

CAREER & Education

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SECTION B

Keeping the Faith *Opera student dreams of singing professionally*

BY GAIL I. DANA
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Chandra Curtis radiates energy. Small and compact with golden brown eyes and a wreath of curly black hair, she sits in a coffee shop near Portland State University, sipping tea and reflecting on her life.

"It starts," she says, "with my dad." Curtis' father loved classical music.

"I remember when I was very young," she says, "hearing a woman sing opera. My dad had switched radio stations and I heard this voice and I thought ohmigod that must be what angels sound like."

Curtis was a natural who sang rock, pop, the blues, anything but opera.

"It wasn't our music," she says.

But in college, Curtis appeared in a musical.

"I was part of the chorus." Her voice rang clear. "A lady from the audience came up and offered me voice lessons." She meant opera.

At the time Curtis was working her undergraduate degree in acting at Ithaca College in New York. She was waiting tables and acting in small plays to pay her way through school.

"I was told by theater people," she says "you have to do only theater. You can't do anything else with your life." But Curtis was also passionately interested in science. And, she loved to sing the operatic notes she'd learned



PHOTO BY JERRY HART/COURTESY PORTLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Portland Community College student Chandra Curtis pursues a career in Opera.

from her new teacher.

She took her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theater Arts from Ithaca, and then moved to Portland, hoping to diversify her life. Curtis registered immediately at Portland Community College.

PCC was inexpensive and she understood the quality of classes was comparable to other universities. Some of the same teachers teaching at PCC taught the same subject at the more expensive PSU.

She began studying to secure essential prerequisites for a Master's Degree. She studied science. "It's all about combustion," she says. "Different elements coming together to create something new." She studied acting. "It's about combustion, too. Two characters coming together and creating conflict that changes their lives." And, she studied voice.

That's when opportunity met preparation: While attending a local play a director spotted Curtis, introduced himself and cast her as the daughter of Hecuba in a then upcoming play. "It was thrilling," she says. Reviewers praised her performance.

She performed in other small plays as time allowed. But with studying and working she had little spare time.

Meanwhile Curtis connected with Wendy Parker, a voice instructor at the University of Portland, for intense

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A Gateway to Career Opportunities, Resources



PHOTO BY SARAH BLOUNT/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Jefferson students Celeste Jackson, Karim Brown, Nyesha Sims, Leily Villea, Sydney Melson and Abby Ilias show they're ready to advance their education and future careers at a student conference by REAP, Inc. (Reaching and Empowering all People), a Portland-based mentoring group.

Mentors reach and empower students

BY SARAH BLOUNT
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Amid the constant staff turnover and myriad news reports of school scandals, Jefferson High School students walk the halls of the large north Portland school each week, pursuing graduation and quietly becoming success stories.

But sometimes they are given an outlet to speak their minds, and such is the case with the student conference they participated in on May 18. Sponsored by REAP, Inc. (Reaching and Empowering all People), the day-long activity included workshops and panel discussion designed for Jefferson students and staff to find better ways of supporting their campus.

Mark Jackson, a coordinator with the Portland-based mentoring group, made sure the conference was tailored to the Jefferson campus by advance meetings with the school's students and faculty. REAP gets its support from local corporations, local school districts and community leaders.

For sophomore Sydney Melson, the conference was a chance to put many suggestions for positive change to

work.

"This was a chance to come together and be united as a school," she said.

Karim Brown, a junior and aspiring civil engineer, said he wanted to make Jefferson's voice stronger so people could see more than what's on the news.

Fellow junior Nyesha Sims, an aspiring 2008 class valedictorian, said she wants people to see how Jefferson is changing and how the students are the solution.

Sims' words were inspired by the theme of the Jefferson conference: "We are not the problem, we are the solution."

Jackson said he chose that phrase because he wants the faculty, district and community leaders to hear directly from the students.

"Who better to engage than the students?" he asked.

For junior Celeste Jackson, joining the conference was a way to show others the true side of Jefferson, but it was also a way to build her leadership skills. She said opportunities like the REAP conference have helped her "get out there and get going," a skill she knows she'll need to open her own massage therapy business someday.

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Mother, Daughter Earn Degrees



A mother and daughter from Portland are both members of the Class of 2007

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Advocate Creates an After School Program

Follows passion to help kids

See page B7



Get Ready for the Real World

Career guide has tips for women of color

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