

And Goin' Strong

ment and has valuable insight. "In each of those positions, I had very unique experiences and I want to talk about where my challenges were and where my support has been, and why I was able to be successful," Toran said.

Part of being successful is learning from the challenges, she said.

Toran was hired to the position in May of 1994. Seven months later, a major challenge came her way. In 1995, the state took six children from the home of Diana L. Whitehead of Beaverton. Whitehead went to the media and immediately people against the state agency used the case as an example of the state agency abusing parental rights.

Toran said the biggest mistake she made during that ordeal was to delegate communication duties to someone else. "I learned how important it is not to delegate to anyone when there is a crisis," she said. "You have to let the people hear directly from you."

She considered it a lesson. "Every disappointment is an opportunity to grow and to learn," she said.

After the Whitehead incident, Toran connected with her staff and helped them articulate the needs of children to the Legislature, which had criticized the agency and its leadership during the Whitehead scandal.

The result?

In 1997, Toran campaigned for more funding from the Legislature. Her effort, combined with the effort of her staff, resulted in the agency raising its budget to \$454.8 million and adding 160 new workers.

Toran also got legislative endorsement for what the agency calls "Best Interest of the Child." The approach requires the agency and the courts to make a permanent decision about where children will live within a year of the time they are taken into care.

To be able to change the image and innerworkings of the state agency with the help of "a magnificent staff" is Toran's biggest accomplishment, she said. "Even the experiences that have been painful, I would not change them," she said. "Those are reasons to self-reflect and to learn."

Jaki Walker

Never tell Jaki Walker it can't be done.

The word can't is a motivator for her.

Just ask Portland residents and powerbrokers who didn't believe a small minority-run community development agency could transform inner North and Northeast Portland neighborhoods from crime-plagued, abandoned, neglected places.

Under Walker's eight years of leadership, that's exactly what happened. Now, as Walker plans to resign her position as executive director of the Northeast Community Development Corp. to start her own company to help other cities nationwide make community development a success, all of her own successes point to four words: "It can be done."

Her work is about helping people, it is a trait Walker inherited from her mother.

"My mother embraced everything and everybody," Walker said. "People

could show up because of any issue... she took everybody in. She always cooked enough for anyone who stopped by."

Walker, the mother of one son, arrived in Portland in 1991, under a hail of criticism and speculation about whether the Northeast Community Development Foundation could implement the U.S. Department Housing and Urban Development's Nehemiah Housing Opportunity Program. The program provided a grant to build and renovate 250 homes for low- to moderate income home buyers.

Front-page articles in local newspapers and television broadcast said Walker and her agency could not do it, Walker said. "They went on and on and on, saying they can't do it, they shouldn't do it, don't do," she said.

But in May of 1993, a home that was part of the Nehemiah project was selected as one of the nation's best by Better Homes and Garden magazine. "That's it. That's us in Better Homes and Gardens," she said pointing to the framed cover from the magazine.

Since the Nehemiah project, the Northeast Community Development Corp. has created beautiful houses and apartments in North and Northeast Portland. The projects include McCoy Village, which is a complex built last year that

contains 55 apartments with commercial space. It is located along Northeast Martin Luther King Boulevard.

As Walker toured her corporation's creations throughout North and Northeast Portland recently, she easily remembered the history behind each one. She remembers choosing the paint for the outside of the home and making sure each home was well made. "I always say we won't create anything we wouldn't live in," she said.

In addition to choosing the paint, Walker remembers how building or renovating a home in a crime-ridden and neglected neighborhood prompted neighbors to repair their property or to host neighborhood cleanups and participate.

In addition to housing, the agency also

helps meet the needs of the community in other ways. For example, the organization has sponsored a tour of historically black colleges for six years. "Whenever there is a need in the community, we find a way to make it happen," Walker said. "That is our trademark."

That trademark has been recognized and applauded throughout the nation as Walker is called on to give workshops and seminars in cities whose leadership is interested in bringing home ownership to their inner-city neighborhoods. "My interest is taking a very complex, but successful strategy and starting it in other communities around the country," Walker said.

Helping other people. Her mother would be proud.

Mother to Son

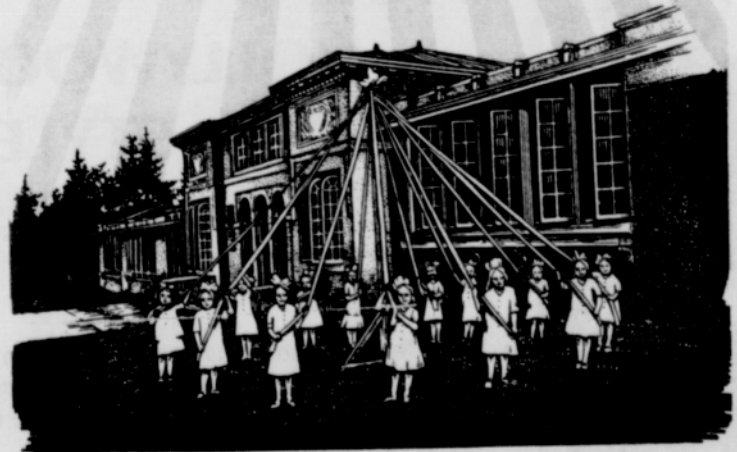
By Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no
crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on
the floor-
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the
dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you find it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now-
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no
crystal stair.

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