

A Decade of Change on Alberta

continued ▲ from Front

less, many of these hearty black pioneers were forced into segregated neighborhoods that were less expensive.

Political power to mostly black communities rose with Dr. Martin Luther King and the modern Civil Rights movement. But the task went far beyond simply telling the white world that black people were equal, King had to convince his own people that they were equal. In areas of the country that had been embroiled in centuries of racism, it was a difficult message.

Cal Henry is president of the Oregon Assembly of Black Affairs, a group committed to improving the status of African Americans in Oregon.

"Blacks have to recognize they are citizens and demand that their citizens rights are recognized," said Henry. "When black people don't see other black people get up and address these issues (lack of education, racism and poverty), they are reluctant to step up and address these concerns themselves."

The dawn of the 1990s added another factor to the mix as a generation of bold, suburbanite Americans began to infiltrate areas of north and northeast Portland despite the violence and gangs. As one of few places close to the city that remained affordable, the influx of people included many former California residents.

Although racism contributed to and still clouds issues of economic justice, the attitude of most non-black people buying homes in the northeast seemed to be simply about money and affordability. Few said they wanted to live in multicultural neighborhoods.

Once outsiders decided Alberta was a hip place to live, property values began to climb and the crime rate went down. At the same time, a black population that had accumulated little or no generational wealth saw the rising property values and decided to sell out for what they believed was a substantial amount of money. Others were forced out when landlords sold properties or rents exploded.

Reggie Brown, 40, was born and raised in northeast Portland. He owns property and a small business, and while the area has definitely improved while he's been here, he's sorry it's coming at the expense of his brothers and sisters who have not achieved prosperity in the ways of the financial world.

"The community is definitely getting better, rebuilding, new lights and roads and bicycle paths all through here," said Brown. "But the only reason that is, is because property values dropped down so far that many of the blacks sold out for a chunk of change, only to realize later they were sitting on a gold mine."

It seems that many people in the black community, in the 90's as well as today, are being left behind, unable to keep up in a changing economic climate and unable to make the changes that would allow the community as a whole to thrive.

Robert Williams, 60, moved from Beaverton to the northeast in 1973; he is a last man standing of sorts. He guessed that when he moved here the area was 95 percent black and that now there are only five black people left within two city blocks of where he lives, which he doesn't mind at all.

The neighborhood kids call him Uncle Ed, he and his neighbors take care of each other when need be, sharing meaningful things like eggs, milk, sugar and gardening tips. As a lone black man surrounded by a largely white community, he has found his home amidst friendship and caring, something that has not always been there for him.

"Please understand what I'm saying," said Williams. "I feel safer with a bunch of white people living around me than a bunch of black people living around me for

