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A Man of Excellence

Part I of a Two-Part Article

by Nyewusi Askari

When I sat down to interview Professor McKinley Burt, I knew that I was in the company of an extraordinary man. His inner vision, his compassion, his passion, his love for children, his hopes for tomorrow for us all, his wisdom and knowledge overwhelmed the space we occupied. I couldn't hide my excitement. The only other time I could remember experiencing that kind of feeling was when I found myself in the same space with African-American poet Maya Angelou. It was a feeling of total honor.

Professor Burt invited me deep into his world: Professor, Writer, Historian, Inventor, Researcher, Father, Computer Pioneer, a lover of life. Hearing him talk was like listening to the sound of clear flowing rivers on the way to forever.

"I was born and raised in the middle south, coming out here as a late teenager. When I first arrived in Portland, many locals would say, 'A southerner and from St. Louis? — Where are your scars?' This indicated that they thought I had to be culturally deprived. I loved to startle them by showing a copy of our Sumner High School curriculum — the prerequisite for graduation: Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry I, Geometry II; and on the science side: General Science I and II, and Biology I and II; and if there was a chance that you might go to college, you could get advanced math courses. Oh, I omitted the two sequences of Physics and Chemistry. Also, a foreign language was mandatory — a choice of Latin or French. This has shaken a lot of people up, not only my students at Portland State University, but many teachers in the workshops I have conducted. Compared to Portland Public Schools of yesterday and today, there was and is NO CONTEST."

As Professor Burt recalled the memories from that era, his eyes gleamed with pride, while his hands gently conducted the direction of the conversation. "Mind you, this was a 'ghetto' school, the student body and teachers being 100% Black. We are talking fifty years ago, and the curriculum was the same for my father and mother, as it also was for all my grandparents. Though it is no laughing matter, I do have to laugh (or grimace) when I hear many contemporary educators defining a curriculum of ignorance and 'Special Ed' for our children. They would not have made the first pay day in that St. Louis system."

"In this same vein I'll remark that I came here to work as a welder in a World War II shipyard managed by the Kaiser Company, and I also attended business classes sponsored by the same company. When the war ended in 1945, I opened an accounting office on Williams Avenue near Tillamook Street, which placed me in the heart of the Black community of the time. Wishing to achieve a high degree of professionalism, I took the entrance examination of Northwestern Law School (now Lewis & Clark) and, to the consternation of the 'powers that be', made one of the highest marks in the state."

"I never did convince those folks that I had not attended a university at that period, and that I was a high school dropout . . . for how could they understand that at the end of the third year in the school I've described, you had read most of the English classics in literature and history — all interspersed with Anglo-Saxon law and custom. This is why I say it is a horror story not to prepare high school students with an academic base that will permit them to function whether they go to college or not — or whenever they go. Near the end of my second year at law school, I was certified to practice in Federal Tax Court."

Professor Burt hesitated. I sensed his pain about an ugly state of affairs for our Black youth. I offered him a fresh cup of coffee and said, "Continue. I can hear you from the kitchen."

When I returned he continued: "The students from our high schools were highly motivated by their teachers and by a constant input of Black

