



Each year since her husband died of cancer six years ago Hazel Williams (left) and Mary Harrison (right) have sponsored a Memorial Tea in honor of Lucius Williams for the benefit of the American Cancer Society. Here the two sponsors check final details with Barbara Herbold, Residential Chair-

man for the Multnomah County Unit of ACS. The annual event will be held Sunday, March 21, from 1 to 5 pm, at 930 N.E. Holland. There is no admission, but an opportunity for a silver donation is offered.

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## To your mental health

*"What is mental health?"*

by Jeanne Cohen, M.S.W.

"What is mental health?" This is a question I recently posed to some Black residents of Northeast Portland. Some of the responses sounded like this:

"Does that mean when you have a mind problem?"

"Mental health is being able to meet a crisis head on and survive in reasonable shape to meet the next one."

"...feeling good about yourself."

"...having a third party to help solve problems of families."

"...keeping the mind relaxed if getting too pressured."

There are two main ideas that came out in my questioning people about mental health. The first one being a certain discomfort in discussing the issue. As one person stated: "When I think of mental health I think of mental illness, then I don't want to think about it anymore." People worry, "Am I okay? If I talk about it too much maybe I'll find out that I'm not okay." Yet the other main theme in these quotes is a really positive one. People having a strong idea of surviving, coping, feeling good about themselves, solving problems, making time to relax, and taking a certain amount of control over their mental health. These people are talking about things we do well and naturally.

When we take these positive ideas about maintaining mental health and put them in the context of these hard times we are living in, they become even more crucial. There are few jobs, social programs are being cut to pieces and inflation is terrible. Maintaining mental health is going to come down to being able to survive. To "still carry on when things get to be too much."

Black folk have learned survival the hard way. It is not news to them that they must look to themselves and each other for strength and support. The larger society has never protected and provided for its non-white members in the same way it has for the majority. So through the years many minority peoples have created their own support systems, survival skills and mechanisms. For example, a Black single mother in Northeast Portland is surviving and experiencing a certain high quality of life because of her family, neighbors, friends and church. She doesn't have to worry about her children being accepted by the community. This same acceptance goes

for old folks in the neighborhood. It is not a common occurrence for Black families to send their elderly to nursing homes to die because they know how to take care of their own.

Flexibility in being able to share and switch family responsibilities is going to be an important survival technique in the future. Maintaining mental health means feeling "I'm okay and my family thinks I'm okay whether I am here taking care of the kids or out working." This holds true for both men and women, and is something Black folks have been doing for years.

Maintaining a role in the family and in the community is essential to mental health. The church is a real core of life in this neighborhood and plays an important role in maintaining mental health. In the church we find spiritual energy and strength. The church is able to bring people together, giving them a social network as well as a place to relax and find some peace. The social clubs are also a place where one gets a sense of belongingness, a place to relieve tension, and a chance to have a good time. From these sources, Blacks obtain stability, health, and a sense of well-being.

Maintaining mental health in these hard times means "let's keep on doing what we're doing." Let's keep our families tight, let's keep on helping and sharing with each other. Let's keep on going to church and to social clubs. Let's keep on visiting each other, cooking together, relaxing and enjoying good times together. They are all positive survival skills and we are going to need them even more as times get tougher. Let's remember that each of us is not alone in this uphill struggle to survive, and let's not blame ourselves for all our hardships. It is important to focus on our strengths which we always have and are there for us to depend on in these hard times. To quote a young Portland resident, "Mental health is the same as a health body...a healthy mind."

*Ms. Cohen is a social worker and a member of the crisis team of the North/Northeast Community Mental Health Center. If you have questions or would like to talk with someone, call the N/NE Community Mental Health Center 239-8871. The Center also offers 24-hour, 7-days-a-week crisis service that can be reached at 239-8871. The Center is open 8:30 am-8 pm Monday thru Friday, and from 8 am-5 pm on Saturdays.*

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