somebody's party.

There are equity issues around the fact that we are making giant investments in certain groups of people, and those groups of people are the ones most favored by the people in office. And I guess people would say that's politics; I think that's the way it works. So if that's the way it works, we need to get someone in there that cares about homeless populations, who cares about people who are not being heard.

We need to talk about people of color issues and have the race discussion. We need to get somebody in office to do that. I hear that my opponent is a really nice progressive guy, but I don't think that he'll do that.

Ethnocentrism is basically: I know what I know because of what I grew up around. So we're all ethnocentric. My Indian and Mexican parts of me, and the white part of me, all create what I grew up with, it creates my knowledge base. I can't expect people like Dan Saltzman to understand what it's like to be poor. I can't explain what it's like to him to be poor. I can't explain to him what it's like to be homeless, a woman, a woman of color.

That's why we have a bunch of high rises downtown. That's why we have "sustainability" centers and not "worker" centers. That's why we have no shelters for little girls getting trafficked. We've chosen to look the other way on a lot of issues we find distasteful, and that's homelessness, that's human trafficking, that's the drug issue. So as long as we don't make investments, real investments, in people — not just little Band-Aids, not just throw crumbs at them — we're not going to have a solution. We're going to have people who are happy because they have what they have and they're fine, and

we're going to have a whole group of people who aren't.

If the city doesn't look at creating a broadband strategy that will allow everybody to have the Internet, then those families' kids who don't have internet will do worse in school. You get unemployed people who are told to go home and go online and apply for benefits. Well, what if you have no online to go home to? If you're a 6-year-old girl and your mom works until eight o'clock at night, and you need to get on the Internet and do something for your report, it's not going to get done because Mom's at work. And if you listen to the people who use the library computers, they'll tell you, you have to stand in line a long time and you only have so long to use it. We're creating this digital divide, which is once again going to create privilege for some and lack for other people. If you have enough, you tend to not think about those who don't.

If Sam Adams and I were to drive down Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd, we would see things differently. And I think that my view is as important as what he sees. He may see all the buildings that are LEED-certified sustainable. I may see the homeless people, and the people who have drug problems walking up and down the street. So we need people in office who can think about all those things.

People say, "I believe in equity," so let's give East Portland some sidewalks. It's way more than East Portland getting sidewalks. East Portlanders need a voice. If we get urban renewal areas, we get them because some communities have been blighted like Mississippi, and it gets built up for another community, and the other community gets moved into a pocket in Southeast. Now gentrification is no longer an unintended consequence. We know it happens when we make these decisions. We plan for our prosperity, but we don't plan for our poverty.

J.T.: *If elected, you'd be the only person of color on City Council. There have been a couple of disturbing reports that have come out in the past couple of years, the State of Black Oregon and the Coalition of Communities of Color reports. What would you do to address the needs of minority communities?*

J.W.: We have to look at policy. So we're doing that now through the Office of Equity and Human Rights, which we just passed and a lot of people were really critical of. I told *The Oregonian* that the way it reported it is like it's a joke; it's not a joke to the people who asked for it. The people who asked for it are saying, "we need you to pay attention to us. We need you to take care of our needs because if you're not taking care of everybody's needs then you're not doing your job."

It's like people don't want to have that discussion about race. They just don't. During the Office of Equity vote, Dan Saltzman said, I don't want to see any more dialogue. Well then, how are people going to learn? Hasn't it always been that we learn through education about each other?

J.T.: So what are some specific things you'd like to see come out of the new Office



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of Equity and Human Rights?

J.W.: One of them is the sit-lie policy and eventually we need to look at how the contract with the day labor workers center will be ending soon and are we going to continue to fund it.

As the Cully Neighborhood gets built up can we make sure that those people are not displaced. It's not a historically black community; it's more Latino, Asian and white people. But can you make sure that those people don't get displaced when you put the new infrastructure in? We don't want to force people out because of economic reasons, and we can take action on this and learn lessons from it. We can't keep pushing people all over town.

J.T.: *The city recently created Drug Impact Areas that exclude people from sections of downtown. The city also continues to enforce a no-camping ordinance, even though there's not enough shelter space for homeless people. How do you intend to address these issues?*

J.W.: It's almost like we need to do an inventory on the empty buildings that we're not using right now, but for profit's sake we'd rather have them remain empty than have people live in them. We have to shift this. We have to increase shelters. And we're getting ready in December to open up the first human trafficking center for teens with the county, but there have to be other options.

What I know is that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. I went and talked to Dignity Village, and we need to support many different modes of living in Portland that we currently don't. We have to really, really, really think outside the box.

I don't support the no-camping ordinance. Where am I supposed to go if I don't have anywhere to go? The city is saying I'm a criminal. So we'll put you in jail, or kick you out of town or harass you and take all the items you have and destroy them because you don't have enough to worry about already. It's not a sustainable idea to think that we can continue on like this. I believe that really at the core of what I'm saying is that if you don't make those investments at the bottom, you're not going to really be blessed.

J.T.: *You're a survivor of human trafficking. How will you bring that experience to City Council?*

J.W.: I'm pushing for more support to get people out of trafficking. We need to make

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