



Jesse Jackson on the Persian Gulf & Social Security

Page 3

"We have a moral imperative to stop cooperating with our own oppression."

See "Economic Sanctions", Page 3

Spike Lee, "School Daze" Filmmaker Debates College Students

Page 7



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## New Urban League Director — Youth Will be High Priority

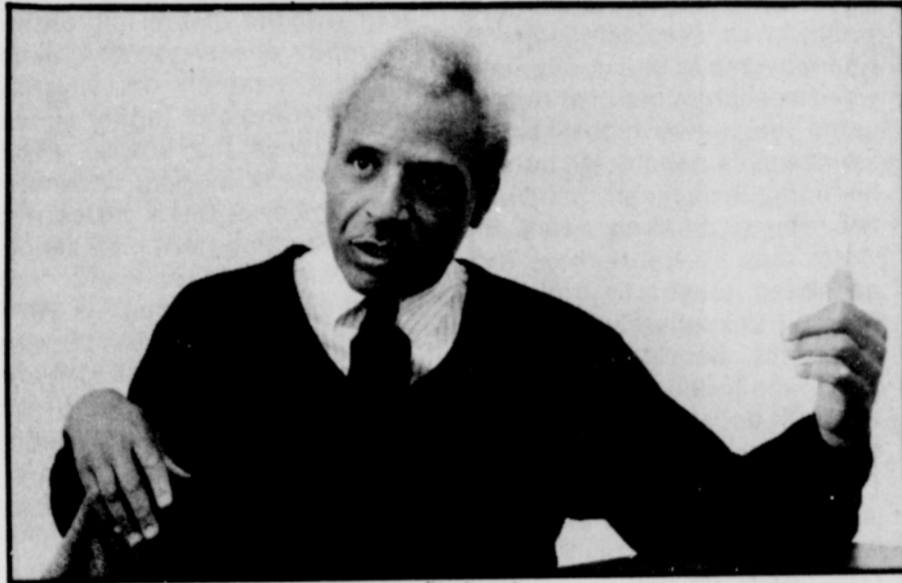
To interview Useni Eugene Perkins, Director of the Urban League of Portland, is to take a delightful, informative journey through African-American history, art, literature, theater, and music. It is also a journey full of enthusiasm, fresh ideas, visions, and a smile that warms.

The light that dances in his eyes when he talks is matched by the sparkle of his smile, especially when he talks about his childhood.

"I was pretty fortunate," he recalls. "I had a very strong father: Marion Perkins. He was a sculpture and an activist. So as a child I was exposed to not only ideas, but to people — important people. I can recall as a child I met people like Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Paul Robeson, who is my spiritual mentor. I consider Mr. Robeson to be one of the greatest men to ever live."

The author of several books, Mr. Perkins began writing at an early age. "I was given a lot of encouragement," he said. "Langston Hughes, as he is for most Black poets of my generation, was my inspiration. I had a chance to meet him, and the thing I've always tried to maintain is a sense of humility and be humble, because all of these great men were very humble. Langston Hughes was a very humble person. So were Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. I even got to meet Mr. W.E.B. DuBois, and so that impressed me. These were giants, yet they were very humble."

Born and raised in Chicago, he vividly remembers what it was like to grow up in the midst of African-American literary giants. "They set the standards," he said. "These people were highly



On writing about African-American youth — "I am not in some academic setting doing a study on Black youth. I am a part of that setting." — Useni Perkins. Photo by Richard J. Brown

committed. They were committed not just by work or rhetoric, but by example. My father was the primary model, not only to his art, but to the Black community. He saw both of them supporting each other; that art should be a reflection of all aspects of the Black community. So these were some of the things that inspired me when I began writing."

Influenced by the realization that his father worked two jobs, Mr. Perkins didn't set his sight on becoming a writer only. "I wanted to be a writer, but I was not going to say I wasn't going to pursue another profession. I didn't want to be a poor man's artist, so I also became a professional social worker, and I have been lucky. The careers have paralleled each other without any conflict. I have been able to maintain my creative interest and creative energy and, at the same time, maintain focus on my professional career."

