

# Portland Woman Inspired Civil Rights Scholar

## Parent's Corner

BY RON HERNDON



Derrick Bell, a civil rights scholar who became Harvard's first black tenured law school professor, died Oct. 5. In last week's issue, I wrote about Bell's advocacy to end Portland Public School's racist policy of busing only black children to accomplish its warped notions of school integration.

Another little known Portland community connection with Bell is the fictional character he used in many essays and books about race relations known as professor Geneva Crenshaw. Her first name and much of her persona were taken from Portland's own Geneva Knauls. While dean of the University of Oregon Law School, Bell drove to Portland to get Geneva to cut his hair at her barber shop. He was impressed with her elegance, intellect and common sense. Geneva and her husband Paul, remain proud entrepreneurial fixtures in Portland's black community.

The following is a continuation from last week's passages from Professor Bell's May 8, 2000, Brooklyn College, Samuel Konefsky Memorial Lecture, Revisiting Brown v. Board of Education:

*"In petitioners' briefs and more particularly in the amicus briefs (Friend of the Court) filed by the United States Justice Department, the 'separate but equal' precedent of Plessy was challenged as not only unjust to blacks, but also bad for the country's image, a barrier to development in the South, and harmful to its foreign policy. To make the latter point, the government's brief quoted at some length Secretary of State Dean Acheson who reported:*

*'[D]uring the past six years, the damage to our foreign relations attributable to [race discrimination] has become progressively greater. The United States is under constant attack in the foreign press, over the foreign radio, and in such international bodies as the United Nations because of various practices of discrimination against minority groups in this country ... [t]he undeniable existence of racial discrimination gives unfriendly governments the most effective kind of ammunition for their propaganda warfare ... school segregation, in particular, has been singled out for hostile foreign comment in the United Nations and elsewhere ... [concluding] racial discrimination in the United States remains a source of constant embarrassment to this government in the day-to-day conduct of its foreign relations; and it jeopardizes the effective maintenance of our moral leadership of the free and democratic nations of the world.'*

*"It is likely that not since the Civil War had the need to remedy racial injustice been so firmly aligned with the country's vital interests at home and abroad. In fact, (Brown) gave a new, improved face to the nation's foreign policy and responding to charges of blatant racial bias at home.*

*"The Brown decision simply replicated a familiar pattern of relief for racial injustices. A semblance of justice for blacks serves as the vehicle for furthering interests of the nation. In fact, that is the only time the nation can bestir itself to relief for even the most serious racial injustices. Even the most serious injus-*

*tics suffered by blacks, including slavery, segregation, and patterns of murderous violence are not sufficient to gain real relief from any branch of government. America never... (passed) an anti-lynching law despite literally thousands of blacks murdered over several decades.*

*"Relief from racial discrimination, when it comes, requires that (National) policy makers perceive the racial relief will provide a clear benefit for the nation. Even then, the relief is more symbolic than real and is not enforced when the nation's interests have been served*

*"The Brown decision, like the Emancipation Proc-*

*lamation a century earlier, did launch major (Black) self-help efforts that made serious inroads into the racial status quo. Is it not precisely because of their unstinting faith in this country's ideals that black people deserve better than an expression of benign paternalism, no matter how well intended? Symbolism has served as sad substitute for the needed empathy of action called for when a history of racial subordination is to be undone."*

*Ron Herndon is a long-time advocate for educational opportunities for African-American children. He has served as director of Head Start in Portland since 1975.*

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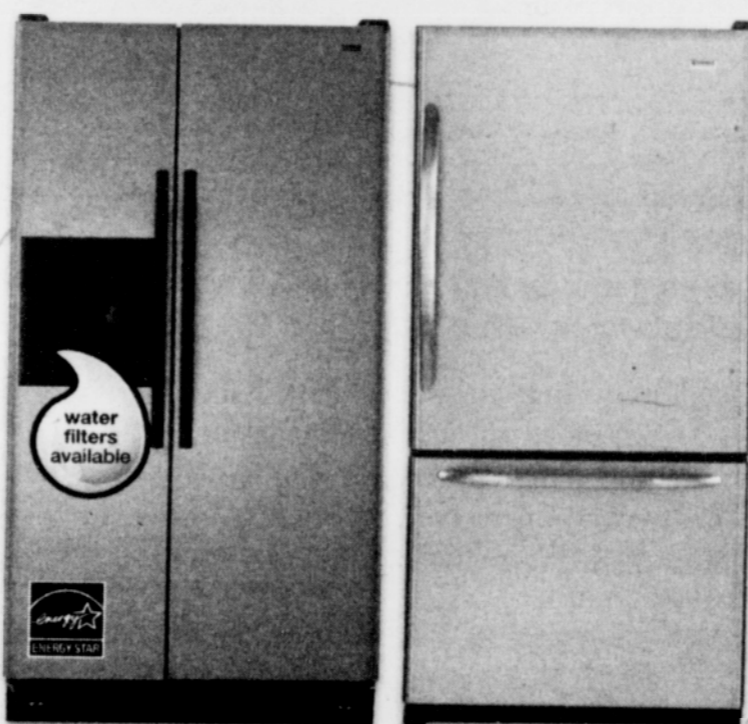
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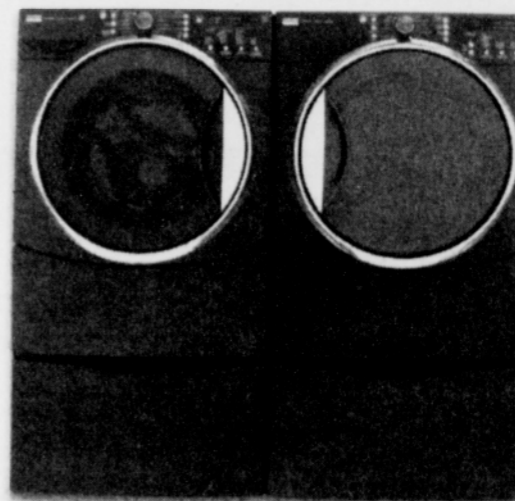
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