

SPARC-ing conversation on homelessness and race

Why does homelessness affect communities of color at higher rates, and how can we make sure that we respond to homelessness in Multnomah County with racial disparities in mind?

This is a conversation that SPARC – Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities – launched this week in

Multnomah County with a series of panels and trainings for folks in the city, county and numerous organizations working on the frontlines of homelessness,

including Street Roots.

The Joint Office of Homeless Services – a partnership of Multnomah County and the City of Portland – formed this partnership with SPARC, an initiative of the Center for Social Innovation. Previously, SPARC conducted initial research with six partners – Atlanta, Ga.; Columbus, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; San Francisco, California; Syracuse, N.Y.; Pierce County, Wash.

Multnomah County joins up now in the next phase, which will take place over the next year.

The initial research showed that African Americans and Native Americans are disproportionately affected by homelessness. Here's how it plays out locally, according to last year's Point in Time count: Compared to white folks,

African Americans experience homelessness at twice the rate, and Native Americans at four times the rate.

There's more, and it's connected. African American and Native Americans earn half the average salary as white Portlanders. And there's no one, two or three-bedroom apartment that an African American or Native American-led household who earns that average salary can afford.

Oregon has a history of excluding and displacing people of color. Federal housing policies, forced relocations of Native people, mid-century termination of some Oregon tribes, exclusionary housing laws, racist real estate practices, planning and policies, terrible terms on housing mortgages and on and on. And then there's less to pass on – people of color lose out on intergenerational wealth. This all impacts housing stability.

Portland must grapple with decades of policies that gentrified – and continue to gentrify – neighborhoods, displacing communities of color. We can be misguided by assumptions and experiences, and by who is at the table and who is not. Then we miss what is right before our eyes, in terms of both problems and opportunities.

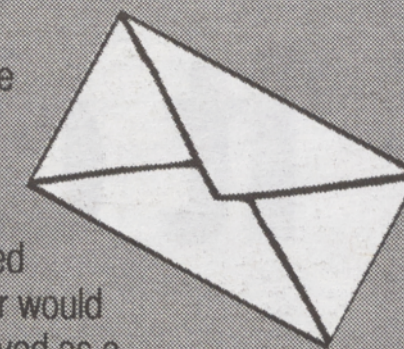
Over the next year, SPARC will work locally on research, conversations and strategies around the intersections of race and homelessness. This willingness to grapple with hard questions means we are more likely to create more equitable responses. We've got to try.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

Kaia Sand is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach her at kaia@streetroots.org. Follow her on Twitter @mkaiasand



Write in

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Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-1 p.m. Sun.

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Executive Director Kaia Sand
kaia@streetroots.org
Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org
Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org
Development Director Andrew Hogan
andrew@streetroots.org
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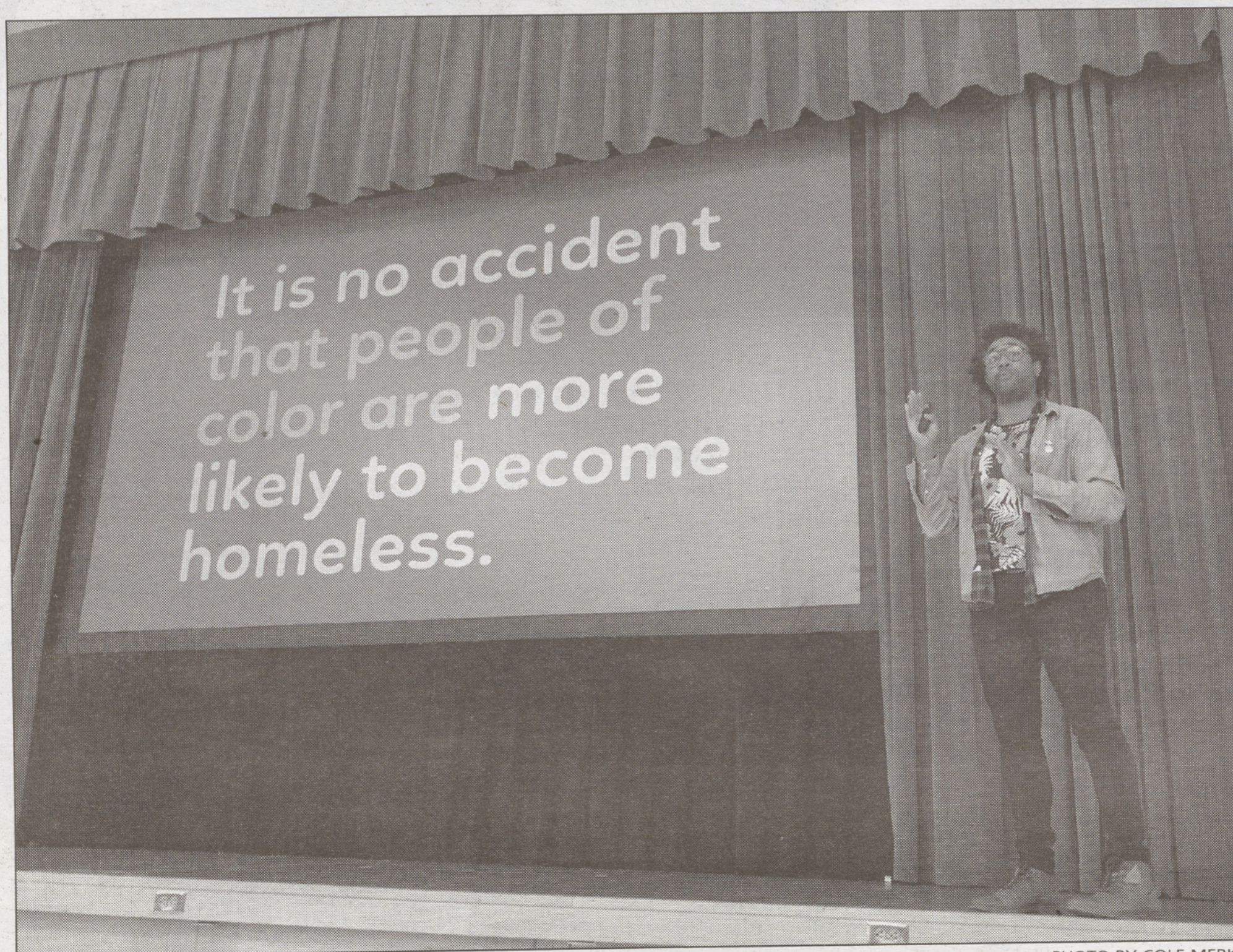


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Marc Dones with Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities, or SPARC, speaks to an audience of service providers in Portland March 19. SPARC is part of the Center for Social Innovation, and is working with Portland as part of a nationwide effort to change how housing and homeless services work with communities of color.