

## Following in King's footsteps

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to deal with this, being black in America."

You may not know McGee is a native of Africa by site or speech alone. She came to the United States in 1992 with her mother, two brothers and two sisters to join her father who had been granted political asylum.

The West African country of Liberia was founded by freed American slaves. McGee is eager to share stories about her native culture, where she was raised with humility to understand the importance of community and family. But she says she will never let go of her ethnic identity, despite the pressure by some to identify as an Oregonian.

"I'm not," she said. "I believe knowing who you are empowers you."

This belief has shaped her role as an activist in America.

Her experience among a clash of cultures led her to become an advocate for fellow African and African American students at Oregon State University, where just a couple hundred black students join nearly 20,000 white students.

"In Liberia, the Lebanese were considered 'white'. We knew we were black and we saw racism, but here it is different. People are profiled and pulled over for the heck of it."

So McGee organized outreach for ethnic and cultural minorities at OSU and continued her advocacy as an admissions counselor after graduation in 2004, until June 2006.



PHOTO BY SEAN O'CONNOR/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER  
Charlene McGee adjusts to being black in America.

McGee now works for Multnomah County, organizing the African American HIV/STD Elimination Project.

My work is in sexual health disparities, but today I believe it's addressing all disparities," she said. "My life is about being a social activist, taking what I know to empower the black community."

Even as she strongly identifies with her African heritage, she recognizes that Africans and African Americans have the potential to move beyond what she calls the "us versus them" syndrome.

"As a young African woman in America my heart aches. As black people we have to address issues in the black community in order to move forward. This means I have to put fires out in my house and then help my neighbor."

McGee's parents, brothers and sisters live in Portland, and she has extended family around the United States. She tries to return to Liberia once a year for a family reunion, and hopes to travel home again this summer.

## Emerging young leader draws on past

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system to close the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students. He was just 19 at the time.

He lost the 2005 election, but felt the campaign for public office was the best learning experience he ever had.

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

McGee continues his dedication to community activism by addressing education, racial profiling and gender inequality issues.

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## The journey toward freedom began with a bus ride.



More than 50 years ago, Rosa Parks went to jail when she refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. organized a boycott and went on to spread word throughout the nation about what freedom really means.

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

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