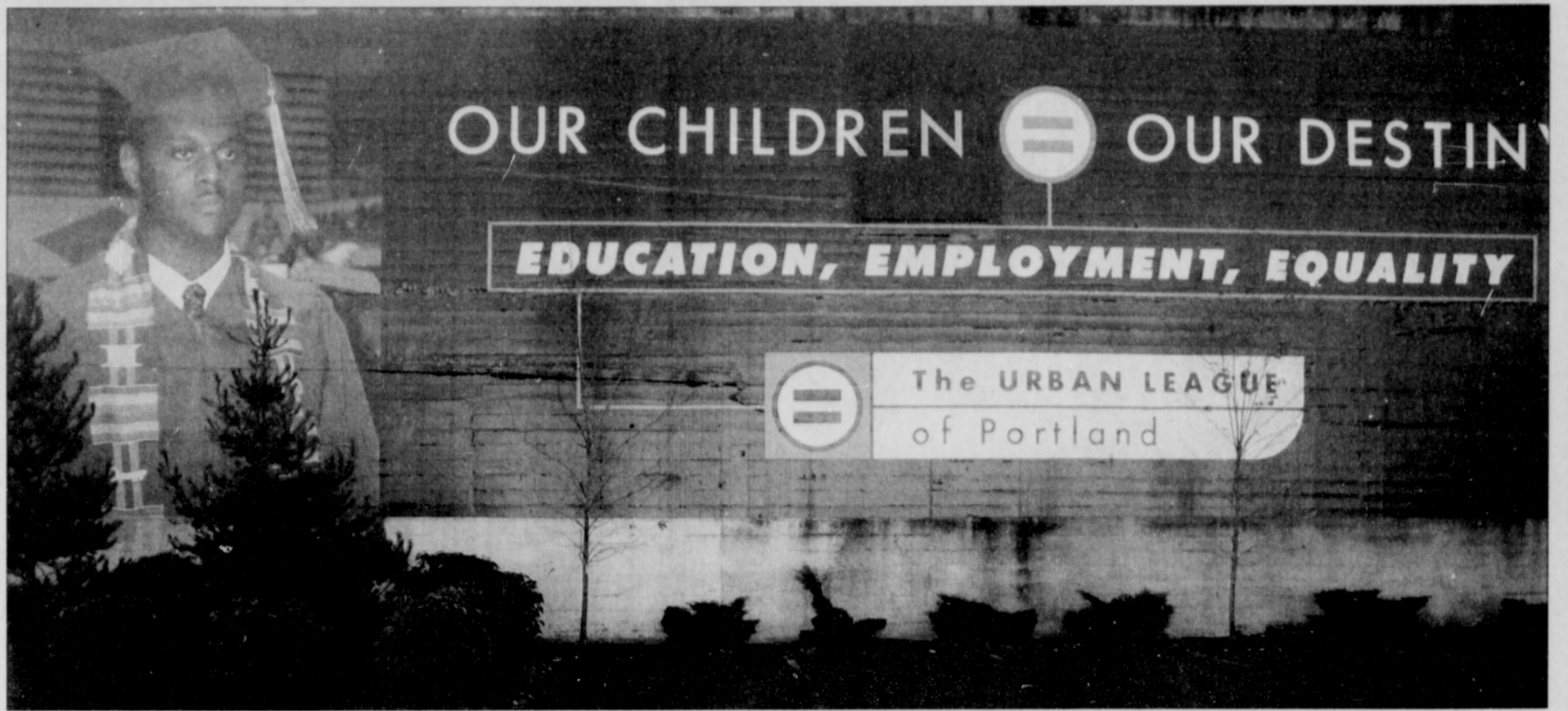


PHOTO BY BOBBY BURK/FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Is there a future for the black community in Portland? A billboard by the Urban League of Portland promotes progress with education, employment and equality.



PHOTO BY BOBBY BURK/FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Alberta Street venues like the Pub Commons promote the neighborhood's urban flavor.



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Joe's Place, an African American hangout for 34 years on Northeast Alberta Street, closed with the New Year. It was the last African American owned bar in the neighborhood.

and provides kids with options for the future. 95 percent of kids in the program graduate from high school and 83 percent go on to college.

When Beka Amblin bought her house in the early 90s, she did it as a poor person and believes that despite race, anyone who had the vision could have done the same at that time.

Rosalyn Hill, who could not be contacted for this article, is a black woman and a fixture in the Alberta and northeast community who owns several properties, a successful woman by any means who began with a coffee shop and a vision of what the "bullet zone" would one day become.

Today, nobody denies that changes in the northeast community have brought an exodus of black residents. Future economic prosperity and economic justice issues will determine if that trend continues and if the northeast can go on calling itself the "Soul of the City."

the simple fact that black people would say "it's none of my damn business." So if someone's kicking in my front door, and they can see it happening, they're saying "well I don't give a damn. Hell, it ain't me. It ain't mine."

It's a mindset produced of the roots of racism and isolation from community.

Brown, 40, born and raised in the northeast, echoes Williams in what he sees is a failure, from one generation of black Americans to the next, to take an interest in the lives of the people around them.

He said the youth in the community today are struggling and looking for guidance, for someone to take notice.

"We need some of the older folks to reach down and help some of these young black folks to come up," said Brown. "Folks who know how to buy their homes need to show kids how to get started. Kids that are having children at an early age need to get together with a grandparent to figure out how to raise their kid. It used to be yes ma'm, no ma'm, you know? But that was the old days. The respect just isn't there like it used to be and we're cut-throating our own, like crabs in bucket."

Cal Henry and the OABA see a serious falling short of education standards at schools with heavy minority concentrations in the northeast compared to schools that are less diversified. Poor education in turn leads to not having jobs, which results in lack of money and a need to survive instead of thrive.

Fortunately, there are groups stepping in to make a difference. Self Enhancement, Inc. is a bright light in the northeast. SEI is dedicated to changing the future of the youth of north and northeast Portland by providing educational mentoring for ages 8-25, a charter school, after school activities and tutoring.

SEI targets schools and neighborhoods that are underserved

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