

Suddenly Black in America



PHOTO BY SEAN O'CONNOR/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Charlene McGee is a young African woman living in America. Experiencing a clash of cultures led her and her brother Charles to become community activists.

Siblings from Liberia follow in King's footsteps

Charlene McGee wants you to know she is an African — not an Oregonian or an African American. But having spent the past 14 years living with her family in Portland, she understands what it is like to be black in America.

As a native Liberian, McGee experienced an ideal childhood turned nightmare when civil war broke out in her country in 1989. Family reunions were traded for dodging bullets and a life in hiding.

"You know the images in 'Hotel Rwanda'?" she asks. "That's what my family went through."

As a child in Liberia, her grandmother returned from the United States with a stack of books about Martin Luther King Jr. "This was my first introduction of his philosophy," she said. "During the war I saw the bad, but King taught us to see peace."

More than a decade has passed since McGee, now 25, was brought safely to the United States, but the trauma of being black in America can still shock her.

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— Charlene McGee

America," she said.

On the day she shares this story, U.S. Marshals rove about her café table. Minutes earlier they had questioned McGee, probing her for an affiliation with a person of color they were searching for.

Her interaction with the heavily armed men left her visibly shaken.

"What I saw this morning left me feeling so exposed," she said. "I grew up believing the police were good people," she said. "I came here and it has changed, but I've realized I have

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PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Charles McGee outside his northeast Portland campaign headquarters in 2005 during a race for school board. He said the campaign was the best learning experience he ever had.

Emerging young leader draws on his past

BY CHARITY PRATER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

For Charles McGee, finding unity among races, genders and cultures means building bridges, creating relationships and educating people about diversity.

McGee, 21, is one of Portland's emerging young leaders. He looks to build his career with elements of leadership, community and education just as the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did.

"Some people forget that Martin Luther King Jr. sweat, cried and put his life at risk so that I could have the freedom that I do today," he says.

Born in war-torn Liberia, McGee and his family, including his three sisters and one brother came to America in search of a better life. His father became his ideal role model as a prominent member of American society and successful school teacher.

McGee looks back to his childhood in Liberia and vividly remembers seeing the tragedy of

"I see joy in everything that happens. I believe that everything happens for a reason."

— Charles McGee

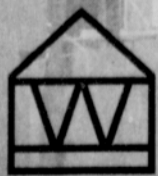
war. He remembers being a majority in a country full of dark skinned people with prominent black doctors and lawyers that looked like him.

After coming to America he saw a country torn by racism. The discrimination of people based on color gave him a better understanding of the significance of being black in America.

After going through the Portland Public School System, graduating from Franklin High School, McGee saw the obvious need to change the

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