

The Portland Observer 25¢

Local Child Casted In Oregon Shakespeare Festival Portland's First All Black Production



Cecile Matthews

Six-year-old Cecile Matthews is one of two local Portland area children casted in Oregon Shakespeare Festival Portland's first all Black production and season opener "Fences." Cecile is in the first grade at Fir Grove Elementary School in Beaverton, and is a member of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in NE Portland. She and her family moved to the Portland area from Cleveland, Ohio in 1987. Attending Vacation Bible School with her grandmother in Ohio this summer has paid off for Cecile in more ways than one. She sang "I May Never March In The Calvary," a bible school piece for her audition before Benny Sato Ambush and Dennis Bigelow, the artistic director of "Fences" and producer of OSF

Portland, respectively. August Wilson's drama "Fences," which won most major theater awards in 1987, is OSF Portland's season opener playing through November 30th. Cecile shares the role of Raynelle Maxson, the seven-year-old daughter of Troy Maxson in this moving story of the African-American experience in the 1950's. Raynelle is also played by Kandi Garvey of Vancouver, WA. Cecile's acting/modeling accomplishments to date include the 1990 film "Wee Sing's Best Christmas Ever," an Oregonian Northwest Magazine cover page photo shoot (June 1990), and the KOIN-TV Channel 6 Christmas Greetings commercial in 1987. This is her first stage role.

'Dances With Wolves' Author Speaks to Students

by Bill Barber

"I have a nice suit on today. I have someone to drive me around Portland to my speaking engagements. I'll be flying to Seattle on a jet later today, but it was a very, very brief time ago that I had nothing." Those were the identical opening remarks of the two lectures Michael Blake, author of "Dances with Wolves," gave in Portland last week. He spoke at the North Portland Branch of the Multnomah County Library at 512 N. Killingsworth and at the Main Library downtown. Michael Blake came to Portland as part of a promotional tour for his new book "Airman Mortensen." Most tours like this are blatantly commercial affairs. You know--wine, cheese, sign book, get check, go to the next town. That is not Michael Blake's style. He had it rough for a lot of years. He knows a lot of people aren't going to have \$20.00 to plunk down for his book. So he made a good deal with his book publishing company, Seven Wolves Publishing. He would go on a book tour if he could do it in public libraries. So it began. He has been on a 16-city tour talking to high schools students all over the U.S. Measure 5 almost stopped another Michael Blake dream. A dream of inspiring high school students to dream. Alice Meyers, President of The Friends of the Library, supplied the funding for the event. She worked with all 12 Portland Public School Curriculum departments to arrange busses, etc. so the students could attend the lectures.



Michael Blake

That statement about "having nothing" came as quite a surprise to all of the people assembled to hear the world famous author speak. Most everyone assumes that anyone so famous and critically acclaimed would have always been financially well off. "I didn't have anything for 25 years. I was trying to work as an artist in the United

States of America. Believe me, it's not an easy thing to do. But, I persisted, and I had commitment and I tried to work from my heart. I tried to work with things I knew about. Fortune smiled on me. All I ever wanted...My big dream was to be able to make a living off of what I wanted to do. I've achieved that beyond my wildest dreams. I can tell each and everyone of you today: Don't give up hope! Whatever your dream is, it can happen for you; but, you have to hang in there. I know the country is not

in very good shape right now." Blake conceded. "You're looking at a horrible mess right in front of your faces. Those of you who are going to be leaving high school and moving into the so-called 'Adult World' will find there is not as much to offer you as there was a while ago. We all know what kind of shape our environment is in, what kind of shape the world is in, and we know how many things have to get pulled together before we have a decent place to live in. I believe there is

hope for America. I think there is change sweeping the world. I'm excited. Somebody asked me the other day, "Michael, what point in history would you like to live in?" I said, "Right this minute. I can't think of a more exciting time to be alive. Our backs are against the wall in America, and around the world, and we are going to have to get it together."

Blake was at his best when he offered advice about our perceptions of viewing other people. "Don't look at me and say 'Oh yeah, I can have it made in this life.' 'Cause theres no such thing as that. There's no such thing as putting up your feet and thinking I got it made. That doesn't exist. Right when "Dances with Wolves" was finished and it was ready for release, I got cancer. After all the operations, treatments, and therapy, I'm doing good now. It just goes to show you. You never have it made in this life."

It seemed ironic that the author of one of the new American classics was speaking with such candor. Most of the people in the room had seen the movie, even if they hadn't read the book. Blake's next statement was even more ironic. "I was technically homeless when I wrote "Dances with Wolves." I had friends, they would give me meals and let me sleep in their living rooms. They let me do that because I was so passionate about what I was working on. I didn't have any place to live. I had a 1970 Chrysler ('das boot') which wasn't too bad to live in because it was awful big. But it wasn't what you want to live in either."

