

METRO

The Portland Observer



Leroy Vinnegar Jazz Presents:
John Nastos and a stellar lineup
for Young Artist Jazz Concert
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SECTION B

African Dance Program Thrives

**Kukatonon
nurtures sense
of pride**

BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Rolia Manyongai-Jones, whose Kukatonon dance program has lasted at Woodlawn Elementary in northeast Portland for 25 years now, has multiple reasons to be especially excited about this year's curriculum.

After decades of struggling with budget cuts, a leave of absence gave her the opportunity to secure grants that allow course offerings without admission fees for the first time this year.

In addition, the lead choreographer and percussionist for Kukatonon since 2003, Sekouba Walker, just returned from a month of traditional training in Guinea.

He is sharing some authentic foundation points for this year's theme, Growing Up and Growing Together, which will culminate in the entire troupe's performance this spring of an initiation rite.

Having lived in Liberia through her late 20s, Manyongai-Jones has come to recognize her program's own maturation as a blessing for her adopted community. She graduated from Portland State University in the early '80s with the plan to return home soon to teach, but was forced to stay because of emerging civil war.

Young people trying to make it in the U.S. may have benefited even more from Manyongai-Jones' teachings. The process of learning the dances, along with the meaning and technique behind each movement, provides avenues of self-discovery she notices especially for her black students.

"I feel as an African woman, it is my responsibility to teach what I know best, to connect the African-



Longtime Woodlawn Elementary teacher Rolia Manyongai-Jones leads a Kukatonon dance with her students (from right) Honni Brown, Jehdah Walker and Jeda McClendon.



PHOTOS BY
RAYMOND RENDLEMAN/
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Jehdah Walker (left) and Jeda McClendon finish off a duet during a Kukatonon African dance performance.

American children with their roots," she says. "Because if they know who they are, they can be whatever they want to be."

The connections come through a curriculum extending to the ancient origins of tribes in West Africa that represent the heritage of most black Americans. "It's important for them to know all the people who have paved the way to get them where they have to be, where they have gotten to now, so that when these kids come to dance, they don't just learn to dance," she says.

One of the students of Kukatonon's inaugural troupe a quarter century ago turned full circle to become a first-grade teacher at Woodlawn. Lionel Clegg recalls delight in learning some language indigenous to Africa, excitement in wearing authentic costumes and the honor of visiting Manyongai-Jones' house to experience a traditional dinner.

"These are opportunities that you cannot get from just any dance group," he says. "It gave me a new sense of pride that I had never experienced before."

The positive feedback continues to be heard from current participants. "I like the energy," says Honni Brown, a sixth grader who's stuck with Kukatonon for four years. "It isn't like you can't mess up or you get ridiculed."

Brown joined the other 10 most experienced dancers for a performance last week at Papa Murphy's corporate headquarters in Vancouver, Wash. The crowd of more than 50 pizza-company employees clapped to keep up with the drums throughout the performance.

"I was mesmerized by the energy these children exude," commented Lynette Speed of Papa Murphy's human resources. "As I looked at them, it was hard to take my eyes off

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**Local
Resident
Leads by
Example**
Honored for
community spirit



Bobbie Brown enriches the lives of others by volunteering.

zations she supports.

There are hats, gloves and toiletries for a nearby women's shelter, teddy bears and toys for a children's organization,

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Student Ambassador Explores the World
Ockley Green
student honored

Josephine M. Gamez-Reyes, a student at Ockley Green Middle School in north Portland, has been accepted into this summer's People to People Student Ambassador educational travel program.

Gamez-Reyes will explore the Mediterranean for 20 days and can earn academic credit while getting to know the people, culture and history of the places she visits.

She will take part in a variety of activities such as a community service project, attending a bullfight in Spain, learning to cook a dish in Italy, participating in a soccer match in Spain, a challenging rope course in Assisi and touring Rome and Vatican City.

Acceptance into the Student Ambassador Program is an honor. After being invited to enroll, Gamez-Reyes submitted letters of recommendation.



Josephine M. Gamez-Reyes smiles as she takes a snapshot on her travels.

She also earned merits for her successful enrollment in a prior People to People program.

Before departing this summer, she will attend new orientations to learn about the Mediterranean and prepare for the journey.

Gamez-Reyes will travel under the leadership of Jessica Morgan, a teacher-leader from Lee Elementary School in Salem. A local delegation manager who coordinates the cultural and recreational

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Community Calendar

Valentine's Day Fun

Roses are nice and chocolate is too, but what can be more fun than watching the sea otters get ice treats at the Oregon Zoo? On Valentine's Day, Thursday, Feb. 14, at 10:20 a.m., the elephants receive heart-shaped boxes of fruits and veggies. Visit Oregonzoo.org for more information.

Festival of African Films

The Portland Community College's Cascade Festival of African Films takes place all month the PCC Cascade campus in

north Portland and at the Hollywood and McMenamins Kennedy School theaters. For a complete schedule, visit the Cascade Festival of Films' Web site at Africanfilmfestival.org.

'Raise the Standard' Revival

Tuesday, Feb. 19 through Friday, Feb. 22 at 7 p.m. nightly, the Kings Temple Christian Center, 4744 N.E. 15 Ave., will host the Pacific NW Holy Ghost Conference Revival; featuring guest speakers from around the country.

Homeownership Class

Thursday, Feb. 23, from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. the Portland Community Land Trust and the Portland Community College Cascade

Campus, 705 N. Killingsworth-Terrell Hall Room 124, will host a free class to assist low-income homebuyers in qualifying for affordable housing. To register, visit pct.org or call 503-493-0293, extension 10.

King School Benefit

Tuesday, Feb. 26, from 5 to 11 p.m., bring your family and friends to McMenamin's Chapel Pub, and half of the evening's proceeds will be donated to purchase much-needed playground equipment for King School.

Kindergarten Roundup

Wednesday, Feb. 27, King School, 4037 N.E. Garfield, will host the annual kindergarten and pre-K roundup at 1:30 p.m., in

the school library. Both programs are full-day and fully funded.

Catch the Authors

Thursday, Feb. 28, at 6:30 p.m., In Other Words, 8 N.E. Killingsworth St., will host the reading night featuring five gay, lesbian and transgender authors. For more information, visit inotherwords.org or call 503-232-6003.

Volunteer Elder Advocates

Thursday, March 6, certification classes begin for volunteer advocates and investigators representing the needs of the elderly in assisted-living centers to insure they receive the proper care. Call Kathy Walters at 800-522-2602 to volunteer.

Cycle of Life Festivals

Friday, Feb. 29 through Monday, March 3, the Portland Japanese Gardens will host the Hina Matsuri, Doll Festival in English.

Town Hall Education Forum

Saturday, March 8, from 10:30 a.m. to noon, Rep. Chip Shields will host a Town Hall forum on education at the PCC-Cascade Campus Student Services Cafeteria; for more information, call 503-231-2564.

Tax Help in Rockwood

VITA tax aide for low-income families will assist clients by appointment only on Wednesdays, from 1 to 5 p.m. at the Rockwood Community office, 18709 S.E. Stark. For reservations, call 503-816-1530.