

OPINION

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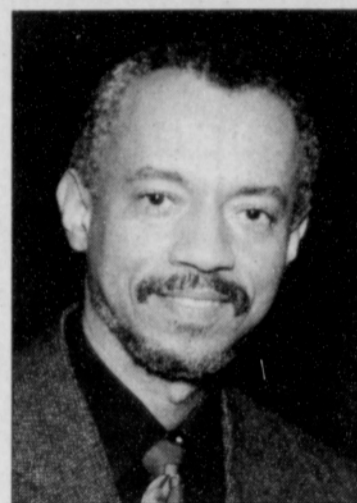
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RON HERNDON SPEAKS

We Must Do More in Fight for Social Justice



Ron Herndon

Ron Herndon Speaks is a Portland Observer series featuring community leader and activist Ron D. Herndon. Correspondent Yugen Fardan Rashad did the interviews and editing.

In previous installments, Mr. Herndon offered his perspective on effective leadership. Currently he's leading the fight to close the achievement gap among predominantly poor and minority students.

The following is a synopsis of Herndon's commitment to the issues of education and youth:

In 1999, Ron Herndon and a vanguard of community leaders formed the Education Crisis Team, targeting 14 schools in the Portland School District where a majority of the population is identified as below the benchmark established by state education standards.

In 1971, Herndon and Dr. Joyce Harris, co-founded the Black Educational Center, an independent primary school. He championed education-related issues such as desegregation, school busing and quality education in Portland.

From 1970 to 1973, Herndon taught a Black History class at Oregon State Correctional Institution.

Herndon serves as Executive Director of the National Association of Schools of Excellence, a national organization of public school principals from urban and rural areas with a record of success in the education of low-income children.

March 17, 2000: Herndon was among neighborhood and community activists that marched from King Elementary School to Alberta Park to dramatize the urgency to address the problem.

Herndon was part of a mock funeral held at the headquarters

of the Portland school board, complete with a casket, to make the point regarding the plight of inner city students below reading and math benchmarks.

Oct. 10, 2000: Herndon and the Crisis Team led a group of parents and community members into a Portland school board meeting to demand a solution, and a turn around of the low-achieving schools.

Yugen: Ron, what are the challenges one faces to address education reform in Portland Public Schools, and talk about community involvement?

Herndon: Community involvement in many cases is looked upon by a lot of people as taking clothes to the goodwill outlet. Folks today must make a more direct connection with history and the struggle. That might mean passing out fliers or donating time or money.

A connection needs to be made between one's life, and the life enjoyed today in this country as a black person and those that aggressively and publicly confronted injustices, and made sacrifices for 'me'. Because of those who came before, I can enjoy the privileges I do today. In many cases, that connection isn't being made.

The situation is completely different than 20 years ago. Take Dr. King, for example. His work has been sanitized so much it's sickening. It's a King that just wants to hold hands. What is not talked about was his involvement in protests. They exclude a King that disrupted the status quo; a person vilified by the press: The New York Times talked about him like a dog. King used kids, grade school kids, in demonstrations, but this is not the Dr. King we hear about today. When the status quo said

'No' to Dr. King, he confronted it. There was an immediate confrontation with injustice, and that lesson has almost been lost on us.

Yugen: Would you say the Black United Front, a collective that dealt with social injustice issues beginning in the 70s, was the forerunner to the Education Crisis Team, in execution and strategy?

Herndon: Back in 1978 a group of us met for almost a year, quietly, privately, organizing the Front. We talked about what we were going to do, did the study and research. Our mission was to form a group of individuals already actively working on a number of social issues that impacted the black community. Individually we didn't have the kind of impact we did once we came together. Whether it was housing, economic development, education, or police misconduct, whatever battle we chose, we decided we would fight until we won.

Yugen: You've replicated the Front's approaches with the Education Crisis Team.

Herndon: Yes. And we've made some mistakes, too.

Yugen: How?

Herndon: One thing we could have done better is to explain, at the most basic level of organizing in the community, to get the message out to the people what it is we're trying to accomplish.

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