



'OK, am I totally being ignored here? Or are they that busy? Am I that invisible that no one sees me standing here?'

-Angel Jones

Honor Diversity

It's more than just a bumper sticker. ■ By Bobbie Willis

When I fell for Oregon, I fell hard. There's a lot about this state, and Eugene in particular, to love, especially for someone who grew up in the stretch of stucco-covered, tile-roofed, mall-pocked subdivisions between San Diego and Los Angeles, Calif. It dawned on me late in my UC college education that everywhere I looked, there was concrete and highway and traffic and people.

Our last year of school, my best friend, Denielle, invited me to go on a road-trip that would change my life. We and her boyfriend, Ken, would drive up to Oregon for a rafting trip down the Santiam River; it would be a big Memorial Day shebang with her family's friends up north.

On the second day of the drive we stopped in Medford, Ore. for breakfast at a diner called Apple Annie's, and I remember the spooky hush upon our entrance. We were a little puzzled at first, until it dawned on us that — oooh, Denielle was black. Ken was a Mexican with long hair. And there I was, a Samoan sporting a pixie haircut. Among the plaid flannels, the Danner work boots and Lee jeans, among this roomful of crew cuts and white faces, we were suddenly very black, brown and *different*.

I have never forgotten that self-consciousness, the way we stopped laughing and talking mid-sentence, how startled I was by the flash of fear that hit me with so many people looking at us in sidelong glances. It was really the first time I'd ever felt that the color of my skin could be a problem.

Past that moment, in a raft on the Santiam, I fell in love — both with an Oregon boy and with Oregon itself: the mossy trees, the quiet riverbanks, the organic sensibility and security of the place.

That moment in the diner comes back to me every so often now that I live here in Eugene, a place with both the tightness of a small community and the potential openness of a university town. This win-win combination obscures the fact that Eugene is in its adolescence, perhaps even in its in-

fancy, in terms of ethnic diversity.

Greg Rikhoff of the Eugene Human Rights Commission says, "It's easy to be lulled by our reputation as a liberal, progressive community... it can make us sleepy about issues on race and diversity." In truth, 88 percent of people in Eugene are white, according to the U.S. Census 2000. Almost five percent are hispanic; one and one-quarter percent are black or African American. Samoans come in at .04 percent, or 57 people out of about 133,000. I have nearly that many cousins on my father's side alone.

The downside of this fine town is that I have a snowball's .04-percent-chance in Hades of seeing anyone around who looks like me. While I am not acutely worried about this the way you would be if you were poked with a sharp stick, it does create an undercurrent of concern, like waking up every day with a low-grade headache. It means at least eight times out of 10, I am the only face of color in the grocery store, at the mall, at concerts, potlucks, lectures and readings. Is this town ready for these numbers to grow, and to grow gracefully? My fear that the answer is "no" keeps me uneasy and uncertain about Eugene as a final destination, about Eugene as a home.

Stay or Go?

The question of whether to stay or go comes up for every newcomer to a place, especially when that newcomer feels different from the population at large. Here in Eugene, situations of racial discrimination can leave a person of color wondering whether or not to set permanent roots in this town.

Nigger — people still use this word — and not just in hardcore rap songs, not just in whispered hisses; they fling it right out onto the street, hock it up and spit it out like some gross, primordial loogey.

Angel Jones, executive director of Library, Recreation and Cultural Services for Eugene, says someone flung this word at her when she first came to town four years ago. "I was standing on the corner — this is when my office was over at the Atrium — crossing the street to go into the parking lot. This lady, maybe mid to late 40s, came up to me and said, 'Get out of the way, nigger bitch.'" She pauses to shake her head, still in disbelief. "It just totally blew me away. And the only thing I could think to say was, 'Your mama!' You know, where that came from... I don't know."

Might be tempting to say, "Isolated incident." But consider City of Eugene Diversity Manager and NAACP member Marilyn Mays' story: "... I don't recall ever being called a nigger walking down the street until I moved to Eugene. I was leaving work — you know, you're tired. I had to walk about half a block from City Hall; this truck drives by and this person yells out, 'Hey, nigger!' And you're just dumbfounded."

As for her reaction, Mays says, "Later, I said [to a Caucasian friend], 'Well, I got called a nigger today while I was walking to my car...' She said, 'You did? That's terrible. You should have turned around and given them the finger, or yelled back...'"

"I don't think people understand — that's a risk. ... I mean, I don't know who this person was or what they had in their truck, what they might have done to me if I had said something back."

It is difficult to understand why someone would so blatantly and randomly disrespect another person. Rikhoff says lashing out this way, or in subtler ways, often "comes down to ignorance." But, he adds, "Beyond that, there's some real anger and hostility happening. People think, 'The world is changing...' And they look for an easy target."

Racism moves in more and more subtly from here. Racial profiling — or assuming a person's intent based on the color of his or her skin — happens not primarily with police, but in all kinds of everyday situations. Jones says, "When I first arrived [in Eugene], I went around to all of the community centers to introduce myself... One of the first ones I went into, there was a big 'Welcome Angel Jones' banner posted. I was like, 'Wow, this really makes me feel welcome.'"

But welcome quickly dissipated as Jones stood at the counter waiting to be helped. "I proceeded to wait for about five minutes. And I continued to stand there. There were a number of things going through my head. 'OK, am I totally being ignored here? Or are they that busy? Am I that invisible that no one sees me standing here?'"

"So finally this lady who came in a considerable amount of time after me said, 'I think she's been here longer than I have.' The staff person turned to me and said, 'Oh, are you here for a job application?' And I