

Oregon's legislature grapples with racial equity

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Last month on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, a coalition of advocacy organizations presented findings from Facing Race: the 2013 Oregon Legislative Report Card on Racial Equity. The report is

designed to help legislators better understand how to address troubling racial disparities in the health and well-being of Oregon's communities.

Oregon's racial and economic gaps run deep. In 2012, the poverty rate

for whites was only 15 percent, but 30 percent for Latinos, 34 percent for Native Americans, 36 percent for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders and 41 percent for African Americans. There is a growing fault line in Oregon and the indicators stretch across a range of issue areas.

The four-year graduation rates for students of color in Oregon entering high school in the 2006-07 school year are abysmal, with only 50 percent of black and Native students graduating on time, compared to 70 percent of white students. Meanwhile, a quick look at Oregon's criminal justice system also shows a stark and disturbing picture: African Americans are over five times more likely to be incarcerated in our state prison system than are whites, despite research showing that there is no meaningful difference among racial groups in regard to their likelihood to commit a crime.

Oregon's racial gaps undermine our ability to ensure a stable and strong future with fair opportunities and shared prosperity for all residents. These are issues we cannot leave unaddressed, and Oregon's sense of urgency should only be elevated by the state's shifting

demographics.

Communities of color in Oregon are experiencing substantial growth. Oregon's population is increasingly diverse — more multiracial, multicultural and multilingual. The population of Oregonians of color has doubled in the past 20 years and now makes up 22.4 percent of the general population. That trend will continue. During the 2011-2012 school year in Oregon's K-12 public schools, more than one-third (35 percent) of children were identified as students of color.

The Facing Race report delivered a central message: legislators must understand that they have significant power and influence to address racial disparities. The decisions that they make today can either increase opportunity and improve outcomes across race, gender and economic lines or worsen disparities. We all have a shared fate, and Oregon cannot thrive if we are leaving some communities behind.

Fortunately, the report shows that some progress is being made. The 2011 Facing Race report included 23 pieces of proposed legislation, of which ten bills became law. This year's report included 21 bills, of which 18 became law.

Improvements in passing legislation can be attributed to the increased presence of organizations representing communities of color at the Capitol, strategic coalition work, bipartisan support for key legislation, and more lawmakers' willingness to work directly with impacted communities.

Despite the success of key pieces of racial equity legislation, there remains a great deal of work to do. Racial disparities in a range of areas from health, to economic well-being, to educational access still exist and, in some cases, are worsening.

Meanwhile, conversations about race often seem charged even when they are not intended to be. And because this project includes an accountability component (grading), there are often increased levels of

discomfort. There has been some real push back and defensiveness around Facing Race. When communities of color and their allies step up and step out to speak the truth around racial injustice and disparities, there are always reactionary elements that immediately respond with criticism.

The report helps underscore that solutions exist, while it also breaks down misconceptions about what it means to work towards racial equity. For example, policies that help address racial equity often do not focus solely on communities of color. Communities of color face many of the same problems as white Oregonians, but more acutely. Let's take the issue of foreclosure. Senate bill 558 expanded the 2012 Oregon Foreclosure Assistance Program by requiring most lenders to offer mediation before initiating a foreclosure. Mortgage foreclosures driven by predatory high-risk loans have had a particularly devastating impact on communities. Although the majority of families affected by foreclosure in Oregon are white, African American families are more than twice as likely to lose their homes. So although the majority of Oregonians who may benefit from SB 558 are white, this legislation unquestionably helps address racial disparities in the foreclosure crisis.

The hope is that legislators take a more proactive approach to understanding and addressing the racial disparities that exist in Oregon. It seems like some progress is being made, but it is no coincidence that Facing Race was released on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday. We have much more to do. Our country and state have not yet lived up to the values and ideals for which Dr. King struggled and eventually gave his life. Notions that we are living in a post-racial society in the 21st century might seem humorous if the racial disparities in the United States weren't so alarming.

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David Rogers is the executive director for Partnership for Safety and Justice. PSJ is a statewide, nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to making Oregon's approach to crime and public safety more effective and just.

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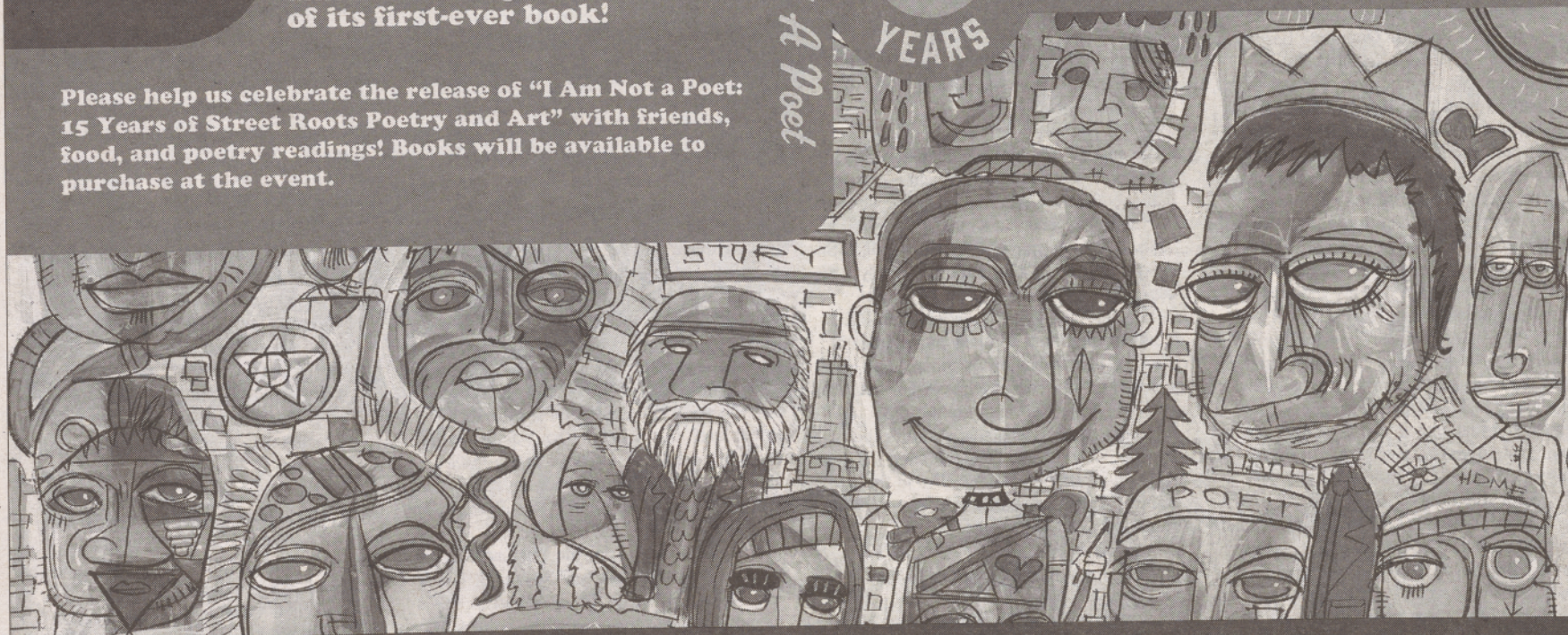
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