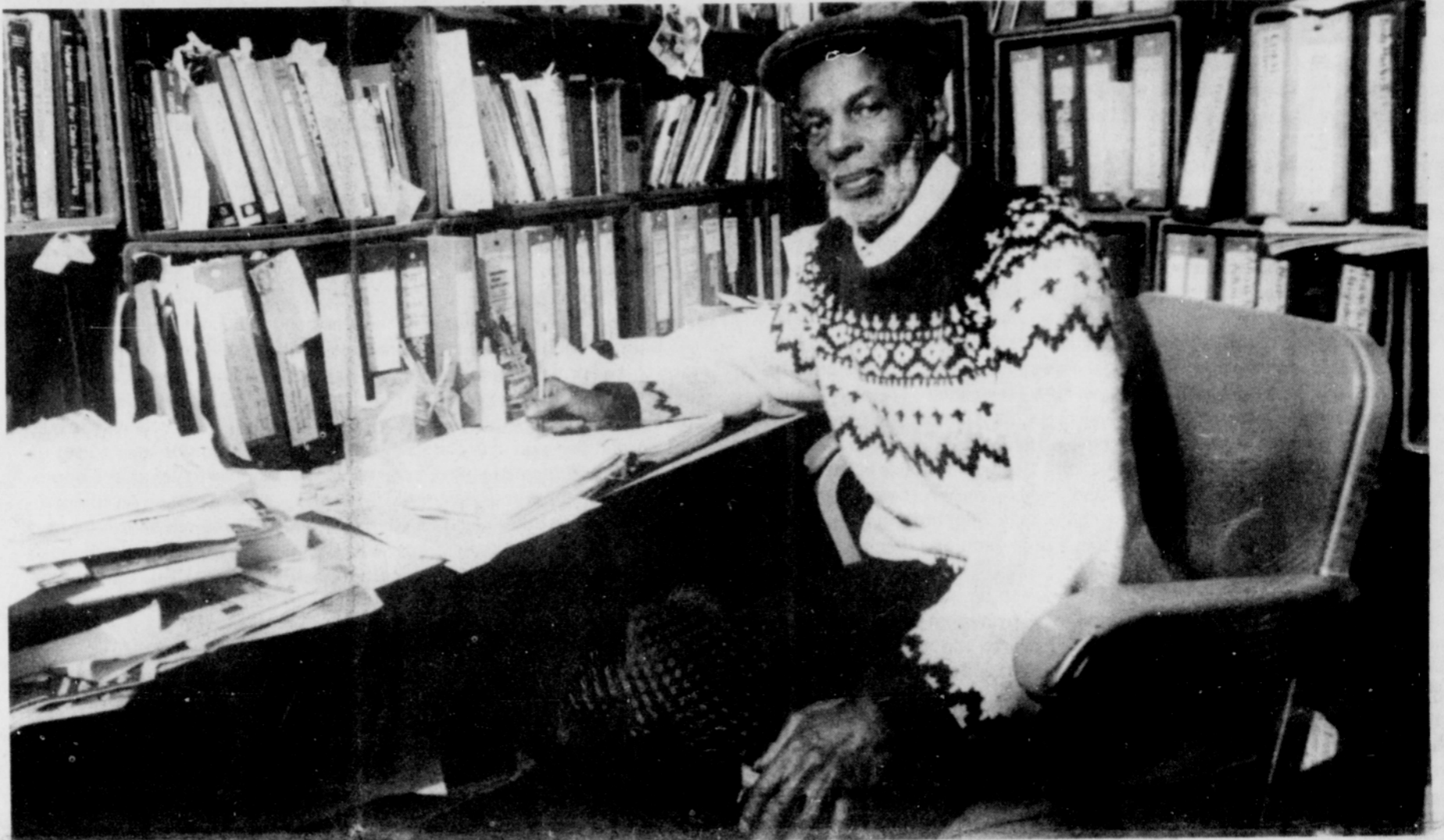


Photo by Richard J. Brown

history and stories of our many accomplishments in every field of endeavor. We knew WHO WE WERE; no group can make it without that. I'll name several of my high school classmates who made it to the top of their professions: Dr. Charles Proctor, former head of toxicology for the city of Chicago, who later became professor and department head of psychopharmacology at several Black southern universities — a master chemist and biologist; Dr. William Wilson who became head of a sociology department at the University of Chicago; Dr. Oral McClellan, for years a senior design engineer for General Dynamics Corporation; Robert McFerrin, Sr., best in languages, who became a leading tenor at the Metropolitan Opera — his son, Jr., appeared here in a Portland concert a few months ago.

"In a similar vein, let me cite Dr. Lafayette Fredericks, whose son is Lou Fredericks, a local Black newscaster on Channel 8. His father and I worked in the same shipyard here during World War II and were good friends. This graduate of a Black high school and college (Tuskegee) went on to chair a school of science at Howard University and to publish internationally acclaimed papers in the field of biology. What else can I say for decent schools and for motivated teachers who KNOW THEIR SUBJECT MATTER!"

I then asked Professor Burt about his own many contributions to the educational process. He mentioned his book "Black Inventors of America," distributed not only in this country, but overseas as well. I was shown many letters of appreciation for this great motivational tool from students, teachers, educational organizations, and the public. Now, the reader will see on page 3 a picture of Professor Burt conducting a class-

room demonstration of computer technology. This occurred — are you ready for this? — back in 1966 in Dalles, Oregon . . . AND WON A NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION AWARD. I will let him carry it on from here.

"Well, twenty-two years ago my job in the accounting department of the Harvey Aluminum Company (now Martin Marietta) included retrieval of labor time and other costs, summarizing the data, and then transmitting it by special wire to our main computer in Torrance, California. I became acquainted with Mr. Frank Ward, the fellow you see with me in the picture. He was chairman of the mathematics department of the Dalles school system. He often spoke of the difficulty of getting students to relate 'the rather dry curriculum of mathematics and language' to their career goals and the 'real world'. I came up with the then-unheard-of idea of putting an on-line computer and/or terminal right in the classroom — both actually performing, as well as simulating, all of the activities carried on by this method in the 'Real World'."

"My system was interactive, meaning that the students could participate using the terminal to communicate with the chief engineer of Pacific Northwest Bell. He would send them greetings from Portland, answer their questions, and, in the 'teletype mode', send them printouts describing the nature of the communications network which subtended all of our commercial and scientific intercourse. Other entities I put on my network of voice-grade and data lines were Tektronix Corporation, Bonneville Power, and

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Former US Senator Speaks Out Against Middle East Policy

by Avel Gordly

Former U.S. Senator James Abourezk spoke on "U.S. Policy in the Middle East" on Friday, October 23, 1987, at the Portland Building. Abourezk is founder and National Chairman of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He said he would have voted against the current Navy presence in the Persian Gulf if he were still in the Senate and stated further that he sees a rapid escalation of the situation because Reagan and the Iranians are "spoiling for a fight." And he also pointed out that "neither Reagan or Khomeni are going to get hurt; it'll be the kids who get hurt."

Abourezk does not feel we need a watchdog in the gulf and believes it to be "tragic that the war has been allowed to go on this long with people happily selling arms to both sides. A lot of money has been made," he said.

Abourezk said, "the real battleground over the middle east is in Washington," where U.S. foreign policy is being weakly debated in the face of what he continually referred to as a powerful Israeli lobby. "In fact," he said, "the most powerful country in the world acts like a banana republic in the face of the Israeli Lobby." He was harsh in his judgement that while Senators Packwood, Cranston, Kennedy and others would vote to save whales, they would not do the same for Palestinians, whom Abourezk feels are living under apartheid conditions like Black South Africans, but said they just don't get the publicity.

He was just as frank in his assessment that "most congressmen or senators could care less about either side; it's who bids the highest" (campaign contributions) that dictates where congressmen fall out on these policy issues. Abourezk is concerned that the American people do not get agitated unless the press tells them to, and one of the consequences is that the American people do not understand the Middle East issue.

Abourezk's talk was sponsored by several groups including Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Jewish Committee for Israeli Palestinian Peace, National Lawyers Guild, Democratic Socialists of America, Rainbow Coalition, General Union of Palestinian Students, November 29 Committee, American Friends Service Committee, and Friends of Reconciliation.



James Abourezk — "The real battleground over the Middle East is in Washington."

Photo by Richard J. Brown