



EUGENE-SPRINGFIELD OBSERVER

Volume II, Number I

"The Eyes and Ears of the Community"

January 8, 1992

Local Businessman Breaking The Stereotypes

BY ED JOSEPH AND NANCY GLINES

Henry Levert has been in the Eugene area for the last 15½ years and has been doing business as Graphic Innovators, Inc. since 1977. In that time he has seen changes in the minority community and the positive one seems to be that there is less crime. He feels that the position of people of color in the community is approximately the same as when he came to Eugene. There are fewer Afro-American policemen and about the same number of teachers in the school district. There are more minorities living in this community but the old stereotypes are still here and in some cases seem to have gotten worse. There are still many problems with students in the school district and how the police interact with the minority community. Mr. Levert sees part of the reason so few changes have occurred is that the city manager has been here since 1980, and the administrations of these facilities have not felt the necessity to address the issues of race.

To most people coming to Eugene the Black community is a truly invisible one in that there are no defined areas that are predominately black. People in the rest of the community don't believe there is racism in this area because they are not the recipients of racism. These same people will tell a person of color, when the racism issue is addressed, that they are too sensitive or overreacting.

In order to gather the Black community together there is a focal point needed and that focal point could be the children. How minority children are perceived and how the community perceives these children in a broad sense is important. The children of color need to feel good about who they are and the white children need to feel good about who the minority children are. He feels that the educational system and the establishment deprives both groups of children of this by the reinforcement of stereotypes. There is a need to work together to break down those stereotypes. For example; all Blacks do not play basketball, some have very good business sense and some have ideals that are just as grand as any white person. The system needs to acknowledge that the minorities have a rich culture, a rich heritage and have contributed a lot to this community throughout the years. The minorities need to take more pride in themselves and the contributions that they



Picture by Ed Joseph

have made to this community as well as nationwide.

There is a feeling among the minority business community that there is no need to join organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Ad Club, MEA etc. if the same barriers are up and these organizations aren't helping to address these issues. Mr. Levert said that he joined the Chamber of Commerce and felt no special outreach to get a minority perspective on issues. At the same time he saw nothing being done by the Chamber to help him in particular or in general. In a business sense he has the same general problems that any other business has but also some unique ones that do need to be addressed especially when it comes to racism from different purchasing departments. He said, "They just don't look at me as a professional but as a minority. I have to win my credibility from scratch. I've been in the

business for almost 10 years but that means nothing and I have to prove that I know what I know." In these hard economic times he feels that minority business will survive because economic hardships are a reality that most minority people have learned to live with. He feels that he would be a lot more successful if he didn't have to fight additional artificial barriers that are put in his way because of his color.

In this community there are overt and subtle racial attitudes. Mr. Levert feels that there is a lot of naiveness among a lot of the white liberals in this community that they're not racist. It may be a "feel good" mind set but some of their actions can be construed as racist because they don't know enough about the Black people and their culture to make those judgements. According to Mr. Levert, his meetings with the superinten-

dent of the 4-J School District, Margaret Nichols, have not always been amicable. "I tell her the truth coming from a minority perspective and she doesn't like to hear it. She tells me that I am filled with rage and anger," said Mr. Levert. "Usually if we agree with them it's okay but as soon as there is disagreement all of a sudden it makes us not fit the mold they wanted us in. I really take offense to that when I'm dealing with an issue that is personal. If I was so filled with rage and bitterness I'd do like some of those wackos and get a gun and to blow somebody's head off, so apparently I'm not filled with too much rage and bitterness."

Another example of racial attitudes is in the matter of the Black *Register Guard* reporter who was not allowed to cover the recent racial incident that took place at Sheldon High School. The story was given to a white reporter even though there was a chance to have a report from a minority reporter on the incident. All of the details are not known about the incident but when a delegation went to see Margaret Nichols her answer to them was that she wanted the minority community to come up with a solution. Mr. Levert said his feelings were that "when someone is getting paid as much as Margaret Nichols is, there should be some solutions coming from her." He also said that in his opinion "The *Register Guard* evidently feels that we are not competent enough to be objective on a story that deals with race. The Black reporter doesn't have the right tools yet to be objective about the race issue. I know how biased *The Register Guard* can be because I've had my falling out with them in the past."

When asked if he was considering throwing his hat in the mayoral race, Mr. Levert said that he didn't think it would be appropriate to comment on that at this time because he wanted to play out all the options. He indicated that there could be several minority leaders contemplating entering the race. There are minority leaders that are as well qualified as any to enter that race. He feels that a major point would be to get the same exposure from the media of the minority candidates and their abilities to the community as any white candidate would get. Mr. Levert said "It wouldn't hurt to shake up the town and add some flavor to it and not be putting so many people to sleep at those meetings."

Martin Luther King, Jr. Special - Next Week