

From the local level, this effort will drive these rights into state constitutions, and ultimately, the federal Constitution.

The Constitution is a living document. The abolitionists and suffragists understood that the Constitution, as originally written, needed to evolve. Now the envi-

ronment needs constitutional rights to halt corporate exploitation and enable a sustainable future.

Take the time to learn more at [www.celdf.org](http://www.celdf.org)

Ann Kneeland  
Eugene

## THE SCENT OF WINE

In regard to Paul Pattison's letter Jan. 17 on wine service at the Hult, Pattison states that he is a "strong supporter of the recovery community" in this area. Having been sober in AA for over 14 years I have to applaud that. There are a lot of miscon-

ceptions about alcoholism and addiction floating about; however, I'm not sure what "supporter" means. Is Pattison in recovery himself? Does he help out at Buckley House? Or does he simply approve of alcoholics and addicts who are trying to live clean and sober one day at a time?

## COMMENTARY BY MARK HARRIS

# Two Black Survival Modes

PAUL ROBESON AND WILEY GRIFFON

A play celebrating the life of Paul Robeson March 8 and 10 at the Lane Community College main campus will benefit the LCC Black Student Union (BSU) scholarship fund. Dr. Stanley Coleman, a director and actor now on the faculty at LCC, plays Paul Robeson in the one-man Broadway play by Phillip Hays Dean.

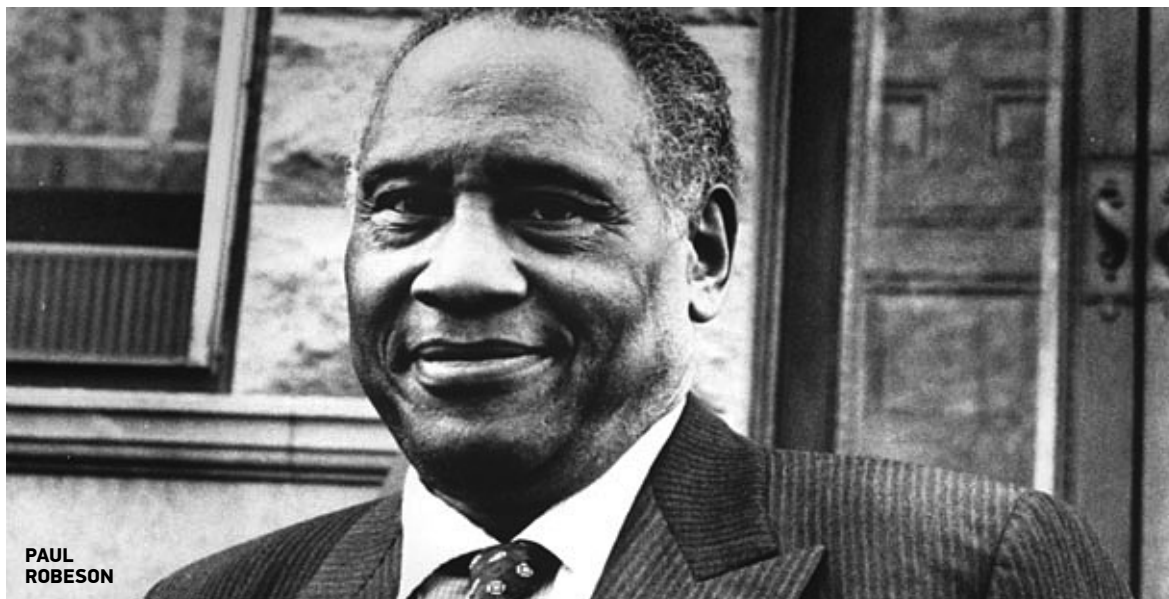
"Of all the imposing figures who have strutted across the stage of American culture in this century, none has been more invested with a superman mystique than Paul Robeson," according to a *New York Times* review. "Phillip Hayes Dean's play *Paul Robeson* should do nothing to diminish his stature ... *Paul Robeson* conveys an inspiring moral fervor."

LCC's BSU has provided the lion's share of the funding of a historical monument honoring the earliest named local African-American resident, Wiley Griffon. The monument is expected to be installed this spring in the Masonic Cemetery where Griffon is buried. Historically, Lane's BSU has been a source of activism resulting in Oregon's first Black, Ethnic and Interdisciplinary Studies programs, as well as supporting community MLK events and local Black History events.

Robeson and Griffon never met but nevertheless represent and role model two distinct Eugene African-American survival modes. Robeson: athlete, lawyer, singer, actor and outspoken labor and civil rights activist, represents a different style than Griffon: "ready smile," "devout Christian," "obsequious Chesterfield" or more plainly in one of Griffon's obituaries: "what a Southerner would call a good n\*\*\*\*r."

