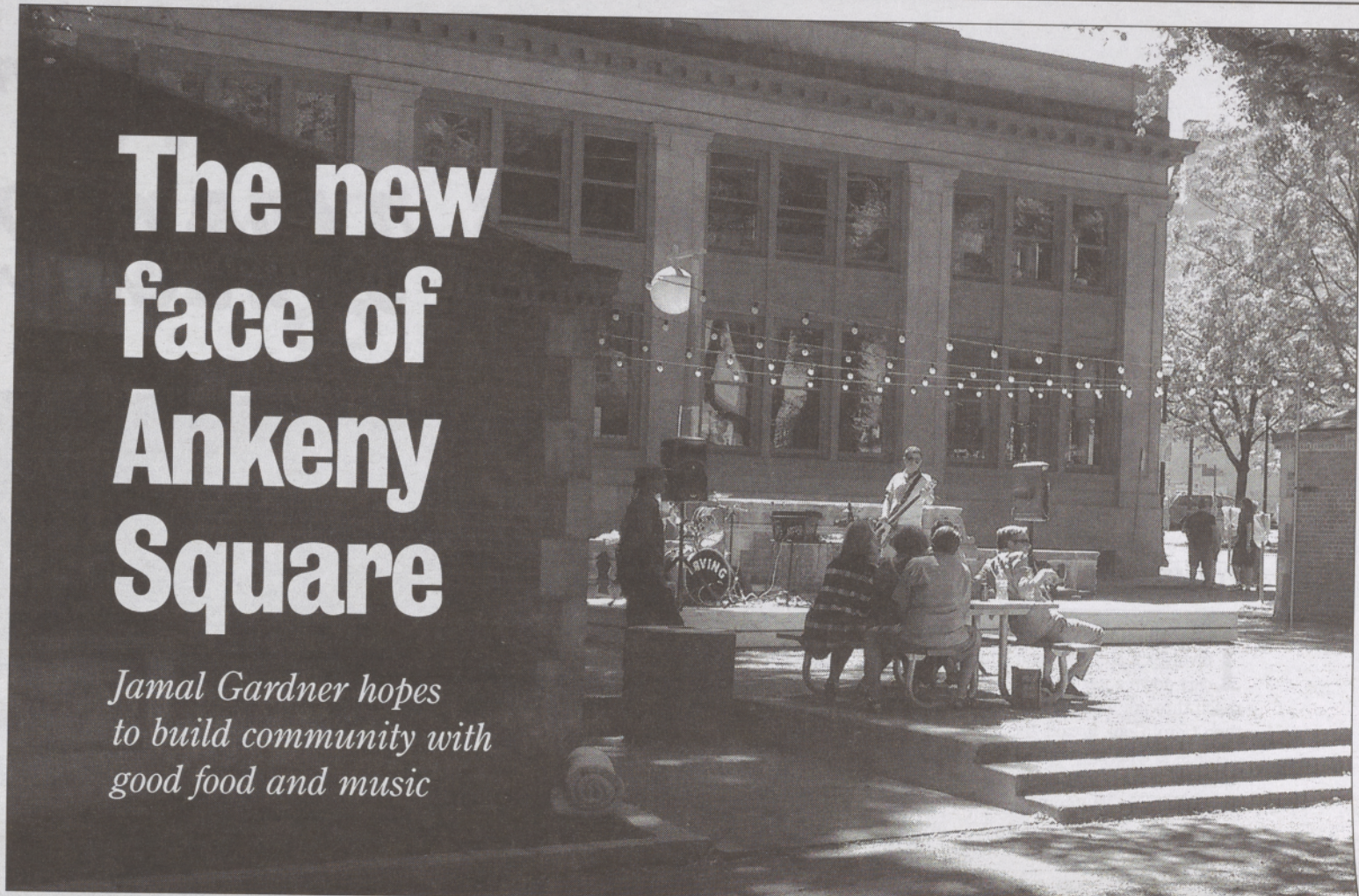


# The new face of Ankeny Square

*Jamal Gardner hopes to build community with good food and music*



Josh Kletzkin, with the band Irving, performs in Portland's Ankeny Square on Aug. 20. The park will become a performance space for musicians and other artists. PHOTOS BY AMANDA WALDROUPE

**BY AMANDA WALDROUPE**  
STAFF WRITER

The low, steady rumble of electric guitar and the sharp thump of drums could be heard down Burnside Street and throughout the North Park Blocks on Aug. 20.

On that exceptionally hot and arid Saturday afternoon, the sounds reverberating through this troubled area of downtown Portland marked the first performance in Ankeny Square since revitalization efforts began.

Half a dozen people sat on picnic benches in the park; another six stood nearby, looking toward the pale, wooden, rectangular stage that now lines the southern end of the square. Some people stopped to order food at one of the three food carts located within the park.

Jamal Gardner stood next to one of Ankeny Square's distinctive, derelict public restrooms. He is tall and slim and wore a sleeveless t-shirt and baggy shorts. He is of Jamaican and Cuban descent, and his face is framed by pen-width dreadlocks that fall past his shoulders. His beard and hair are beginning to gray. He often smiles as he talks to friends or passersby, a wide, toothy expression that is infectious.

Gardner, 38, has been smiling a lot lately. He is now in charge of Ankeny Square – the small park between Burnside Street and Southwest Ankeny Street that, for decades, has had a seedy reputation and attracted drug use, loitering and vandalism, as it fell into neglect and disrepair. In an effort to revitalize the space, Portland's Parks and Recreation bureau announced this past spring that people interested in creating

community projects at the park could submit proposals to the bureau.

Gardner's proposal was selected from a pool of 15 in May. Ankeny Square will become host to five multicultural food carts and a small stage that will be a performance space for any artist – writers, musicians, jugglers or others – to perform and share their art and talent with the public.

"Anybody with any weird talent – that is family friendly, of course," Gardner said.

He calls his vision for Ankeny Square, and the name of his business, Grubbin'.

Grubbin's slogan is "artistically celebrating diversity."

It's also Gardner's mission in life. After years spent on the street and in prison, he now hopes to build and foster community through food, music and interconnection.

The performance that afternoon was part of the Oregon Walkways event, hosted by Better Block PDX, an advocacy group for public spaces.

Josh Kletzkin, a guitarist who kicked off the afternoon's music session, and drummer Kris Sarles, form the band Irving. They call their music "paz" – a combination of pop and jazz.

"It's an honor to play outside in a space that (Gardner) restored and made so much more accessible to people," Kletzkin said.

"It's so Portland," Sarles added. "There's always been this culture that anyone can go outside and play music. That's been dwindling because a lot of money is coming in. Everything is more competitive." He said Ankeny Square is "not about making a lot of money. It's open to the city, open to the community."

Ankeny Square has undergone a facelift in



Jamal Gardner, right, checks on a community member at Ankeny Square. Gardner is the owner of Grubbin', which is bringing performance artists and multicultural food carts to the park.

the three months since Gardner gained control of it. The short, emerald green grass is gone, replaced with gravel. Several picnic benches sit throughout the park. At the southern end, between the two brick public restrooms that became notorious for drug activity, there is a rectangular, wooden stage large enough for a four-person band. Four strings of lights hang overhead.

Gardner expects to add two more food

carts, which he'll position on the park's northeastern corner, by Sept. 15, when Ankeny Square will have a grand re-opening.

Gardner leases Ankeny Square from the city for \$1 a year, and he is responsible for paying utilities. The contract with the parks bureau will be renegotiated after two years. He charges the food carts rent for the

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