



PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

## George Mayes Remembers

### A personal memoir of another Portland

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT  
STAFF WRITER

*Born and raised in Northeast Portland, Street Roots vendor George Mayes has been an eyewitness to the many changes Portland has undergone in the past few decades. One of seven children of a longshoreman father from Texas and a railroad worker mother from Louisiana, George has born witness to the changing black presence in Portland through the conflicts of integration to the struggle with gentrification and displacement. Recently I met with Mayes at a Starbucks on Northeast Fremont where he shared his memories of growing up in Northeast and watching as the city, and the neighborhood, has grown. His story is just one of the thousands that make up the history of black Portland.*

In 1955, in Portland, I was born and raised. I've been here off and on, but I had grown up here. It is my home. I've

seen a lot of changes. I grew up over here on the northeast side, but I went to kindergarten, grade school, on the north side. We grew up on Cook Street. Irving Park is right there. That was our master playground. And it was very interesting, because we were right there at that boundary that switches over quick. Cross the street, you're in North Portland, cross back you're in Northeast Portland. The people were even different, you know? From this side of Union Street it's a thing where it was kind of like an upgraded type of social type people. Then on the north side they were kind of like downgrading them and undergrading them.

We was like a big family. That's like our whole block of Cook Street. It was like we were doing the whole team thing. Everybody was cool, everybody was there, everybody was open. If you got in trouble, you could get a whooping five or six times

before you got home. It was just that open. And it was cool. And you had to be straight or they'll say, "Hey, boy, you know you're not supposed to be doing that." It was good, I mean, it was real good.

We always had a church-home coming up. First A.M.E. Zion, we were Methodist. As my parents say, You never leave home without one because that's gonna strengthen you even more. And that's the thing where our church model became, "education's important." As today that's what we have in our church. Education's important.

And so we ended up getting bussed out (for school) in 1964. We ended up in the Southwest Hills of Portland. West Sylvan was the school. Our parents gave us the opportunity to make the choice. They said you have the opportunity to get a better education. It's a thing where we were getting the low-funded books. We were getting the hand-me-downs. West Sylvan was getting *the* books, and this is what my parents were explaining to us. You could be a little farther ahead, but it's not gonna be easy. It's gonna be a lot of recourses. And, boy, it was a lot of recourses. Hardest time in my life. It was bad enough crossing Martin Luther King Jr. (Blvd.) to get on the north side. At that time the blacks were against the blacks that were going. And get up there — oh boy — the whites were against it too. So now we're stuck in the middle.

I got into a fight every day for a whole year, up on the hill and when I came back down. Because I was from Northeast. If I had been from North it might have been different. But I was getting tired of it. It was the opportunity in my time to do what I had to do. I worked hard on not trying to fight but I had to. And I kept telling them, I am tired of doing this. I don't think I should have to do this, to come back home, you know? I'm hiding sticks in the bushes because they were always trying to gang up on individuals. I thought every day I was getting hurt because it was to a point where I had to fight my way home.

By my sixth grade year, things were better, but I was still dealing with the issues of the prejudice thing. You know families, friends, meet new friends. And I wasn't even minded by what color. It ain't the color, it's the people. There's good ones, bad ones, ones just indifferent. So as my mom said, You go out there and find the good people. It'll settle down for you.

It was probably about the late '80s, '90s, when development and changes had started happening. In the development field there were changes, but the people weren't changing. Yeah, the buildings. But the people? They were still the same. Today, a lot of people are from out of state, too.

Yeah, Cook Street has changed. It's got trees all over the place. They got trees up and down the block. We didn't really have that many trees on the block, now it's kind of filled up pretty good. Because a lot of people are into that environmental type thing, trees, bushes and other things.

Yeah, [it's mostly white now.] There were a lot of black families that were on this side and they were kind of middle class. There's still some that's still here. But then a lot of the white people have moved back in. And the old generation—the kids have come in, kind of fix up the houses, sold them. They just wanted that quick fix. A lot of the old folks, the companies and the kids just sold them out. Got rid of them because they didn't want the headache. They was tired of them. My dad sold the house from up under us. Just all of a sudden, bop. I was about 36, 37, somewhere around there. He sold it cheap. People paid cash for it. To him it was just some money. We were trying to fight for it, but it's too late.

Other than that it's drastically coming back. In the early days when the blacks and everything was here, they just didn't have enough money to maintain and keep the buildings up and have things like this — Starbucks. It was all ran down. And now it was like the white people came in and they're getting allocated money, see? But I'm looking at it to where if them blacks had got allocated money it would be nice too. But to each his own. I can't knock them for that.

