

Black United Front demands equitable desegregation plan

by Stephanie Michael

The demands of the Portland Black community were recently voiced concerning quality education for their children. A group known as the Black United Front helped community residents strategize and set forth possible goals to insure their children do not share a disproportionate amount of busing in the city's upcoming school desegregation move.

Co-chairman Ronnie Herndon, along with other Black United Front members, have been lecturing and holding meetings around the city. These meetings have been scheduled to let concerned parents know about the history of Portland and how it has affected the school district. Group members feel the state's and city's history have played an important role in previous moves by the Portland School Board in planning its desegregation program. Herndon, who was recently a guest speaker of the Militant Book Store Forum, says the BUF plans to keep an eye on the school district's moves concerning the issue. He says steady strategizing efforts will help insure a successful and beneficial desegregation program for everyone in Portland, which has never been instituted.

Briefly discussing the history of Oregon and laws pertaining to Blacks, Herndon made particular reference to a law established in 1857 which prohibited free or slave Blacks in Oregon. He also mentioned that two Oregon senators had voted to have the 14th, 15th and 16th amendments removed from the Constitution.

Taking a look at the history of the 1940s, he stated that Oregon had been surveyed as one of the states worst in segregation, north of the Mason Dixon line. The co-chairman says Portland was one of the prominent ship building areas during World War II, and recruited Blacks to the area for manual labor and service jobs for the first time. He stressed that after the war there was no need for the Black laborers which then totaled a population of 25,000 strong.

"Within six months the Black population was reduced to 11,000. The impossibility of getting work except for very limited service jobs was almost nonexistent for Blacks. The overt discrimination backed by laws forced many Blacks to leave the state just in order to survive. Looking at recent statistics the population of Blacks in Portland is just now getting up to the 1940 census. Portland is the only city I know of that has this unique and perplexing problem. Still today, for the most part, overt forms of racism exist in the Portland area. Take a look at the number of Blacks in management positions as well as the number of professionals here."

When comparing the history of the state and how it has effected education, some devastating moves

have been carefully planned in the education of Black children -- or what he prefers to call the lack of educating Black children.

"In 1954 the Portland NAACP conducted a school study finding that the achievement levels of Black children were very low. With this finding the group put pressure on the School Board for quality education and for the hiring of Black teachers. The School Board, in response to the protest, put together what they considered was a blue ribbon committee to help study the problem. What resulted was the beefing up of salaries for teachers in the predominately Black populated schools. This is what teachers and Blacks at that time described as combat pay. There were some curriculum changes made, but still all white curriculum."

"By the 1960's, the achievement levels for some Black students in the city had gone up, but that was a factor that was occurring all over the country, nothing really unique to the Portland school district. But something else was also occurring, the harassment of Black students at predominately white schools. When nothing was done after numerous reports to the school district, Black students and parents threatened a boycott.

Presently the Portland school board and district administrators are working on the development of a school desegregation program. What supporters and members of the Black United Front don't want to see is a new plan scattering Black children again. Things the group would like to see are more Black teachers, cultural classes including Black History.

"These cultural classes the group is talking about would be provided not only to students, but to counselors, teachers and administrators as well. Strength, unity an commitment have been developing over a long period of time in the Black community. There are some demands that we want met, or some course of action will have to be taken. We prefer not to take any course of action, but there is a change needed in the Portland community as a whole. I find it a very racist assumption for the school district to decide a ratio of 49 per cent in racially isolated schools is inferior. Why isn't this same statement used when a school is populated with a ratio of that many white students?"

"I feel that any time you take any children, making sure they've got old books, inferior equipment, sixty students in one classroom -- not including the culturally biased tests -- I can guarantee that you will get low achievement levels and the failing of tests. The 1954 Brown vs Board of Education decision I feel was racist in its whole content. I believe the Supreme Court should have decided that all children could go to any school that they chose and the

government would do its utmost to protect that right. You see, by putting Black and white kids together, they will never guarantee they will get along. Black people have never had a problem dealing with white people. Our problem has always been racism and the institutions that support it.

"Even during slavery times Black and white children played together, but the institution of slavery caused the problem. You don't get rid of a problem when a racist system keeps the problem going by giving federal money to supplement things. When whites came to this country Indians never saw whites before, but they didn't request that whites bus their children to London. The same can be said about Africans when Europeans came to their land. I feel it is all a part of one's value system."

Herndon stated that Black children have a hard enough time seeing the sense in attending school, particularly to the college level. There are more unemployed Black college graduates today than white high school drop outs. Cultural programs will help everyone discover and understand differing cultures. When Black children go to

predominately Black schools that is not re-segregation. Segregation occurs only when laws forceably limit citizenship rights based on skin color. People have to start making decisions that make sense. Herndon says Blacks have to insure that quality education, self-concepts and images are provided for all. There is no time to go on the basis of what white folk are or are not opposed to. Things should be measured on the good for the whole community in terms of long range goals.

"What we have found by talking with children, parents and concerned supporters is that desegregation has brought more destruction than development. The group has received letters from Black prison inmates who state their problems with the law started with schools they were bused to. Inmates claim their rebellion process started with teachers and counselor relationships, climaxing with school administrators. The neglect by white teachers caused these intelligent, successful Black students to rebel against a system that didn't recognize them or their potential. We aren't going to let this happen again."

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SENATOR VERN COOK

Senator Vern Cook, Democrat, announced that he has filed for reelection to the Oregon State Senate, District 12, Multnomah County. Cook has been a member of the Oregon Legislature since 1957 when he was first elected, and a member of the Senate since 1961. Senator Vern Cook has had numerous committee assignments but his principal areas of interest have been in the fields of legal rights and taxation. Cook, a lawyer and a former Gresham City Judge, served four sessions as the Revenue and Taxation Committee Chairman of the Senate and in 1979 was the Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.



SENATOR JIM GARDNER

State Senator Jim Gardner has announced that he will seek reelection to the State Senate in 1980. Senator Gardner represents District 10 in East Portland, which includes the neighborhoods of Irvington, Alameda, Laurelhurst and Mt. Tabor.

A member of the 1979 legislative session, Gardner served on the Senate Judiciary, Revenue and Elections Committee and was vice chairman on the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. Gardner is an attorney, practicing in Portland.

