

Portland **OPINION** Observer

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Battle for Educational Equality Persists: Pioneering teacher shares views on education crisis

The Portland Observer is proud to publish the following interview with retired educator Ellen Law, a pioneer in Portland's black community. Her parents moved the family to Oregon from Stephens, Ark. in 1924.



Ellen Law

Law worked in the capacity of principal and vice principal of Portland public schools throughout her career. She retired in 1980 and still lives in northeast Portland. She graduated from the University of Oregon in 1941. She is also a survivor of the Vanport Flood.

Our correspondent, Yugen Fardan Rashad, sat down with Law to share her opinions about education and the challenges of work and college:

Yugen: Please share the challenges of your college years.
Law: At that time (1936), tuition was \$32 a quarter! The college would award \$54 per year for schol-

arships or \$18 per quarter. Today that wouldn't even pay for one course!

Yugen: My goodness!

Law: I had to pay room and board, transportation, and attend school. There was very little money to start school with. While on campus, I had a job un-

der the government-sponsored program National Youth Authority where I made 35 cents an hour! And... there was a limited amount of hours you could work.

Yugen: That is hard to imagine by today's standards. In addition to the scholarships and earned wages, were your parents able to assist you financially?

Law: My parents lived in La Grande, Ore. My father couldn't help out much because he was a section laborer for the railroad and my mother was a homemaker. She did take in a little money washing and ironing clothes for one or two

customers. During my third year of college, I stayed on campus and worked for a white couple. I lived with them in their home and took care of their child. I took time out from college to care of my ill mother. I also did domestic work, because during those years it was hard for blacks to get a job as a clerk in an office, or secure an elevator (operator) job. I took maid jobs in the West Hills (Portland) during the summer.

Yugen: Talk about your first teaching job.

Law: I decided to go to the library to find out where the black colleges and high schools were. I wrote letters to various schools, applying for a job. I spent a lot of money applying, partly because my father always told me he wanted me to go. Then I heard from Venice College in Greensboro, N.C. They took me solely on my record and the reputation of the U of O. The school was an all women college, supported by the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Yugen: Are there any parallels

you'd like to draw regarding the state of education then and now?

Law: There are a lot of subtleties; a lot of these things have gone underground. When I was going to school it was very obvious, and now you run into roadblocks but you still have to work around them.

Yugen: Talk about your dad's influence on you.

Law: One thing I see lacking in today's climate is there isn't enough parental support for the child, and the school. My father didn't go any further than the sixth or seventh grade. It was my dad's theory that if you don't do well "I'm first going to blame you, and then I'll blame the teacher if I find out it's not you". He stressed behaving in school. He would say, "I know if you're acting up, you can't get it". When he looked at the report card he would scold me, then go talk to with the teacher.

Yugen: I know you're familiar with the Crisis Education Team and their roll with the school district over the achievement gap of black and poor students.

Law: There's always been agitation, and I mean that in a kind way, about the progress of us blacks. Way back in the 70s, they had the Race and Education Study. It was brought about as a result of dissension in the black community regarding the school board. The result was the same as today - changes need to occur within the education system. Back then, I don't think there were as many demonstrations as today, but there were a lot of questions and agitation about the progress of the black children.

We didn't have as many blacks in the teaching profession as we do today. There was also a differential in the pay between black and white principals. They were paid on merit

and for some reason the black principal was never up to merit compared to the white principal. We had to fight to get up there, now we're fighting to stay because many blacks have been moved out of those positions. At one time, every high school had either a black principle or vice principal. I bet there are only two black principals or vice principals working in the high schools today.

In elementary schools we had a lot of black principals, male and female. I'm told that today, the number has dwindled. Now you can't tell me that every black principal is inferior to a white principal. The law of averages says there has to be more equal than unequal. They've attended the same colleges and been exposed to the same education, and most are graduates of colleges here. So what happened? These things bother me.



WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

I first became aware of the high costs of drugs in the U.S. about 10 years ago when I went with a friend who lives in San Diego to fill a penicillin prescription across the border. She came out of the pharmacy with a whole bottle of medicine for \$11, when just a few miles away she would have received only a few pills for the same amount. Today, my community in Ohio, like many others near either the Mexican or Canadian borders, sponsors bus trips for seniors and the disabled to go and buy their medicine for a fraction of the cost they would pay here. When our elders can't afford the medicine

they need in the wealthiest nation in the world, we must recognize that something is deeply wrong and then do something about it.

The debate is going on right now in Congress, with both Democrats and Republicans unable to come to agreement on the best way to deal with this tsunami wave which threatens to engulf many families in our nation. Under Medicare legislation passed in 1965, senior citizens receive doctor's services and hospital care. But prescription drugs, the fastest growing health care expenditure, are not covered and 38 percent of seniors have no drug coverage at all and must bear the entire cost of their own prescriptions. Many of those without coverage are the

poorest and the oldest, clearly the most vulnerable. The Bush administration has put in place a program to provide some of these seniors the opportunity to join drug-purchasing plans, but most seniors have not found that they saved much actual money under these plans. A band-aid approach just won't work.

Only if we let our senators, congresspersons and president know our outrage will anything change. As the late civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer once said, our elders are sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Bernice Powell Jackson is executive minister of the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries.

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