The point that Michael Blake was driving home was: "Don't be afraid to dream."

He also announced a writing contest offered by Seven Wolves Publications; the details are listed on page 3.

The History Of L.I.F.E. Center : Twenty-five Years of Service to Those In Need

It was 1966. President Lyndon B. Johnson was talking about a War on Poverty and The Great Society. Congress was approving a variety of social programs. In the Albina neighborhood of north Portland, a handful of community service workers, headed by 57-year-old Gertrude Crowe, was going door to door trying to connect residents with programs that might help them. What the group discovered was that the needs of the residents were much more basic and immediate than what the government programs had envisioned. People needed food, clothing, heat, furniture and bedding. "Some people slept on papers laid on the floor," reported one of the visiting workers. "One old widow we discovered lived alone, slowly dying of malnutrition." The workers, members of the Albina Neighborhood Service Center, decided to take the matter into their own hands, and set up a makeshift distribution center in a small building at Beech and Williams Streets. They called it the Low Income Families Emergency (L.I.F.E.) Center. At first, it was not much more than the workers themselves contributing what they could from their own homes, and asking friends and neighbors to do

the same. Then, local businesses and churches became involved, and eventually a federal grant and United Way funding were added. But always one overriding principle was followed: that people getting help from the center had to volunteer time and work in return for what they got. "It's a question of dignity," Mrs. Crowe would say. "It takes something away from people when they have to take something away from people when they have to take something for nothing." So men and women sorted, pressed and mended clothing in exchange for needed pots and pans, or refinished furniture in return for food, or typed letters to get clothes for their children. An Oregonian reporter wrote in 1974 that "on a recent summer afternoon the director (Mrs. Crowe) was supervising a grade school youngster who was stamping receipts in return for a new pair of shoes." Another reporter in 1976 observed volunteers in a sewing room "busy making colorful, hand-crafted quilts." The principle of "giving for getting" is still alive today. Charles Carter, who became director after Mrs. Crowe's death in 1985, notes that the tens of thousands of requests the center gets each year could not be filled without volunteer help. "It's what sets us



Gertrude Crowe

apart from other community service groups," Carter said. An Oregonian article credited the start of L.I.F.E. Center in 1966 to "eight persons assigned to walk a beat to sur-


vey the needs of the indigent in an area encompassed by Broadway and Ainsworth and Northeast 15th Avenue to the Willamette River." Mrs. Minnie Harris, now living in

Concord, California, was one of the eight. She was the first chairperson of the board of directors, and stayed seven years. She identified the other originators, in addition to Mrs. Crowe, as Mr. Ira Mumford (deceased), Mrs. Louise Carson (deceased), Mrs. Verna Sheppard, Mrs. Lizzie Sheppard, Mr. James Hill and the former pastor of Mt. Olivet Church, the Rev. John Jackson. Newspaper accounts from the early years refer to other key persons, including Cecil Walton, a vocational counselor aide in the Albina Neighborhood Service Center; Vernon Summer, also a staff member at the Albina Center, and the Rev. Samuel Johnson (deceased), pastor of Highland United Church of Christ. But no one has been identified more closely with L.I.F.E. Center than Gertrude Crowe, who dedicated 19 years to it as its executive director and chief worker. "She was industrious, loyal and faithful," recalls Mrs. Harris. "She was a good public relations person. She had the ability to win friends for the Center." According to the obituary for her in the Oregonian of September 19, 1985, Mrs. Crowe was born in Prescott, Arkansas (near Little Rock) in 1909 and taught in Arkansas schools before moving to Portland in 1942. She became active here in the NAACP chap-

ter, and assisted with relocation of victims of the 1947 Vanport flood. Mrs. Crowe was the mother of three daughters (Betty White, of Portland, Dorothy Pack, of Detroit, Michigan and Harriet Whitherspoon of Chicago) and one son (the Rev. Clarence Crowe, of Arkansas). Her husband died in 1969. In 1982, Mrs. Crowe received the Russell A. Peyton Human Relations Award from the city's Metropolitan Human Relations commission for "her charitable contributions to the entire Portland community and her sincere dedication to serving and protecting the rights of low income and indigent people." Until 1968, Mrs. Crowe and other L.I.F.E. Center workers simply donated their time to the center. They operated out of storefronts and basements, moving the center from Beech and Williams Streets, to Fremont and Union, and then to Union and Monroe. "There were many times when we didn't know we would be able to pay the rent," Mrs. Crowe recalled for a reporter in 1968. What little money there was came mostly from benefits staged by the Albina Neighborhood Service Center. One such benefit held in 1966 at the Cotton Club featured "Mighty Mo

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