

Family LIVING

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The Portland Observer

Family Matters: You Had Better Believe It

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

My matronly neighbor with the old VW Van has been gone a few years, but you can bet she is sorely missed. Not just by the scores of children who called her "the Van lady" or "van mama", but missed like a member of the family, by adults like me -- I always thought of her as "operation intercept," a neighborhood institution.

I suppose it had been six years, now, since she moved to California to be with an aging mother who needed intensive care. It is not just her cosmetics and toiletries customers who miss her wares and advice but a diverse ramshackle crowd of "little ones", her ever-changing "extended family" who were always falling through the cracks of what we like to think of as a normal, ecstatic, giggling five to eight-year old childhood. Her children just didn't fit.

"Van mama" had taken it upon herself to gather up her little bedraggled charges early each school morning, the confused and hungry ones with their special "consanguinity." The word is defined as "common ancestry" and their was poverty, neglect and being relatively unloved. Before their caring, brown benefactor moved into the neighborhood, many of the children were missing school half the time -- and many were not immediately returning home if they did.

The good lady had not been 'in residence' more than six months, before, in that mystical way they have of communicating with each

other, the little ones had performed their own "needs assessment" and the word was out. If you had been leaving home without breakfast, there was a place you would be fed. If the older kids complained that you smelled bad and commented unfavorably on your bloodline, why then there was this lady who would throw you in the tub and put some clean underwear on you. ("Make you wash your teeth too, man").

Before long, everyone got accustomed to seeing the van sail by in the morning with a much better dressed and better behaved crew of former neighborhood delinquents. All of a sudden you noticed that there was not that motley crew of cussing, yelling, quarrelling youngsters at key times of days. We were all happy to make contributions of clothes and money to the "van lady." You know, sometime I entertain a thought that perhaps there should be a chain of neighborhood "comfort houses" sort of order on the "Safe houses" for children.

But, then, one is forced to think again. Many of the delinquent parents of the children we've described had nerve enough to start delivering their children to the "van lady's" house, instead of school; still unfed and unwashed. One supposed they then returned home to drugs, alcohol and, probably an untroubled sleep. Oh, by the way; we were all aware of the existence of Children's Services and a host of other intervention - type.

I would note two things here.

First, when I was a kid, there were innumerable "Van mamas" and formal and informal African American institutions who performed "Social intervention" in the ghetto neighborhoods. And if you still managed to get to school in bad shape, there were compassionate teachers who had a special radar for detecting empty stomachs and acted accordingly. They would also dispatch persons to the homes of the ill-treated, official and unofficial. They would intervene in no uncertain manner.

Also, speaking of a "common ancestry" or bloodline, I am reminded of a National Geographic article I saw years ago with the most wonderful photographs. It described the economic activities of some amazing black women on the West Coast of Africa (either Ghana or Nigeria - or both).

Driving along winding, poorly-maintained roads that led from the hilly interior to ports on the coast, they pushed their 18-wheeler trucks to the limit, getting agricultural products to the docks.

The vehicles (Mercedes - Benz diesels) were affectionately known as "Mammy Wagons" and were of World-War II vintage. One set of endearing photographs showed one woman stopped to pick up several wandering children who had been outlined in her headlights, wandering through the jungle night. You just know that when I think of the "Van lady", I also think of that article.

Winter Coats For Kids Drive Begins



You can help thousands of needy children in the Portland tri-county area stay warm this winter through The Salvation Army's "Coats for Kids" drive in October.

Public donations of coats in all sizes are needed. Fifty members of the Oregon Dry Cleaners Association are collecting and cleaning the coats. Look for Coats for Kids posters in neighborhood dry cleaners such as Halsey Cleaners, Northwest Leather, New China Laundry & DRY Cleaners, Majestic Cleaners & Laundry, Village Cleaners, The Cleaning Bar, Marbee's Cleaners, and Alpine Cleaning & Laundry, or call The Salvation Army at 234-0825.

It's all smiles for the proud owner of this donated coat (left). The boy joined thousands of needy children who received coats last winter through The Salvation Army's annual "Coats for Kids" program.



Anniversary Celebration - Paul and Geneva Knauls renewed marriage vows of 30 years and Ken and Harriet Adair, celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary aboard the Royal Caribbean. Others on the 4 day anniversary cruise to Catalina Island and Ensenado Mexico were Jean Stewart, Paul Geneva, Rose Marie Johnson, Maxine Paden, Kelvin Pe'a, Dianna Smith, Ruth Harrington, Jackie Fair, Helen Colman, Frank Fair, and Earl Johnson. Not pictured were Mary Alice Evans, Ailna Malraj and Keith Berry.

Forum To Address Tenant Rights

Area renters are invited to a forum to learn their rights under the law.

The Oregon Housing Now Coalition is sponsoring the session on Tuesday, Oct. 10 at 7 p.m. at the Portland Temple Church, 2030 S.E. Hawthorne.

A panel of tenants, housing and legal experts will present information and answer questions about the Landlord/Tenant Law in Oregon. Resource materials will be available and there will be discussion on what renters in Oregon can do to strengthen their rights.

Oregon Housing Now receives

many calls each week from renters experiencing housing problems because they do not understand their rights under the law.

Renters, who make up 47 percent of Portland's housing units, are experiencing increasing difficulties as the housing market becomes more expensive and competitive.

The forum will address issues of concern for renters and let them know how to strengthen their rights as renters. The event is free and childcare will be available. For more information, or to register for childcare, call 288-0317.

Clackamas Women's Services

You can make a big difference in the lives of women and children fleeing domestic violence by becoming a volunteer for Clackamas Women's Services. We are currently looking for volunteers to work during the weekday to provide children's services and to mentor parents in our Transitional Program.

The next volunteer training begins October 10, 1995. To receive a packet of information about how to join the ranks of compassionate, caring CWS volunteers call Carol at 654-2807. If you have a few hours a week or more, you can help change the lives of battered women and children.



When I grow up...



All across Oregon, kids have dreams of what their futures may hold. Whatever they aspire to be -- doctors, musicians, astronauts -- public education helps make those dreams become a reality. Last spring, Oregonians voted to help fund Oregon's public schools with Oregon Lottery dollars. And just as it has for the past 10 years, Lottery dollars will continue to help build Oregon's economy and create jobs. That way our children's dreams of tomorrow can happen right here in Oregon. The Oregon Lottery is proud to help strengthen Oregon's most valuable resource -- our kids.



It does good things

The Oregon Lottery -- proud to be a part of Oregon's future.

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