

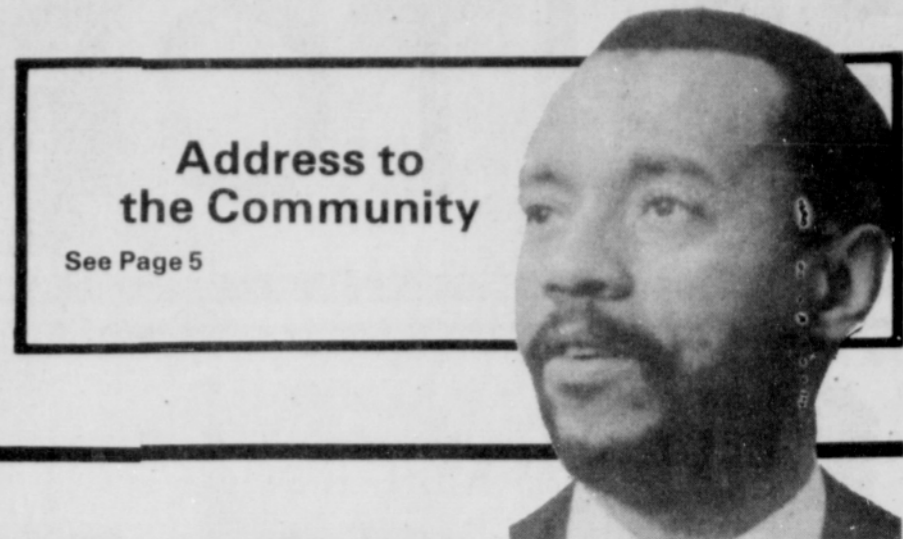
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Black Prisoners Speak Out

Part I of II

by Nyewusi Askari

EDITOR'S NOTE: On October 23, 1987, the Portland Observer Newspaper received a letter from Oregon State Penitentiary inmate John D. Leftridge II. The letter requested an interview. The interview, it said, was needed in order to give the Black community "a detailed scenario of illegal activities and wrong-doings at OSP."

On Nov. 6, 1987, after some lengthy discussions, the Observer granted the interview.

"The Little Red Rooster said to the Little Red Hen, 'I ain't seen you in God knows when . . .'"

If you are African-American, it is easy to be reminded of this particular conversation as you walk down the well-guarded corridors of the Oregon State Penitentiary. It appears that you recognize the face of or know every other Black prisoner you pass along the way.

It also brings to mind a common expression you hear spoken in Portland's Black community: "If a Black man disappears from sight and you don't hear from him in a while, check our OSP. He just might be there."

The urge to become sympathetic is great, especially when you find yourself surrounded by cautious guards, familiar faces, automatic locking steel doors, shakedown, electronic checking devices, and hundreds of aggravating sounds bursting into your ears at the speed of light. When reality finally makes its appearance, you suddenly realize that you are walking down a corridor that leads to nowhere. Under these conditions, objectivity commits suicide.

Oregon State Penitentiary, like most prisons throughout the country, is a complex system of administrative departments staffed by civil servants. Each department is assigned particular roles which are designed to make and keep the system running smoothly. When any part of the system breaks down, a crisis is created. A crisis can occur because of an escape, as in the case of Diane Downs. It can occur because of racial tensions. It can occur because of a breakdown in communications between guards and inmates. In short, a crisis in prison can be caused by a thousand-and-one things.

Inmates John D. Leftridge II, George Gaines, and Julian Armas believe that the system at OSP has either broken down or that correctional officials are simply refusing to carry out their duties. Leftridge explains: "Under ORS 144.410 to 144.525, it is the job of corrections to have a work release program. Specifically ORS 144.430 clearly states the duties that shall be done, such as establish and maintain community centers. But they won't do it. They would rather send a prisoner into the community unprepared in order to insure his return to prison."

The Circuit Court of the State of Oregon for the County of Marion found that, at the time Julian Armas was sentenced to prison, he was suffering from a severe personality disorder indicating a propensity toward criminal activity. Consequently, he was sentenced under ORS 162.725 et seq as a dangerous offender. Armas petitioned the court for Writ of Habeas Corpus. At the proceeding, Armas contended that his continued imprisonment and restraint was illegal; that he was incarcerated as a dan-



John D. Leftridge III (L) explains some of the problems inmates at O.S.P. are experiencing in dealing with the parole system, while gersous offender and had been deprived of available treatment and a reasonable opportunity to be cured or improved of the condition for which he was incarcerated.

George A. Gaines and Julian R. Armas listen.

