

"Hard work" brings success as TV engineer

By Ulysses Tucker, Jr.

For most Blacks, the city streets of Portland will provide them with the only educational experience during their lifetime.

The only place to market a "street degree" is at the Oregon State Penitentiary, Rocky Butte, or one of the local cemeteries around town, institutions that openly accept those people with qualifications.

Robert Mitchell, a N.E. resident since 1963 and electronic engineer for KPTV-12, feels very fortunate to have been able to lift himself up off the streets before falling victim to his environment.

Mitchell, who dropped out of Jefferson High School in 1965, came to Oregon from El Dorado, Arkansas with his parents. He later enrolled at Portland Community College and finished a one year "G.E.D." in only six months.

"I know some brothers out on the streets who are highly intelligent, but I doubt if they will ever use their minds constructively," said Mitchell.

"I even know a few at the pen in Salem who had some intelligence, but somewhere along the line they got lost to the wrong system. Before I got the proper education, I had no choice but to deal with the streets because my alternative were few."

Mitchell attributes most of his earlier problems to a bad marriage, poor health which kept him in the hospital, and to the traditional economic difficulties faced by Black low income people.

How did you become an engineer?



Robert Mitchell ready for his shift at KPTV.

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"It is a very difficult test that involves a great deal of math," said Mitchell. I give 50% of the credit to my new wife who stayed beside me and gave me the motivation to keep on pushing forward."

How would you rate the test?

"Basically, I'm self taught," said Mitchell. "But after I finished my G.E.D., I enrolled in some Electronic Technology Services classes at the same school. I studied under instructors Sid Antock and John Sammons who taught me that I wasn't as dumb as I was conditioned to think."

In order to work as an engineer for a television station, it is required by station management that a person pass the "First Class Operators Test" administered by the Federal Communications Commission.

"I think that it's a waste of time because I use very little of what I learned from the test. You can almost say that it is a barrier which prevents minority people from becoming engineers.

"You have to know something about the white culture to understand the dialect involved in Electronics, and the test is the same way. Most Blacks do not understand whites, so you know they won't comprehend the test," said Mitchell.

Is it hard for you to deal with whites?

"In the beginning it was hard," said Mitchell. I've learned over the years that all of them are not bad even though there are still some who won't accept me as equal. Many are surprised when I tell them that I have my first class license. They think that we aren't capable of achieving a feat such as this."

"I think that I'm torn between the two communities because some of the whites don't want you there, and then my own Black brothers and sisters give me hell. They feel as though I want to be white just because I work with them. I just want to be a man in both worlds

and I want to be respected for my talents and abilities in both."

In his spare time, Mitchell builds computers, pans for gold, and walks through the community with a metal detector where he finds old coins and other collectables. Mitchell's responsibilities at KPTV-12 include working a studio camera, maintenance of the various cart and video tape machines and keeping the television signal on the air.

When questioned about the advice he would give to the aspiring communications engineer, Mitchell made the following comment.

"I hate to discourage my Black people, but the competition out here in this world is getting tougher by the day. I've lost a great deal of respect for the government because of the hardships inflicted upon us. They have no concern for the poor Black at all and would much rather bring over other people to help.

"Don't let this bother you. As long as you know what you want out of life, you got it made. Don't get discouraged. My next advice is for Blacks to get a better understanding about the people who run this country. If you have a bad attitude toward the white world, it'll affect your interaction with them.

"There's a way that you can deal with them and still retain your identity but most Blacks feel like they're selling their souls to the devil.

Blacks have the ability to adapt to any situation, that's if they're willing. Any Black who has survived the system this long has to be strong. As far as communications engineering is concerned, it would be helpful to have some good math skills and be willing to put in some long hours of study. If it wasn't for my new wife, Shirely motivating me to keep on pushing, I don't think I'd have made it. Like I said, you have to really hang in there."