

# New president brings local perspective to Urban League

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT  
STAFF WRITER

**N**kenge Harmon Johnson's legal and political career has taken her from her Pacific Northwest home across the United States and back again.

A graduate of the Trinity University School of Business and the Howard University School of Law, Harmon Johnson has served as a deputy assistant trade representative under Barack Obama and has worked in communications for several politicians, most recently serving as the communications director and press secretary for former Gov. John Kitzhaber. A few months ago, Harmon Johnson accepted a new job as president and CEO of the Urban League of Portland, the civil rights organization whose headquarters are a few blocks from the North Portland middle school where she first learned about

American civics.

Succeeding Michael Alexander, who served as the Urban League's president since 2012, Harmon Johnson takes the reins of the organization amid the excitement surrounding the release of its much-anticipated State of Black Oregon 2015 report. During our conversation about this critical new report, Harmon Johnson spoke to her own perspective on her new role in the state she loves and serves.

**Ann-Derrick GailLOT:** When people ask you what your job is, what do you tell them?

**Nkenge Harmon Johnson:** The Urban League is 70 years old this year. That makes us one of the oldest civil justice and civil rights organizations on the



Nkenge  
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Johnson

West Coast, and it's right here in our little Portland. Most people wouldn't expect that. So my job is to make sure the Urban League as an organization is around for another 70 years and that the work this organization has done in the community, not just in Portland but across the state, can continue and expand.

**A.G.:** So you grew up in Portland in the '80s and '90s.

**N.H.J.:** Portland and Salem.

**A.G.:** How do you think that experience informs your job?

**N.H.J.:** I am the first president of the Urban League who is from Oregon. I'm the 14th president of the Urban League. I'm the fourth woman, and I'm the

See **PRESIDENT**, page 7

## REPORT, from page 4

reason that a woman in Umatilla County may not seek prenatal care early enough in her pregnancy. Transportation is standing in her way. Same issues, very different places. So, for me, the similarities between black Oregon and rural Oregon were most surprising.

**K.S.:** One of the things that really stuck out at me, and I wasn't a believer in until this report was done, was how powerful all of the social and economic and health benefits (are) that come from community, from a solid community that has everything it needs to thrive. And on the flipside, what displacement and gentrification have done. Before, it was just a housing issue, and now I think we really are starting to understand that there are so many social and economic things that are affected when communities are broken up. I think all of those things when we kind of added them all up, you kind of realize it just takes a few policies that aren't well-coordinated to break up something that was built up over generations. And then we spend all our time trying to come up with these kind of

unnatural solutions to something that was so natural before. That's why it's so important to preserve the communities that we have still, and the new ones that are being formed; make sure that everything that we need is there.

**A.G.:** One thing that I read in the report is black voter turnout is much less than white voter turnout. It seems like a Catch-22 with trying to increase black voter turnout since people's faith in the system can't really be re-earned until something in policy changes, but that can't happen without votes. How can you interrupt that loop?

**K.S.:** Your interactions with the police are going to affect whether you want to vote or not because they affect the trust that you have in the people that are supposed to be either representing you or protecting you. So I think for us, it's really important that, for example, we work on policing and the relationship between the police department and communities, whether it's an adversarial one or one in partnership. That's one area where you can actually affect civic engagement. When people feel a sense of safety and they feel good about the people

who are protecting them, it's gonna increase civic engagement and voter turnout.

**A.G.:** There's been a lot of violence in the city this past month, and in response to that, Mayor Charlie Hales just said something that kind of speaks to what you're talking about. He said, "Right now, this summer, tonight, we need to make sure they're being watched carefully and that it's OK for police officers to stop and question people in the street, and everyone needs to understand that that's part of them doing their job. It's not about profiling; it's about doing our job." What do you think about that and how it affects what you're trying to do to improve this relationship?

**N.H.J.:** I've had conversations with Mayor Hales in the past, and I know that he's thoughtful on some of the issues we care about. In fact, he was at the launch of the State of Black Oregon. Part of me as the president of the Urban League and part of me as an attorney is concerned with what I just heard in that quote, so let's take the comment at face value. The types of activities that can be spawned by comments such as that are those that will lead to

further diminution of the relationship between African-Americans, between Latinos, between Asians, between whoever the "they" in the quote is and the police, because even when there's a spike in violence in a particular area, most of the people who live in that area are not in fact violent. And to be treated as though they are, it's a problem. It's also been shown again and again — New York and "Stop and Frisk," for example — it doesn't work. So my guess is that the mayor is aware of that; my guess is that our police chief is aware of that and that that is not what he was referring to in his comments.

**K.S.:** And I would just add that even the best-intentioned people still profile and there are reasons behind it. That's why we're trying to work with the police department, work with the city, to start to get at what are some of the other factors playing into why that happens and how can we stop it. It's not as easy as, "Stop profiling." And then everyone's gonna stop doing it. We have to understand why it happens, how it happens and what's the history behind it.

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