

OPINION

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JO ANN BOWMAN SPEAKS: Seat African Americans at the Table

The Portland Observer is proud to publish the first part of an interview with former state Rep. Jo Ann Bowman. Our correspondent, Yugen Fardan Rashad, recently sat down with Bowman to discuss her leadership in the issues of criminal justice and other topics.



Jo Ann Bowman

Yugen: Would you agree with the statement that many young people today snub the efforts of previous generations who fought to ensure equal access and opportunities in society?

Bowman: I put that responsibility solely on my generation because we were raised under a false illusion that somehow everything was equal. Our parents fought the civil rights struggle, did the sit-ins, and opened doors that created opportunities. What they did not tell us how bad it really was.

Yugen: Okay, so our generation is closer to those folks who stoked the flames of the civil rights struggles.

Bowman: I grew up during the time when every evening, conversation was about civil rights, black empowerment and how do we get educated so that we can be qualified for the jobs and opportunities to develop our own businesses in our community, and becoming self sufficient.

Yugen: And there are a number of youth that do complete school and move on to careers.

Bowman: I notice a massive education gap between young people today just finishing education and starting a career.

Yugen: Really! Pray tell.

Bowman: Public education doesn't tell us our whole history. After we've finished school, there is another education component that talks about our history, of who we are, where we came from, and where we're headed.

Yugen: Well, if local political and voter turnout in the black community is an indicator of where we're headed...

Bowman: Today we have voter turnout of 17 to 22 percent of the people who actually bother to participate in an election season. What that says is that people don't see themselves in the system. And for an African American not to utilize that right is criminal.

Yugen: What would you cite as reasons for this dilemma?

Bowman: Black people operate under radar so they don't have to react to the racism and sexism, and all the other issues people are impacted by on a day-to-day basis. I think, for the most part, black people are focused on raising families and paying bills. And so the variety of issues black people have to address... they feel they're in a state of paralysis.

Yugen: Yeah. Issues like education, affordable

pressures when you're an African American elected official?

Bowman: I think there is a lot of pressure on those folks to address everything. With this, I think the average person says, "There is nothing I can do personally to have an impact".

Yugen: And now we're about to seat a new governor.

Bowman: In terms of the race for governor, I met with Gail Shibley (campaign worker) and said to her, "How many blacks are on Ted Kulongowski's campaign staff." I told her, "You want to come to me and ask how to get blacks to volunteer for his campaign. Well first, we want to see whom you hire (paid campaign staffers) and if they all look like you and not like the community, he says he'll represent. That sends a message right away."

Yugen: Has it ever been any different in local politics?

Bowman: When I worked for Bev Stein, (past county chair) she was one of the few public officials

official's office and everyone is European American, I have to ask the question, how committed are they to the issues I care about, or do they know the issues I care about?

Yugen: Are we that far apart?

Bowman: The breach is that wide because there's such a small community of color here.

Yugen: Please share your involvement on an issue in the legislature that impacted the political process and resulted in an outcome you're proud of.

Bowman: There was a law introduced that would make it a crime to give a false name to a police officer. And the reason was because when they (police) bust up keg parties where kids are underage and drinking (beer), chances are the kids will give a false name. So if they had this law on the books, they could hold the kid accountable for giving the wrong name. So I asked 'Okay, it's already against the law to drink if you're underage, and if you bust up a keg party, do you not take those kids home and release them to an adult guardian if you catch them drinking? If that's the case, then why do we need this law?'

Yugen: Okay.

Bowman: Then I said that the neighborhood I live in, police stop kids all the time and do what they call a "walk and talk". "Hey, how you doing, where you going, who you hangin' with, can I look in your bag, is it okay if I check your pockets?" So, in that situation the kid is not under arrest or suspected of doing anything wrong, its just a "walk and talk," for information for the officer. So would that kid now have a criminal record if he said my name is Joe Blow? I see how law enforcement interacts with young people in our community, and even the other committee members (legislature) who were not African American, started saying "Oh, well you're right... And, why do you (police) need that law again?" And so they withdrew the law, and there are many situations where I could say well, in my community this is how it plays out. If I had not been in that room asking those questions...

Yugen: Great point. I see the importance of having diversity at the decision table.

Bowman: So when new laws are passed to prevent criminal behavior, I believe that's a code word for "we will be able to arrest more African Americans, Latinos and more people of color". If I was in the audience, I would never have been able to impact whether that kind of legislation moved forward. The fact that I was a committee member, they were forced to answer my questions and even educated the other people at that table and they started saying "well, you're right", and so the police had to back off and finally decided that's not a good law.

When I moved to Portland in 1991, we had an African American police chief, county chair, a couple of legislators, and a city council member. And just in 12 years, African American leadership has almost disappeared.

—Jo Ann Bowman, former state representative

housing.

Bowman: The education crisis, and making sure your kids get a quality education, can overwhelm the average person. Unless you have a lot of time to watch what happens in public schools, you really don't have a clue in terms of what your child is facing day to day. Then, you look at the issue of affordable housing: Fewer families trying to get a starter home, when they can't afford one. And so you have the added pressure of not being able to provide for your family, struggling with the day-to-day life, even before you begin to look at the political arena.

Yugen: What about black people taking more ownership in the political process?

Bowman: Most blacks believe the political arena doesn't reflect them. And look at who serves on the city council. And the county commission, with two Latinos, but no African Americans. When I moved to Portland in 1991, we had an African American police chief, county chair, a couple of legislators, and a city council member. And just in 12 years, African American leadership has almost disappeared.

Yugen: That was quick. Are there any added

who selected committee and staff members who were representative of the community. She didn't sit and scratch her head "Oh, I need ex number of blacks or Latinos. Instead, she said who are the best people to help me address this issue. You look at other types of organizations who are supposed to be representative of the broader community and what you hear is "I couldn't find any blacks to serve". Well, where did you look? If you only look at the people around the table I guess NO.

The flip side is people will talk to one in five blacks and think they've got the view of that community. It doesn't, nor should that person be the only one that interacts with that community. An elected official has a responsibility to show up and be there and not just at election time. That means to be there, working on those tough issues that impact the communities. And by having an Asian, Latino or African American on your staff, says you acknowledge that the world is bigger than just the white people surrounding you, and that you have made an effort to make sure your staff is diversified. Now it may not be as diversified as I would like it to be, but when I walk into an elected

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