As an example of how the two professions nurture each other,

he cited his writing about African-American youth. "A lot of my writing, especially as it related to Black youth, is basically a reflection of my work as a social worker; my observations, my empirical involvement with young people. The works that I have written relating to Black youth come out of my experience as a practitioner. I am not in some academic setting doing a study on Black youth. I am a part of that setting. I am out there working with Black youth on a day-to-day basis. Writing is a reflection of my involvement as a social worker."

Mr. Perkins has also written several plays.

Shifting the conversation, he talked about the importance of a multi-cultural curriculum. "Education should be the foundation for one's social development. The multi-cultural factor is extremely important, especially for Black youth. We can teach Johnny how to read. We also have to be concerned about what

Johnny reads.

"A multi-cultural education provides Johnny with information which is more representative of his culture, which is very important in terms of contributing to his motivation and self-esteem. American history doesn't provide Black youth with enough of our history, ancient history, and history that relates and celebrates ourselves as people.

"I am a strong supporter of multi-cultural education and programs. It not only helps the Black student, it helps the white student equally as well. If the Black student has been exposed to misinformation, the white student has also been exposed to misinformation. Misinformation contributes to a lot of the feelings and prejudices that whites have toward Blacks. We really have to see that the textbooks are more representative of the events that actually took place in this country. You have, here in Portland, once its implemented, a multi-cultural curriculum that will become a model for the rest of the county."

When asked what he thought about Portland's gang problem, Mr. Perkins said, "I worked with gangs in Chicago for about twenty years. If you do have a gang problem here in Portland, you need to look at why young people join gangs. More than likely you'll find that they are attracted to gangs because perhaps other institutions are not providing them with the kinds of things they need. This is what really creates gangs.

"Young people first need a sense of identity, and gangs give youth a sense of identity. They have a name, and they are proud of that name. They write it on the



"Paul Robeson — one of the greatest men to ever live." Photo by Richard J. Brown

walls.

"Young people need to feel a sense of belonging and often this does not take place in the community. It's not always happening in the schools. It may not be happening in the families, so the gang provides that.

"Young people need a sense of security, and gangs give young people a sense of security. They feel more secure within a gang structure.

"It also provides a sense of power. Young people, I believe, feel that they need to have some power. They read about power, they look at it on television, and they know that with power you can get things done. So young people want these things.

"To a certain extent, the gangs become an extended family. Being in a gang itself doesn't necessarily have to be negative. It's the behavior of the gang that can be negative," he said.

Concerning his appointment as Director of the Urban League of Portland, Mr. Perkins said he

feels the Urban League has the responsibility to be as accountable as possible. "It should have a high degree of accountability. Social service agencies are in a situation where people expect them to do everything. I think agencies have to be very honest about what they are able to do in terms of service delivery. When they commit a service to the community, they should do that with high quality. It's hard to say how much you can do with limited resources, but young people will be a high priority with the Portland Urban League. It is very important that we place young people on a high priority. Of course, there are other problems we will have to look at and I wouldn't want to make an early forecast."

When asked if there was anything he wanted to say to Portland before he headed back to Chicago to wrap things up, he smiled, reflected for a long moment, and then said, "Don't measure me by past Urban League presidents or how successful or unsuccessful they were. Measure me by what I do and give me the opportunity. I feel that I can do quite a bit for the Portland Urban League and the City of Portland. If not, I wouldn't have come here. I believe that my resources, my experiences and my commitment can do that," he concluded.

Mr. Perkins will assume his duties as Director April 1.

For African-Americans throughout the City of Portland and the State of Oregon, I will take the opportunity to say, "Welcome, Brother Useni. Kick off your shoes, roll up your sleeves, step into the trenches and stay a long while. We have a lot of work to do — together."

## Exclusive

by Nyewusi Askari

When a small group of North-Northeast Portland "homeboys" read and heard that the media were labeling them as the "Portland Bloods," an L.A. style street gang, they were less than pleased. But, when the L.A. Crips began to physically confront, threaten, harass and physically attack them because of the colors they wore, they realized that their lives and their neighborhoods would never be the same unless they themselves took direct action to meet the challenge.

Meeting the challenge meant organizing "homeboys" (African-American males from the same neighborhood, city or state), establishing coded patterns of verbal and non-verbal communications, participating in activities that would ensure maximum safety for members of the group, and presenting a "united front" whenever faced with violence or physical threats.

