

continued **▲** from Front

just another stiff or like I was just one more family member of a dead person," she said. "When I told her what the man at the other home had said, she was very gracious and apologized to me on behalf of all other funeral directors for his behavior."

It is this kind of sensitivity that Cleodis D. Vann said sets African American funeral homes apart from the rest.

"You really have to be apart of our culture to know what to expect," Vann, who's family operated the first African American owned funeral home in Oregon, Vann and Vann, until it closed in October 2001. "Some funeral home directors may seem callous and insensitive towards the grieving process of African Americans because it is so totally different."

Vann said he has been at funerals where people have tried to wreck cars in the procession as an expression of emotion. During funeral programs, friends and relatives often break out in fits of tears and wailing. Touch-



ing and grabbing the body is not uncommon.

"I've have a lot of people jumping into the casket with the body," Vann said. "Chances are, you won't see that at a Caucasian funeral. Other funeral directors might not be ready for that."

The differences don't end there — a history of the funeral business in Portland shows a startling division between black and white dating back to the 1940s when many African American families couldn't find funeral homes to bury their relatives.

Vann said when his parents, Roberta and C. Don Vann, opened Vann and Vann in 1954 only three funeral homes in Portland would provide services for African Americans. In fact, his

father, who was already licensed in Michigan, was only able to get licensed in Oregon because of the help of Ellsworth Purdy Sr. at Killingsworth Little Chapel of

History Project, Arthur was turned down by several funeral homes before he was accepted for an apprenticeship at Zeller's Funeral Chapel.

Portland was just terrible as far as racial situations went.

—Cleodis D. Vann, retired funeral home director on the discrimination against African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s

the Chimes.

The north Portland chapel served African Americans at the time. But Vann said Purdy had complaints from white customers who were opposed to this practice

He said Purdy helped Vann and Vann get off its feet out of fear of loosing clientele.

When Etoile and Arthur Cox tried to open Cox and Cox in the early 50s, they also ran into problems with discrimination. Although Arthur had graduated with flying colors from mortuary school at Washington College in Chicago, Oregon law required him to apprentice with a licensed director and embalmer for two years.

According to a 1976 oral interview from the Oregon Black

"They would accept him by letter and by telephone," Etoile said. "But when he'd show his little black face down there they'd say, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I would like to, but I can't.'"

At the time the city also had a discriminatory indigent persons plan that took care of distributing to funeral homes the bodies of those people who could not afford to pay for their burial. Vann said African-American bodies always came to African-American owned funeral homes and Caucasian bodies always went to his white competitors. It wasn't until the city arranged a turn list to make sure each home received an equal workload that Vann and Vann began receiving deceased Caucasians.

"Portland was just terrible as

far as racial situations went," Vann said.

Vann added that white owned funeral chapels only began promoting their services to African Americans when cremation gained popularity. Because cremation was less expensive than formal burials, funeral homes were loosing money. African Americans traditionally preferred burial to incineration and funeral directors found that in order to regain lost profits, they would have to actively target black families.

He remembers a teacher of mortuary science at Mount Hood Community College in the 70s once told the class that because black people had darker skin, their body tissue was stronger and there for it was necessary to use a stronger embalming fluid.

Vann said African Americans have the same arterial structure and blood types, and like white people, their bodies come in all shapes, sizes and densities regardless of race. He said when embalming bodies, all those characteristics must be taken into consideration — skin color, however, is not a part of the equation.

"I had to dispel that myth to my professor," he said.

Charlene Cox, Jerome Cox-Tanner's mother, said other

myths still prevail in the funeral industry to this day.

"For example, there are black people with pale skin and thin lips," she said. "I've seen some people like this go to other funeral homes and the people doing the preparation assume because they are African-American, they should be dark with lips that are thick and big."

Charlene said at Cox and Cox they look at all parts of the person's characteristics. Regardless of skin tone, she said they have the skills to make anyone look their best. Tanner had a background in cosmetology before she went into the funeral business. When she sets about to prepare a body, she said the process is very much like going to a beauty salon.

"We've been told they look better when they leave this establishment than when they were out there living life on life's terms," Tanner said.

As the population of north and northeast Portland diversifies, Cox and Cox hopes to continue to serve all parts of the community, not only African-Americans.

"Black, white or green, we are going to be aware of the needs of our community," Cox said.

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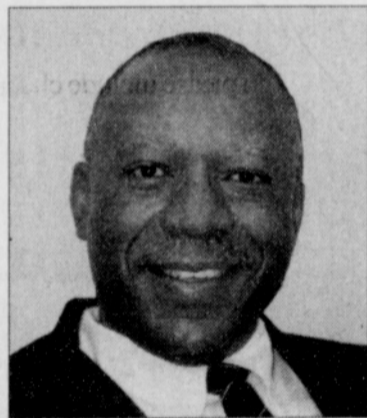
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Jordan to Retire From Portland Parks

Announcement comes one month after city voters approved a \$49 million levy for park



Charles Jordan

Charles Jordan, community leader and director of Portland's Bureau of Parks and Recreation since 1989, will retire as of April 1.

He made the surprise announcement last Thursday at a holiday luncheon.

Spokeswoman Karen Loper

said Jordan plans to spend more time with his family.

The announcement comes one month after city voters approved a \$49 million levy for parks.

The five-year property tax measure will pay for building projects, repairs, service im-

provements, maintenance and the addition of after-school programs.

Loper said Jordan wanted to leave on a high note and hadn't made up his mind to leave until after the levy passed.

Jordan is also a former Portland City Councilman.

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Alcohol Safety Urged for Holidays

People urged to keep off roads after drinking

The Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon State Police are reminding people to keep this holiday season happy by following one simple rule—don't drink and drive.

"Every alcohol-related crash is a tragedy for the people involved, but such tragedies are preventable," said Gretchen McKenzie, ODOT impaired driver program coordinator. "The combination of alcohol and driving results in the death or injury of far too many Oregonians each year."

During the first half of 2002, alcohol accounted for 80 fatalities on Oregon's roadways. More than 36 percent of all highway deaths during January through June were alcohol related.

"Our number one goal is that motorists reach their destination safely and without incident," said Lt. Gary Miller of the Patrol Services Division for the Oregon State Police. "We would much rather drivers make the right choice ahead of time than the wrong choice afterwards that may result in a crash or an arrest."

McKenzie said planning is the key to avoiding tragedy during the holiday party season.

If hosting a holiday party: Provide plenty of non-alcoholic beverages; Limit amount of alcohol available.

If a guest has too much to drink: Take their keys; offer them a ride home; call them a cab; offer to let them stay overnight.

If attending a celebration: Plan ahead; decide, in advance, who will be the designated driver, or take a cab or mass transit if it's available; remember each person has different limits or tolerance for the amount of alcohol they can consume and not become impaired

Never, ever, transport a child after drinking or allow any one else to either.

In 2001 a total of 173 people were killed in alcohol-related crashes, accounting for 35.5 percent of all traffic fatalities that year. That was the lowest ever percentage since reporting began in 1977, but ODOT and its partners in law enforcement and community education are working to bring that tally even lower.

Kwanzaa is the time to reflect on what is important to you.
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