They got more restaurants and bars than they ever had in there in my entire life being here. They got bars all over the place. They got eating establishments all over the place now. You gonna find somewhere almost on every corner that you're gonna be able to get something to eat. And there's more people coming. And they're building for these people. They are building jobs, they are building places for these people. They know people are coming, and people want to come this way. I'm seeing that people are out more. It's reminding me almost of the old days, but it's just more crowded. And people are congregating at all these places, and they're just uniting at all these places and going from there. And I can just see the crowd. This is a great thing out here, it's growing abundantly. People come here and they go, "This is beautiful, this is lovely, this is gorgeous."

Let me tell you what my dad told me when I was little. And he kept repeating it. "This is God's country. You are in God's country. You'll find nothing no greater than here." He said, "Son, this is what I'm telling you. This is the easiest place you can live. If you can't live here, wow, you are done." And find out, it's true.

### WHITELANDIA, from page 8

through Albina. We tend to look at the last three years of Williams as being what's relevant to the black population, but it goes much further back than that. If you're not in that culture you're just not going see it. You're not going to have those discussions, and it's going to feel like history to you rather than your life.

**A.G.:** Can you tell me about your partnership with the Oregon Assembly for Black Affairs, and how the film has benefitted from that? You mentioned that you've partnered with other organizations as well.

**M.Z.:** Through a series of coincidences with creative projects we came into contact with Dr. Calvin Henry who is the head of the Oregon Assembly for Black Affairs. We were having a discussion with him one day about a project that we had ended and that we were looking for something new.

**T.M.:** Basically, we feel that a lot of the projects we've worked on in the past haven't given us the opportunity to give fair

representation to, or really serve folks of color. And in some of our other work we've come across stories in the black community — stories of discrimination, stories of resistance—that surprise us. So we just started talking with Dr. Henry about what it might look like to create a project that would address these issues that we have not had the opportunity to address in our previous work.

**M.Z.:** So Tracy and I then took the idea of combining the current state of gentrification, and all the other problems that exist with the history of black Oregon and through Dr. Henry came up with the idea of doing the film "Whitelandia" and then asked Dr. Henry if he and the board for the Oregon Assembly for Black Affairs would become the advisory board for "Whitelandia," which they agreed to. So officially OABA is our advisory board and we go down to Salem to sit in on board meetings when we're invited and to update them on the progress of the film. And as it moves forward, (OABA members) will sit through edits of the film, give us feedback, etc. We've done work with the Portland Observer and one of their reporters, Donovan Smith, who is a younger man.

We've let him on as an adviser for the film because he brings a very unique perspective, his experience here in Portland being in his mid-20s. And recently we did a presentation for HUD, Human and Urban Development, and we're speaking with HUD to pick a few members from their organization to become advisers for this film on issues of housing, which is huge in Portland and in Oregon when you're discussing black communities.

**A.G.:** What kind of community response have you gotten since word of the film has gone around?

**T.M.:** We had an overwhelming response from people who want this film to be made, both black and white and other people of color as well. Of course there are those people who question: "Hey, you guys are white filmmakers, so can you really tell a fair and honest story when you guys are white?" And then we've had some white folks say things like, "I don't really think that Oregon is so racist today, I just don't feel those effects as much." But there's always people who are going to question, and that's good. Dialogue around this issue is really important so we really appreciate and welcome

conversation and dialogue around the process. But I can say overwhelmingly, people feel this is a project that needs to be made. We have been really happy and excited and honored to receive the support that we have from people in terms of their understanding why this is such an important project. I'm really happy because I think in general people are ready and willing to talk about race right now more than they have been. I think there's sort of this lull, and I think people are realizing that there is a sort of mythology, there is this bubble, that it's an illusion and it's time to take things up to the next level and really start exposing the deep roots of racism and the way that it functions in everyday life without people realizing that they're complicit in it. And I think people want to have these conversations now, I think we're ready for it.

To learn more about "Whitelandia" and to fund this project visit the [Whitelandia Kickstarter page](http://WhitelandiaKickstarter.com), [kickstarter.com/projects/whitelandia/whitelandia-black-oregon-white-homeland](http://kickstarter.com/projects/whitelandia/whitelandia-black-oregon-white-homeland). To learn more about Tracy MacDonald, Matt Zodrow and their work, visit [uncolafilms.com](http://uncolafilms.com).