



Charles McGee III, co-founder of the Black Parent Initiative

PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

# Empowering minds

Portland's ground-breaking nonprofit, Black Parent Initiative, confronts the challenges facing black youths and their families with community-based solutions

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT  
STAFF WRITER

It's warm on this summer day in the Southeast Portland art gallery, but local artist Robert Collins stands unfazed — decked out in a slate blue three-piece suit complete with matching fedora. The sun streams through two walls of windows and lands on the opposite side where Robert's paintings hang. Robert greets the well-wishers streaming through the door. All are

here to celebrate Robert's artistic accomplishments and, of course, to wish him a happy 15th birthday. With a savviness to match his wardrobe, Robert reminds his guests, "Remember! All the paintings are for sale!"

"No," says Robert's mother Amanda setting out birthday cake across the room. "You can have whatever painting you want." She smiles at her son who smartly

stays quiet on the subject.

Down the hall is Robert's windowless studio where he spent the better part of the summer, waking up at 5 a.m. to bike down to where he would sketch and paint until it started to get dark. Since starting his freshman year in high school in September, Robert has had to settle for only going before and after classes. Once home in the evenings, he continues to draw.

"I have to tell him, 'Go to sleep, Robert!'" Amanda says proudly. It is her hard work at

two jobs that allows Robert this space to create.

Though Robert is only 15, he presents himself with the maturity of someone older, reflective of the other guests at the party, most of whom are adults familiar with Robert and Amanda through the Community Transitional School, along with their volunteer work with the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Military Helpline, and his new high school, Leadership and Entrepreneurship High School where Robert hopes to learn more about the world of business. Earlier this year, Portland Public Schools — in conjunction with the Black Parent Initiative (BPI) — honored him as one of this year's Young, Gifted and Black Students, an annual formal recognition of PPS's high-achieving black students.

Afterward BPI, a community nonprofit focused on empowering black children and their parents to succeed in school, honored Robert further by buying four of his paintings to use in future promotional materials. One painting of a black mother kissing her child on the forehead, graced the posters for BPI's 5th Annual Parent Symposium, which took place in September.

In many ways, Robert represents BPI's model black student. He excels in his studies, is pursuing his passion, and is well-connected to the social resources Portland has to offer him.

But looking at his background, raised by a single mother — both well acquainted with housing instability — and headed to a school rated "below average" last year in student testing, and you see the work BPI still has to do.

Some of the challenges Robert and other

## Charles McGee III 'Every single day inspires me to do the work that I do.'

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT  
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Charles McGee III and I sit outside a coffeshop one late afternoon, but we are far from alone. We are interrupted multiple times by passersby who know him and can't help but say hello. He greets each one like an old friend.

"And how's your mother doing?" he asks in conversation with a woman, walking her dog. He is curious to know about others, and others are curious about him. Even in his office, his phone buzzes constantly with messages and alerts from the mass of people trying to get a hold of him.

Though it seems throughout his life he's always had many plates spinning at once, these days most of his time and attention are taken up being a husband and father of two young children and the president of the Black Parent Initiative, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering parents to help their black children succeed in school. On one side of McGee's office is a bookshelf filled with history and educational theory books from which he quotes often when talking about BPI and his hopes for Portland's future. On the other side of the room stands a table supporting photos of his loved ones, family and friends, his wife and 4-year-old son, not yet one of his daughter born only a few weeks prior. He points one out in particular, McGee with a black couple smiling in matching outfits.

"That's a picture of my amazing parents," McGee says. "They do it all the time," he says, referring to their matching yellow ensembles. "It's kind of excessive," he jokes.

His parents, he says, are the ones responsible for both the strong cultural pride and humanistic curiosity that informs all he does. Today, McGee wears many hats — activist, community organizer, president and CEO — all with the mission of helping parents be the best they can be for their children. With all of the positive energy McGee embodies today, it is hard to imagine that nearly three decades ago he was a young child witnessing the outbreak of one of Africa's deadliest civil wars.

Like many great Portlanders, McGee was not born in

**"We all have the greatest aspirations for our children, but the questions becomes our ability to leverage resources, personal community resources, in the rearing and development of these kids."**

CHARLES MCGEE  
CO-FOUNDER, BLACK PARENT INITIATIVE

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