These and other revelations were shared by several members of the Portland Bloods in an exclusive interview with *The Portland Observer*.

The interview, conducted by

this writer, was granted after members from the group contacted Ron Herndon and the Black United Front requesting an interview with this newspaper. The purpose, they said, was to clear up some misconceptions about who the Portland Bloods are and what they stand for.

This is their story. When homeboys from North-Northeast Portland started hanging out together, their language contained words and phrases common to Black language speakers — "Cuz" (relative or a very close friend), "Homeboys" (African-American males from the same neighborhood, city or state), "Youngblood" (the youngest Black male in an all-male group) and "Blood" (Brother).

Many of these Homeboys had grown up in Portland, attended the same schools and had participated in the same school activities. For them, hanging out (being together) meant shooting and playing hoops (basketball) at the parks, visiting friends, going to the movies, attending basketball and football games, doing homework, double dating and going to house parties.

The frequent get-togethers led to the group adopting the name "Homeboys" to signify their Oregon-Portland roots. Around 1982-83, they adopted "red" as their primary color. The adoption of red as a primary color was seen as a way to show how much they identified with the Rose City. At that time, they thought everyone understood what the color red meant to Portlanders. But that wasn't the case.

During the years 1985-87, they found themselves confronted by members of the L.A. Crips, who demanded that they stop wearing the color red. They were told, "Red is a war color in L.A. It is worn by our enemy: the L.A. Bloods." The Homeboys ignored the threat for a while, but when their members began to be harassed by members of the Crips, they decided to confront the issue.

Confronting the issue meant letting the Crips know that "they couldn't come into Portland and take over the neighborhood." It also meant making the decision to wear red to show the Crips that the Homeboys were not going to be intimidated by outsiders from

California.

The decision to resist the Crips invasion led to more confrontations. According to group members, many of the early confrontations took place at high schools. Crip members would come onto campus, target a student wearing red (cap, socks, shoes, shirt, ect.) and confront him. It didn't matter if he belonged to the Homeboys' group. Soon word had spread throughout most high schools in the Portland Metropolitan area that any African-American male student caught wearing red of any kind would be confronted by the Crips and given an "L.A. style whuppin."

As the confrontations continued, the Homeboys found themselves with a new name: The Portland Bloods. Leaders of the group said this label came from confused law enforcement officers, who, at the time, didn't know the difference between a Blood and a Crip, and from the media. And by the time the Homeboys realized what had happened, they were being labeled as "violent" and

See "Exclusive", Page 4

## South African Visitors Welcomed Here As Net of Repression Widens

by I.R. Macrae

With the iron heel of repression coming down hard on the backs of South Africa's Black resistance movement, the U.S. State Department appears anxious to maintain the appearance of supporting opponents of the policy of racial separation known as apartheid. In the aftermath of last week's news of a government-imposed ban on the activities of 17 major anti-apartheid groups in South Africa, U.S. officials issued statements expressing righteous indignation at the decision to outlaw virtually all peaceful protest against apartheid.

Yet at the very moment when the ban was being imposed, an event here in Portland provided more evidence of this administration's lack of interest in the fate of South Africa's suffering Black majority.

On Wednesday, Feb. 23, the Bonneville Power Administration, an entity under the direct supervision of the U.S. Department of Energy, extended a hearty welcome to two representatives of one of South Africa's largest utility companies. According to Dan Schausten, assistant

to B.P.A. Deputy Administrator Jack Robertson, the two utility engineers were here to gather information about transmission technology to aid in a major rural electrification project back home in South Africa.

The fact that B.P.A. has long been considered one of the world's most efficient providers of low-cost electricity draws such visitors from throughout the world, Schausten said; the two white South Africans were merely extended the same courtesy as all the rest.

When asked whether this kind of hospitality is extended to all foreign countries equally, regardless of the character of their political systems, Schausten said he was not aware of any restrictions. "We have checked through our boss at D.O.E. There is nothing in federal regulations that would discourage us from an exchange of this sort," he explained.

Pressed as to whether technical information would be freely offered even to countries like Cuba or Iran, Schausten could only say that his superiors were seeking clarification on the mat-

See "Visitors", Page 5