Photo by Richard J. Brown

Circuit Court Judge Richard Barber agreed, and issued the following judgment: ". . . It is ordered that defendant (Fred Mass, Superintendent, Oregon State Penitentiary) has ninety (90) days to: (1) attempt to identify petitioner's severe personality disorder indicating a propensity toward criminal activity; (2) determine if petitioner's severe personality disorder can be treated and (3) if the severe personality disorder can be identified and successfully treated, make an adequate treatment plan available to petitioner (Armas)."

Armas says that he has yet to receive any kind of treatment and he's angry about it. "I would like for the community, all of my brothers and sisters, to realize what we have in our hands. A person, a taxpayer, out there is always crying that they are paying too much for this and that, but what is the price of lives? What is the price of their children's lives? What is the price of the lives of fathers and mothers who are out there when they let a psychopath like myself in their communities? I would like to know what the Governor's doing in collecting all these thousands of dollars for individuals like myself, that are considered dangerous, what treatment are we getting? None what-so-ever. I'm put out on the streets and I'm put out there raving mad. I am admitting to this and if there's something wrong with me, who is at fault?"

"I just want the community to be aware that if an inmate needs treatment, pay for it or else you'll be paying for your children, your mothers, your fathers, and then there's no crime anymore. A person that is guilty, that is sick, deserves to be in a state hospital. If a person needs confining,

then confine him. If he's done a crime, confine him. If he's sick, treat him. If I'm sick, treat me . . ."

Leftridge and Gaines are outraged at the way OSP officials have responded to a court order that instructs Michael Franke, Director of Corrections and Manfred Mass, Superintendent, Oregon State Penitentiary, to provide the two inmates "with an accurate and correct document computing the reduction of the sentence actually to be served in the custody of the Oregon State Penitentiary as mandatory by ORS 421.120 (1) (b), or show cause why they have not done so . . ." Leftridge says that "under ORS 421.120 (1) (b), it states that for every two days served in prison, one will be computed as good time. There are three prisoners here who have received court orders for this action and the officials here at OSP refuse to comply. This institution refuses to acknowledge court orders."

"The Judge sent an order stating that the state should comply to giving us good time on the actual time served," Gaines added. "The court gave until November 6 to comply with Mr. Leftridge's order and until November 10 to comply with mine. Nothing has happened."

"Don't misunderstand us . . . we are not asking for the community or anyone else to give us sympathy. We are just presenting the issues as they are now, so that taxpaying citizens can get a handle on the seriousness of the problems we are trying to solve. If anything, we are asking citizens to take note of corrections' refusal to follow the law. All we are asking is that the law be followed . . ."

NEXT WEEK: Prison officials respond & Black prisoners give insight into what they are presently doing to prepare younger Black prisoners for re-entry into the community.

Black Community Schools Have Glorious Past

by Nyewusi Askari

The present effort by Portland's Black community to establish a Saturday School comes from a tradition created centuries ago by African-American parents as a means of insuring the continued education of their children.

Susie King Taylor, in the book "Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops (Boston: 1902)", gives an eloquent retrospective account of how the process worked.

"I was born under the slave law in Georgia in 1848 and was brought up by my grandmother in Savannah. There were three of us with her: my younger sister and brother. My brother and I, being the eldest, we were sent to a friend of my grandmother, a Mrs. Woodhouse, a widow, to learn to read and write. She was a free woman and lived on Bay Lane between Habersham and Price Streets, about half a mile from my house. We went every day with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went in, one at a time, through the gate into the yard to the kitchen, which was the school room. She had 25 or 30 children whom she taught, assisted by her daughter, Mary Jane. The neighbors would see us going in some time, but they supposed we were learning trades, as it was the custom to give children a trade of some kind. After school, we left the same way we entered, one by one, and we would go to a square about a block from the school and wait for each other."

"I remained at her school for two years or more, when I was sent to Mrs. Mary Beasley, where I continued until May 1860, when she told my grandmother she had taught me all she knew, and grandmother had better get someone else who could teach me more, so I stopped my studies for a while."

Laura S. Haviland (Laura S. Haviland — A Woman's Life Work, Labors
Con't on Page 10



"There's no magic and mysticism about getting a Black child to learn. It takes hard work and it takes focus. There are Black American Saturday Schools springing up across the nation as parents realize the public schools are not meeting their children's needs."

Asa Hilliard told the 100-plus people that crowded into a room at the King Neighborhood Facility to hear the Black United Front's plan for Saturday School.

Photo by Richard J. Brown