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Somebody's Got to Say Something

By L.K. Bass

On May 16th, two days prior to the official announcement of the superintendent's resignation from Portland Public Schools, I interviewed Ben Canada. As he began to repeatedly dispel some of the 'bad press' he's received and as he answered the unasked questions, there were three themes that came to mind that summed up that interview: "Putting The Public in Public Education", "What Have I Done for You Lately" and to borrow a youthful expression from kids today: "That Is So Not Who I Am". We begin with: "That Is So Not Who I Am"

Portland Observer: You've lived in Portland now for three years and much has been said about the fact that you still do not own a home here. What do you say to those who feel this demonstrates that you never took root here; That you never made Portland or the school district your home in the most fundamental way?

Ben Canada: Let me ask you this: what makes a person a member of the community? Is it that you go to church? Is it that you participate in the arts? You're out and about town or that you walk through the community? Is it that you give of your time and from your pocket when you see a need and can help? I don't think homeownership is a prerequisite to being part of your community. If I had not made a commitment to Portland public schools, I wouldn't be doing the things that I do. I would not be putting in the hours that I put in. I have made a total commitment here and the fact that I just happen not to own a home here is not something that I am happy or proud of. I don't like the idea of having to write two checks a month for a house note and rent. There's no tax write-off for rent. I want the house. I want a garden. I love to garden. I want to have my own space to do that and that's why every weekend that I'm not somewhere doing something, I'm out looking for a home.

Portland Observer: And what are you looking for in a neighborhood that you can't seem to find in Portland?

Ben Canada: I like Portland. I

like Oregon. I like the Pacific Northwest. I like water and there's water all-around. I like mountains and there are mountains all-around. I like this area. Now with regard to the specifics of the house itself, I found a house that I really wanted but somebody else beat me to it. Actually, that's happened to me twice. I like living in town. I like being close to everything. I like neighborhoods with sidewalks. I'm nostalgic for certain things, but I also like certain conveniences that



Lydia K. Bass

my wife also wants. So, when I find a house it'll be the house that she wants. With the house I bought in Atlanta, I signed the papers and I never even saw it. I bought it because my wife liked it, because my daughters liked it. They spend more time in the house than I ever do. I spend 16 to 18 hours basically away from home and there is only 24 hours in a day. So I have to have a place where they're comfortable as opposed to where I come in and occasionally visit.

Portland Observer: You mentioned your wife. Why does she still live in Atlanta?

Ben Canada: I married my first grade sweetheart, the best friend that I have. She's been with me when everyone else seemed to be trying to push away; she's always been there. Matter of fact my wife lives here now and she reads the paper with me every morning as we drink our coffee at the table together. I'm going to spend whatever time I can with my wife. Even though she's here, she would have every right to complain because she never sees me. Since I've been, well, almost married to Portland

Public Schools.

Portland Observer: I know that African Americans are not a monolithic people, but what would you like to say to the Black Community in North and Northeast Portland regarding their children, and their concerns in relation to the achievement gap?

Ben Canada: I came here as Superintendent of schools for all children. It bothered me when I looked at the data as a candidate, that North/Northeast Portland had some of the lowest performing schools and had for years. So I made it a top priority when I walked in the door. Go back and check the tapes; check the written documents. I said it was a number one issue with me. I have not deferred from that. The achievement gap has been the number one issue and we're addressing it.

Portland Observer: How do you connect to the black community?

Ben Canada: I eat in North/Northeast Portland, I shop in North/Northeast Portland, I get my hair cut in North/Northeast Portland, I looked for a home in North/Northeast Portland and I go to church in North/Northeast Portland. I am all over this city and I was like that before I even officially got here. I would dare to say that I have been to certain parts of our community more than the people who live there. I've been to Bishop Wells' COGIC (Church of God In Christ) church, Dr. T. Allen's Bethel church, Rev. Bailey's Vancouver Avenue Baptist church and Rev. Williams AME (African Methodist Episcopal) church. I'm A.M.E. from birth, okay. So I made that circuit but I also made the other circuit. I didn't come here, and I made that very clear, because I knew that was an issue with some people, as a black superintendent of schools. I came here as a superintendent of schools. Now I can't get away from the reality that I am black. I grew up in the segregated South. I know what it means to be discriminated against. I also know what it means to be denied access in terms of supplies, materials and equipment.

So what would I say to the African-American community, the Black community in North/Northeast Portland? I am what I am. I'm superintendent of schools for all children. I've focused on the real-

ity that the children in North/Northeast Portland have not been given the attention at the level they should. We've focused on it and if they

looked at it they would see that we have stayed true to our promise and commitment that, that was not acceptable.

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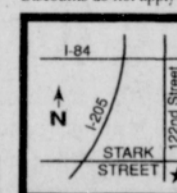
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