

Community College Black Student Union in 2011, and has been hosted by the Eugene-Springfield NAACP to recognize the link between the fight for liberty and the story of the African American community.

“The black community is not monolithic,” Richardson says of not only celebrations of Juneteenth but of African American culture and history.

“As a national identity and a people, there are few things that bind African Americans together. There are black churches and historically black colleges,” Richardson says, but even those create smaller communities.

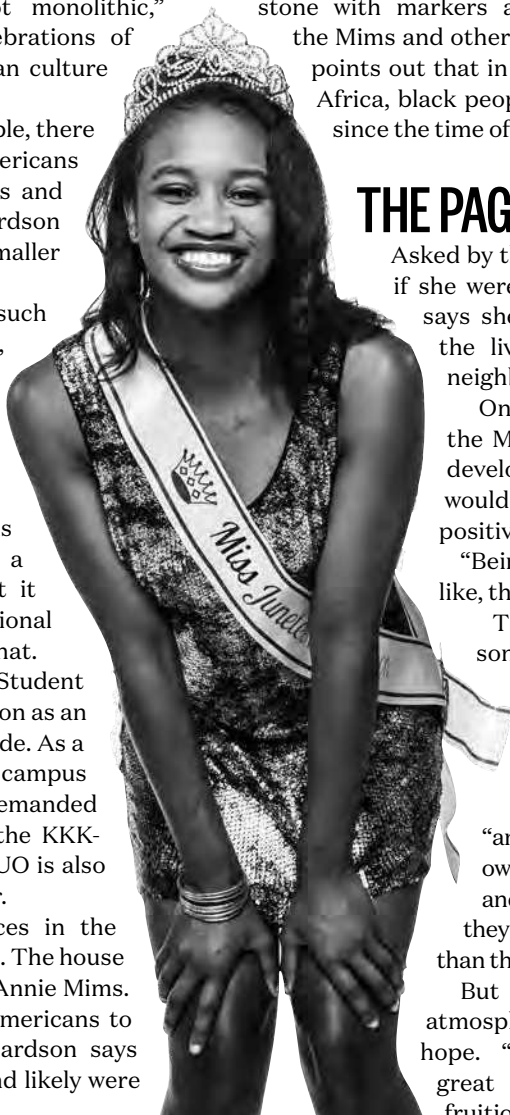
There are also national groups such as the NAACP and Urban League, but, he says, “there is no canon of black experience.”

Richardson says, for one thing, “we need to do better in our educational system, not to whitewash it, so to speak.” He adds that “black folks have kept up a traditional, rural holiday and kept it alive,” and not because the educational system has done anything to aid in that.

He points to the work of the Black Student Task Force at the University of Oregon as an example of changes slowly being made. As a result of their work, Deady Hall on campus was de-named after the task force demanded they “change the names of all of the KKK-related buildings on campus.” The UO is also building a new Black Cultural Center.

The local NAACP has its offices in the Historic Mims House on High Street. The house was purchased in 1948 by C.B. and Annie Mims. The Mims were the first African Americans to own a home in Eugene, and Richardson says they came to Oregon from Texas and likely were familiar with Juneteenth.

And while Juneteenth and other key parts of African American history have been maintained in oral tradition, one thing the NAACP has done at the Mims House is set some African American history down in stone with markers and plaques commemorating the Mims and other key black figures. Richardson points out that in Egypt and around the rest of Africa, black people have been writing in stone since the time of the pyramids.



THE PAGEANT

Asked by the pageant what she would do if she were president of the U.S., Aceia says she would improve schools and the lives of people in low-income neighborhoods.

One thing she would like to see the Miss Juneteenth pageant do is develop a boys’ pageant as well. She would like to see black men get more positive attention.

“Being a black man in the U.S. is, like, the scariest thing,” she says.

These are points that Richardson makes, too: “Folks yearn for positive images,” he says.

He adds that those who talk about the poor, the houseless and the jobless in terms of “the bottom line” are “an affront.” That is how slave owners — monsters who bought and sold people — thought of those they enslaved, he says: “Never more than the profit margin.”

But he says the current tense atmosphere in the U.S. has some hope. “It’s actually a reaction to great promise actually coming to fruition: multiculturalism, diversity,

nonviolence, civility,” Richardson says. “All the things everyday people embrace and enjoy.”

And those who embrace racism are “fighting against natural progress.”

Pageant organizer Chambers says that, through her Miss Juneteenth title, Aceia and other participants can talk about “school and race and how that makes them feel,” along with getting mentoring and encouragement “through a culturally specific lens.”

Chambers says the girls get together on weekends for at least six weeks and that “black and brown girls can come together and talk about things that might never surface.” As Miss Juneteenth, Aceia will do public speaking and community service.

Aceia brings up an experience she had at Churchill High School in Eugene where another student threw a glue stick at her in science class. She had spoken up when he grabbed it from the kit she and the only other African American student in the class were using.

When Aceia complained to the school, and asked for an apology, she was told she was over-exaggerating, she says.

“I don’t feel like I should have to, but if I have to I will,” she says of dealing with racist incidents and “little remarks” that get made.

Like Chambers, Aceia says Miss Juneteenth is something more than a mere pageant — it creates a sisterhood. Aceia says when people in school ask her “what is that?” she now has a “bigger voice” to talk about Juneteenth and African American history.

Oregon became the 18th state to recognize Juneteenth in 2001 through a legislative resolution by then-state Sen. Avel Louise Gordley, the first African American woman to be elected to Oregon’s state Senate. Hawaii, North Dakota, South Dakota and Montana have yet to recognize Juneteenth, and the National Juneteenth Observance Foundation has been trying for years to get Juneteenth recognized at a national level. ■

For more information on Oregon’s annual Juneteenth celebration, go to JuneteenthOr.com. For the pageant, check out MissJuneteenthOr.org and for more on the Eugene-Springfield NAACP go to NAACPLaneCounty.org.

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