

THE NAACP REMOVES BARRIERS

By Rachael Carnes

“We serve as a reminder of where we’ve been and where we’re going,” says local NAACP President Eric Richardson. “We call on the United States to live up to its promise and its higher ideals.” Richardson is speaking at the NAACP’s offices, in one of the historic Mims houses on High Street. The charming home is one of the first African-American-owned buildings in Eugene, purchased by the Mims family in 1948 under the name of a sympathetic white employer.

At the time, exclusionary laws forbade African-Americans from legally residing inside Eugene’s city limits, let alone buying property. The Mims house became a port for African-American travelers, including luminaries like Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole, who were not allowed to stay in local hotels in what was then a strictly segregated town.

“Eugene has a small African-American population, but it has a great history of activism,” Richardson notes. “The Mims family is a big part of that. Being here, in their home, shows our youth that we care about our elders and the progress that we’ve made.”

And the Mims house is a perfect backdrop for the NAACP’s vital work: “Historically, as a law-based organization, we’ve sought to go to the highest level of government, to remove access barriers to the polls, to businesses, to homes,” Richardson says.

“Locally we’re called upon to work with housing issues, school issues, neighbor issues,” he continues. “When there’s discrimination and people are thinking, ‘Who can I call?’”

They call the NAACP.

The NAACP also helps to develop systems to bolster the community’s infrastructure, to support those in need. “Childcare, transportation, fees,” Richardson says. “These are real obstacles to those that are struggling.”

The local NAACP is volunteer-driven, providing advocacy, referrals and community connections.

The Youth Council provides leadership development through civic engagement and group activities. The group also sponsors an ongoing mentoring program for 8th through 12th graders, and a Back to School/Success in School tutoring program for K-12 students.

“We’re also creating legislative bills to address police accountability through greater transparency in public records access,” Richardson says. “And we’re looking at Oregon’s stringent free speech laws, that allow hate speech to exist.”

But change happens slowly: When Oregon joined the Union, it was the first state to do so with exclusionary clauses built into its Bill of Rights. The passage of the 14th Amendment did little to quell everyday racism and oppressive laws that made many communities in Oregon inhospitable to non-whites. In fact, the remaining racist language wasn’t scrubbed from our state constitution until 2002.

That’s why organizations like the NAACP matter, now more than ever.

“America is suffering from an outdated social narrative, created in the period of slavery, that places European civilization above all others, with white men on top,” Richardson says. “Even though we know it to be untrue, this continues to be our bedrock narrative.”

“We have to engage,” he says. “And we will vote.”

Richardson encourages the community to get involved. “We’re welcoming of volunteers and members, and we’re looking forward to the legislative session,” he says. “We welcome people to don a T-shirt, and go to the capitol with us, to be a voice for peace, and civic engagement.”

If Richardson could talk to a group of school kids about 2016 and about the recent election, what would he say?

“I would speak positively about our system,” he says. “We’ve had ups and downs, but we have to have faith in the system we’ve set up. I’d tell them to be aware, to read, to learn how our government works. We’re all Americans. We all have points of view. The more we talk to each other, the better.”

Annual membership in the NAACP is \$30. The organization welcomes donations of \$25-250 or more to support local programs. To become a member, donate or to learn about volunteer opportunities, visit naacplanecounty.org, or call 541-484-1119.

they are better able to look for work and stable places to live.

Additionally, CSS-run rest stops provide residents with useable addresses, which are practically vital when you’re looking for a job.

The CSS website says the group will take building supplies, firewood and volunteers. More specifically, CSS says it could use: wool socks, blankets and sleeping bags, AA and AAA batteries, headlamps and flashlights, feminine hygiene products, 60-quart Rubbermaid totes, bleach, antibacterial soap, Bungee Cords and silver tarps in 10x10- and 10x16-foot sizes.

Cash is also a huge help, CSS says, as it is funded entirely by community donations. For more specifics, contact them at 541-683-0836 or see communitysupportedshelters.org.

The **Nightingale Health Sanctuary** is on a similar mission to that of CSS. Rest stops like those run by CSS and Nightingale have a proven track record of assisting homeless folks find stable places to live. Of the 260 people who relied on homeless rest stops last year, 55 moved to some form of permanent housing.

Nightingale has to relocate early next year. To find out how best to assist them in their move, write an email to nightingalecollective@gmail.com or see respectexistence.org.

With CSS and Nightingale working hard on long-term efforts to house the homeless, it’s important not to lose sight of the short-term needs of those who live on the streets. And really, once the weather turns icy, staying warm ranks at the top of the list.

Administered by St. Vincent de Paul, **Egan Warming Centers** are a collaborative effort that brings together non-profit agencies, religious organizations and community members to provide Lane County’s homeless a warm place to sleep when the temperature drops below freezing.

Egan centers open any time the mercury dips below 30 degrees between mid-November and the end of March, so long as there are volunteers to staff them.

Last year there weren’t enough volunteers signed up at first, which meant the warming centers couldn’t open for the year’s first frost. It was bad.

Volunteer trainings have already begun. See eganwarmingcenter.com to find out when and how you can get involved.

For those who haven’t got time to spare, the centers can always use sleeping bags, winter clothes, first-aid supplies and money. Oh, and warm socks! Socks are huge, says Egan volunteer director Shelley Corteville. — *Ben Ricker*

CAHOOTS and White Bird

If we could replicate one local program in every city and county nationwide, without hesitation our choice would be **CAHOOTS** and the organization it is housed under, **White Bird Clinic**.

Prepared to respond to Trump’s dystopian realities with a visionary and pragmatic approach, the White Bird Clinic defines its mission as providing a collective environment organized to enable people to gain control of their social, emotional and physical well-being through direct service, education and community.

According to the White Bird website, White Bird arose in 1969 from a collaboration of medical workers, graduate students and concerned citizens responding to “some of the fallout of the 1960s, which included a growing number of youth and young adults ... many were runaways and living on the streets, and were not likely to access the usual services available despite their needs, among which were medical, legal, mental health and substance use.”

Almost 50 years later, White Bird provides an umbrella of services that includes Lane County’s only 24-hour mental health crisis hotline, mental health counseling, a dental clinic, medical services and referrals, acupuncture recovery and detox services and more.

White Bird is at the frontlines of social and mental health management for low-income and houseless populations. White Bird’s Ben Brubaker says the group hopes to expand its medical, dental and homeless case management in 2017.

Founded in 1989 through a partnership with White Bird and the city of Eugene Public Safety, CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) provides free, confidential and voluntary mobile-crisis-intervention.

Responding to calls in Eugene and Springfield, CAHOOTS vans are easily spotted throughout town. Less

NAACP PRESIDENT
ERIC RICHARDSON

