

Address to the Community

The following excerpts are from a speech delivered by Mr. Ronnie Herndon at the first public organizational/informational meeting of the Black community's Saturday School.

"Thank you all for coming out tonight. We will try to move through the agenda as quick as we possibly can. Just as a quick overview about why we are here: one, we are here out of a sense of desperation. Why the desperation? In looking at where the average Black child is in Portland Public Schools, most objective people will feel a sense of desperation.

Children in this community, a large percentage of them, are scoring below average. The gap between white children and Black children in math, given the current rate of gain, it will take Black children 30 years to catch up. The average GPA of Black high school students, specifically Black seniors, will not allow them to enter into any four-year state school in Oregon. You have to have a GPA of at least 2.5.

So, right now, the tax dollars that this community pays to the public state system of higher education are not being spent to educate children in this community. The average child who comes from this community will never be able to get into a four-year college or a state-sponsored college in Oregon.

What we are saying is, we in this community are going to have to take some immediate steps to address the problem. Let me be specific. Questions have been asked: "Are you giving up on the school system?" Obviously not. There are some people who ask, "What's the problem?" Without getting into a long song and dance, there is one serious problem. The majority of the people who are in positions that are supposed to give direction to principals and teachers, I'm talking about people in the administration of Portland Public Schools, never in their professional career did they have a class filled with low-income children, be they Black, white, Hispanic, or Indian. Can they show us that they had those children achieving at grade level or above? If you look at the records of instruction, if you look at heads of curriculum, if you look at the assistant superintendent, and ask, "Where did you teach a class that was filled with Hispanics, Indians, Blacks or poor whites? And can you show us, based upon achievement tests and scores, that these children were performing at grade level or above?" We've asked that question many times and still haven't received an answer.

If you don't have people at the top level of management who have had successful experience in teaching this population, then how can you expect them to give instructions to those below them? How can they give successful instructions to principals and teachers? The reason I'm mentioning this is so that nobody thinks that somehow we feel that the problem is with teachers or principals. There are a lot of problems at the bottom, admit; but we are convinced that the major problem lies at the top.

Number one, this community is saying it "can't wait" for this great getting-up-day-in-the-morning for our children. We are the ones who have to be confronted daily with the problem. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that children coming out of Portland Public Schools who can't read or write will not qualify for employment. There are only so many people who can work at Burger King. There are only so many children who can work at Wendy's. These companies don't need a whole lot of people. What are



Ron Herndon.

Photo by Richard J. Brown

they going to do? A lot of them are going to turn to crime. A lot of them are going to end up on welfare. These children are not going to be committing crimes in Beaverton. They are not going to be shooting dope out in

Lake Oswego. No, they are going to do these things right here in this community; and we are the ones, in this community, who will end up confronting all of the social ills that are generally the product of children, young adults, who do not have an adequate education that will allow them to become productive individuals in society.

So we have a lot of interest in making sure that we do whatever we possibly can to encourage these children to become better students. What do we hope to accomplish? Do we hope to do on Saturdays what the public schools can't do five days a week? Absolutely not! We are not making that claim. But we are focused to accomplish the following: (1) to address some of the academic deficiencies these children have; (2) to begin to address the issue of culture and history. Most of these children have no knowledge of their history and culture. If you take them beyond Martin Luther King, they are lost. In terms of Africa, that's a blank. The Caribbean, where is it? Black inventors, never heard of them. So, if these children do not have a decent self-concept of themselves and their community, then how can we expect them to have high self-esteem about their abilities to become good students? It's almost impossible. (3) Working with parents: We want parents to get totally involved. Ultimately it will be our responsibility to make sure that our children get a quality education. After all that's said and done, it comes back on us parents. If our children are behind, then we are going to have to run harder to catch up. If other children can get by, and these are children who are performing well, if they can achieve by studying an hour a night, and our children are behind them, then our children are going to have to study three hours a night to catch up. We parents are going to have to make sure that we explain this to our children, and make sure and insure that it happens. At the Saturday School, we will help parents discover ways to work with and teach their children. We know that some parents don't have the skills to do it. If this is the case, tell us, and we can talk about other programs that will provide the proper assistance.

Another frequent question that comes up: "Can white children attend the Saturday School?" The answer is YES! Can white children participate in the Saturday School? The answer is YES! This community is looking for persons who have skills and talent regardless of ethnicity. That's what our children need. We are not about "gene checking". We are about "talent checking".

In closing, I must point out this is not solely a Black community problem. The worst scoring school for achievement levels is predominately white. Let's take a moment to address that. Part of the problem is about expectations, and many educators do not expect poor white children to learn. It was not the Black community who came up with the phrase "poor white trash." So there is the expectation that poor white children can't learn, Black children can't learn, Hispanics can't learn, and Indians can't learn. And we parents know that, generally, if you don't expect a child to learn something, he/she won't.

This community has been asked time and time again, "Is it true that the Saturday School doesn't want anyone from Portland Public Schools involved in its programs?" The answer is no, it's not true. We will welcome talent from wherever it comes, as long as it's qualified and dedicated to the community's cause."

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N/NE CMHC Worker Honored

Peter Blumklotz of Portland has been honored with the Marge Lee Anderson Award from the Mental Health Association of Oregon. The award was presented at the statewide organization's annual meeting in Clackamas on Saturday, October 31.

Marge Lee Anderson, a psychologist at the North/Northeast Community Mental Health Center, died in January 1986. In order to com-



memorate her long years of dedication to community service to the mentally ill, the Center and the Mental Health Association established the award to honor individuals with similar commitment. Criteria included professionalism, commitment to minority communities, and commitment to teamwork.

Blumklotz has worked as a staff psychologist and therapist in community mental health programs for about twenty years. He is currently a Mental Health Specialist with the North/Northeast Community Mental Health Center.

The Mental Health Association of Oregon is a 53-year-old citizens organization concerned with the quality of life of the mentally ill, prevention of mental illness and public education about mental illness. Its 1987 annual meeting theme was "Outpatient Commitment: Trick or Treat?" Presentations focused on the strengthening national trend toward use of outpatient commitment of the mentally ill.

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