Segregation was the law of the land during Griffon's lifetime and Robeson's rise to international prominence. Overt discrimination, microaggressions like "Chesterfield" and institutional racism were refined to a high art in Oregon when Robeson visited Eugene, Salem and Portland. Robeson was an American patriot and world citizen who spoke 46 languages and performed in 25 languages. He believed in holding his nation accountable for the legally promised equality to all its citizens. In that, unlike Griffon, he was reviled by some, and beloved by many more who love freedom more than white racial supremacy. Robeson's exemplary response to discrimination inspired some prominent historical Oregon figures, like Sen. Mark Hatfield, to action. Those qualities would certainly cause Southerners, among others, to refer to Robeson and his ilk as "uppity."

When Griffon was operating the tram here in Eugene, Robeson was born in 1898 to a slave who had freed himself at 15 and became a college graduate and firebrand minister. His mother came from an abolitionist Quaker family. Two years after Griffon's death, Robeson won a four-year academic scholarship to Rutgers in 1915, received the Phi Beta Kappa key in his junior year, graduated as class valedictorian, and despite suffering racist physical violence against him by his teammates, won 15 varsity letters in baseball, basketball and track, and was named twice to the All-



American Football team. He was posthumously named to the College Football Hall of Fame.

At Columbia Law (1919-1923), he met his wife, Eslanda Cordoza Goode, the first black woman to head a pathology laboratory. Robeson taught Latin and played professional football on weekends to finance his tuition. His brief career in law ended, when the white secretary at his firm refused to take dictation from a "negro." The partner of the firm backed the secretary, Robeson quit, and with the encouragement and management of his wife, Essie, he turned to the stage.

Robeson believed in and practiced a healthy African-American cultural existence as an activist. He tried to choose roles that were uplifting to the image of African-Americans as players on the global stage. He was the first black man to play Othello in the 20th century. To rehearse for that role, he practiced it in period English, contemporary English, Italian, German and French, to name a few. Whenever he played the role of an African royal who is displaced into a largely white society, he learned that specific tribe's language. While the Russian Court spoke French as the language of diplomacy, like Alexander Pushkin before him, Robeson spoke Russian, which endeared him to the people when he sang Russian folksongs. When he and Essie were traveling to Moscow via Germany, Nazis pulled them off the train because they thought Essie was white. Robeson noted the similarities between Nazis and the Klan. "In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being. No color prejudice like in Mississippi, no color prejudice like in Washington. It was the first time I felt like a human being."

Robeson never joined the Communist Party, but he was not the first to note the obscene marriage between capitalism, racism and white supremacy.

When war was declared against Japan, the young Mark Hatfield, in college at Willamette University, watched tearfully as his Japanese-American friends were

being loaded onto railroad cars on their way to internment camps. A student group he belonged to brought performers like Marian Anderson and Robeson to Salem. The finest hotel in Salem refused to allow Robeson to stay because he was black. Embarrassed, Hatfield borrowed the family car and drove Robeson to the Benson Hotel in Portland. Describing the ride up to Portland, Hatfield replied, "Oh, he just laughed the whole situation off. He was a genius, you know. A great man, and in conversation, he had a way of making you feel as if you were on his level. He talked about his life, and his travels, the things he'd seen."

Hatfield successfully pushed through a landmark Public Accommodations Bill to end discrimination in public transportation and hotel accommodations, before such legislation was enacted nationally. His said experience with Robeson motivated him.

It was the Sandell family who brought Robeson to Eugene, where he sang at the Ferry Street Chapel, (now St. Mark's CME Church) in the Ferry Street Community, before it was bulldozed. Willie Mims remembered that incident as a child, as well as a family photograph taken of Mr. Robeson at that event. Ferry Street was the most well-known integrated community just outside the city limits — non-whites were not allowed to rent or buy homes within the city limits until 1965. Imagine the irony of having a county commissioner named Christian signing the order in 1949 to bulldoze a church, a juke joint and people's homes. This would be exactly the kind of institutional racism that Robeson, on the personal request of local white friends, would lend his considerable voice.

"As an artist I come to sing, but as a citizen, I will always speak for peace, and no one can silence me in this," he said. "The artist must elect to fight for Freedom or for Slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative."

*The play will be performed at 7:30 pm March 8 & 10 at the Ragazzino Performance Hall at LCC. Tickets are sliding scale, \$5 to \$500. Mark Harris is an instructor and substance abuse prevention coordinator at LCC.*