



New Turf for Clinics
Health care for the needy moves to food pantries, other gathering spots
See story, page A6

Black Skin, White Mask
Multicultural film festival puts anti-racist political author in spotlight
See story, page A7



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Week in The Review

New Minimum Wage

The ushering in of the New Year bumped up Oregon's minimum wage by 15 cents, from \$7.80 to \$7.95 per hour. The increase reflects the rise of the cost of living as defined by the Consumer Price Index and is mandated by Ballot Measure 25, approved by voters in 2002.

Rigler Dreamers Adopted

Third graders from Rigler Elementary in northeast Portland will receive long-term mentoring, tutoring and financial assistance for college as the newest class of dreamers with the I Have a Dream Foundation. See story, page A7.



Assassination Shock Waves

The assassination of Pakistan opposition leader Benazir Bhutto last week sent shockwaves around the world with Poland ordering extra troops to Afghanistan and other leaders vowing new help in battle against Al-Qaeda.

Fast Growing State

Oregon is the 11th fastest growing state in the nation, according to new Census Bureau state population estimates released Thursday. California remains the nation's most populous state with about 37 million people.



Smith's Scientology Rumor

Top box-office stars Tom Cruise and Will Smith may share more than just a close friendship. Smith has done little to quell rumors that he has followed his friend's footsteps into Scientology.

New Home Sales Plunge

The latest figures for new-home sales are the lowest level in more than 12 years, down nine percent nationally, a grim testament to the problems plaguing the housing sector.

Americans More Wired

About 38 percent of U.S. consumers are watching TV shows online, 36 percent use their cell phones as entertainment devices and 45 percent are creating online content like Web sites, music, videos and blogs for others, according to a new media survey.



PHOTO BY PAUL S. FARDIG

Portland's 'Dreamgirls'

Lava Alapai, (from left) Julianne Johnson and Joann Coleman make their way from backup singers to headliners in the Portland production of "Dreamgirls," based on the Tony Award winning play and Academy Award winning film. Stumptown Stages will bring the passionate story to the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center stage beginning March 7.

Fewer Oregon Families Earn Living Wage

Conditions even worse for people of color

BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A newly released report reveals startling numbers of Oregon families earning below a living wage. Odds against finding a living-wage job became even steeper for people of color, according to research by a regional alliance of nonprofits.

Fifty-five percent of current jobs in the Oregon economy do not pay a living wage for a family of four with both parents working, and the state's black, Latino and native populations in this type of household have less than a 20 percent chance of making a decent wage, according to findings from The Race for Wages:

Jobs in the Current Economy, the latest report from Oregon Action and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations.

A living wage, for the purposes of the study, "allows families to meet their basic needs, without public assistance, and provides them some ability to deal with emergencies and plan ahead." Each adult in that family of four would have to make at least \$32,594 a year or \$15.67 an hour to get above the calculated subsistence level.

As all types of Oregon households with one parent working fall even shorter, only single or childless adults have a better chance to obtain a living wage.

"This holiday season is not a merry time for many families in Oregon," said Clayborn Collins, a businessman and board member of Oregon Action, for the report's recent release at the Portland office of the Bureau of Labor and Industry. "Families forced to make tradeoffs between basic needs all year round face even greater burdens at this time when heating costs are high and things like presents under the tree need to be traded off too because the money just isn't there."

continued ▼ on page A10



Geri Washington

Former Convicts Look Beyond Barriers

Striving for full employment

BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Formerly incarcerated people and justice advocates have spearheaded a campaign to open up employment opportunities for people who are rebuilding their lives after paying a debt for past criminal behavior.

Paula Drake had a common struggle because of her prior felony conviction. A recovery program graduate, she needed to stay employed as a condition of her housing. But she lived in fear of homelessness because of the difficulty finding work.

Employers would lament that Drake was well-qualified, but company policies prohibited hiring someone with a criminal record. With a previous career in marketing, she could only get a job as a house cleaner with no benefits and a wage barely above minimum.

"I'm not asking for any gifts," says Drake, 46, "I don't deserve to be right where I was when I left off: I have to earn that back, but in doing the things that I'm doing, I'm absolutely earning that back to deserve a chance, and that's what I'm asking for."

Job opportunities for the stream of former convicts leaving prison are slim. In Multnomah County, the unemployment rate for ex-offenders on active supervision runs as high as 55 percent.

However, the past few months

brought some measures to ease the destitution of this large population. For example, standard employment applications for county jobs no longer ask about criminal history, leaving discussions on the topic to follow-up interviews.

"We need to find out what you've done to turn your life around; then your past tends to be an experience that you can bring

forward to benefit others," says Patty Katz, director of the Beyond Barriers program that scored its first major victory with the county's decision.

Working through the nonprofit Partnership for Safety and Justice, Katz promoted the change with a message to "Think Outside the Box" in reference to stereotypes as well as the checkmark next to a common

job-application question about felonies.

"We have to humanize that stigma," says Katz, "I want anyone who is qualified for any kind of job to be considered without having someone at the desk just throw away that application."

The caveat: No one condemns employment statutes designed to protect vulnerable populations by

excluding people recently released from prison. But, when applications claim no disqualifiers while serving to weed out anyone with a criminal record, justice advocates agree that the unstated discrimination strips hope from an already vulnerable population and contributes to recidivism.

Katz, 60, had learned firsthand of these employment barriers for those who have been incarcerated after her own "14 years of very dysfunctional life."

When applying in another county through a temp agency, she found that the standard form only assures criminal history will not "automatically" disqualify an applicant, even for a job that would use her recovery experience to help others find a new life. With six years drug-free and out of prison, she marked the box that read "Have you been convicted of a felony in the last seven years" and soon heard back that her past made her an unacceptable candidate.

Now hoping one county's change sets a statewide precedent, Katz credits her drive to "show them that we can do it and make a difference in the lives of others" with preventing despair at the slow progress. "I want to blaze the trail for people coming behind me," she says. "It has given hope to a lot of people, and that has been amazing in of itself."

Katz also drew hope from the past year bringing even broader nondiscrimination initiatives in

continued ▼ on page A10



Beyond Barriers Program Director Patty Katz points to a report that finds unfair treatment in employment practices for people who are productive members of society after paying a debt for past criminal behavior.



Paula Drake lived in fear of homelessness because of the difficulty of finding work. Hiring bosses would say she was well-qualified, but company policies prohibited enlisting someone with a criminal record.

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