

Flee Eugene?

Shyrra Adams urges minorities to stay.

Shyrra Adams is a 25-year-old mother of two, student, and caregiver to adults with disabilities. She lived in Ketchikan, Alaska and Los Angeles before moving to Eugene in 1999. She contacted EW after reading the interview with Mark Harris (12/23) and the letters to the editor in response (1/6). Her message to youth of color in Eugene: Stay here and contribute to the community.

What brought you to Eugene?

I came here to visit a friend and I fell in love with the diversity of thought. It's like a spiritual Mecca here. Eugene is beautiful and safe, and I felt really embraced by the community. But there is obviously some racial tension and feelings of inequalities. I think it's time for the African American community to speak out more.

Do you encounter racist attitudes here?

It's more about curiosity. If you're not solid with who you are, curiosity can be perceived as someone being racist. It used to bother me when people would ask, "What are you?" But now I understand that the questioning is an opportunity to educate and enlighten people and to disperse the stereotypes. There needs to be an understanding that when you come up to an area that has been predominantly white, there is going to be some curiosity. It's best to let go and to answer those questions, because then it'll make it easier on your children, too. You educate the parents, then their children, and it goes on and on down the line.

Is Eugene missing some of the things that black people need?

I find it a real big issue. I can't even walk into Safeway or Albertson's and get my shade of coverup. I've got to go clear across town to Sally's to get my hair products, and I have to go to someone who specializes in black hair. Little things like that are a big clue that you are so different. It makes you feel like you're not really a part of the community. And on top of that, within the radio stations and on local news, you don't see enough representation of minorities. That's

part of the feeling of the uneasiness within the African American community.

Why do you think that some local black leaders are leaving?

When I see the older people that have left and are leaving, I understand that it's because they were around in the times of the civil rights movement, and they have dealt with so much. There is a feeling of being worn down after awhile. Marilyn Mays said, "I just don't want to die here," meaning this is just not the place for me to live, grow, prosper and feel equal. But still, after being awarded the street name Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. — to fight for that, and to get that, and then to turn around and say "It's just too tough right now" sends the wrong message to youth. There has been change, because at one time there were no black people in Eugene. There were no minorities. And it's just getting more and more diverse.

What kinds of activism are you involved in?

I work with adults with disabilities, and if anyone gets the most prejudice, oh God, they get it so bad. When people see somebody in a wheelchair who can just give you a smile and who can barely move, they think that there's nothing in there. The discrimination is on a daily basis. When Jerry Harris says black people are self-segregated and



only involved in the black community, I am a prime example that that is not true. I am out there working with adults with disabilities who need to be heard.

What provoked you to contact EW with your thoughts?

I disagree with Mark Harris, who told [minority] kids, "Get out of Eugene." To me, that's a contradiction of what our forefathers — those that were very actively involved in the civil rights movement — were doing. Would Martin Luther King Jr. say, "Get out of Eugene"? Would Malcolm X? Would Rosa Parks? To get out of Eugene is to say that we are not valid individuals to stay here, that for some reason we should be listening to those who are telling us to leave. To say to get out of Eugene is teaching our youth that we have something to fear, that we don't have a say, and that we are not strong enough to fight against this. And as a people, as a culture, we are very strong.

What's your message to local youth of color?

I think we should say to our youth, "Stay in Eugene." Because if enough people stand strong and voice their opinions, those that are inflicting this racial inequality on us are going to realize that they are not winning. If we keep on staying here, we can start making our voices heard just by being around the community, working and going to school. We don't have to be on the front line, fightin' for the cause against the man. Just by being who we are as a people and developing our community, we will have more people of color. I'm very proud of the Latin community, for example. Seeing the Sunday market that they have and the supermercado that just opened up is beautiful. But Jerry Harris is not saying, "They're the most self-segregated community." He looks

at them as being ethnocentric.

What's the difference between ethnocentrism and self-segregation?

Ethnocentrism is working within a community: creating churches, hair shops, the Black Student Union. Things like that make people feel like, "We are part of the community because we are making our part in the community." If you're feeling like such a minority that your daily needs aren't being met, then you're going to have to work within a culture of people who understand what you need and why you need it. That brings more integration. At the Hult Center, they celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday because of black people have gotten together and said "We need this." It sparks people's interests, and it serves the purpose of what we're trying to do. Self-segregation is not what's going on.

How do you assess the state of race relations in Eugene?

We're definitely not in L.A., where it's so mixed that color doesn't really matter. But there's definitely a future for us to be a diverse and racially equal place — if we continue to bring up racial inequalities, and if we don't run. I feel like there is a huge population within Eugene that is willing to support minorities. The key is for the youth and the adults to continue to educate themselves and to be aware of what's going on in the community. By doing that, we'll have more of our voices heard.

As a society we should be beyond race, but it seems like we still have to talk about it. How do you reconcile these two ideas?

Race is an issue because fear of the unknown spawns stereotypes and prejudices. Educating and enlightening one another will bring us to the point of understanding, and then it won't be an issue. But until then, we're going to have to talk about it until we are completely exhausted. Racial profiling and other problems are major challenges, and if race doesn't matter they shouldn't come about.

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