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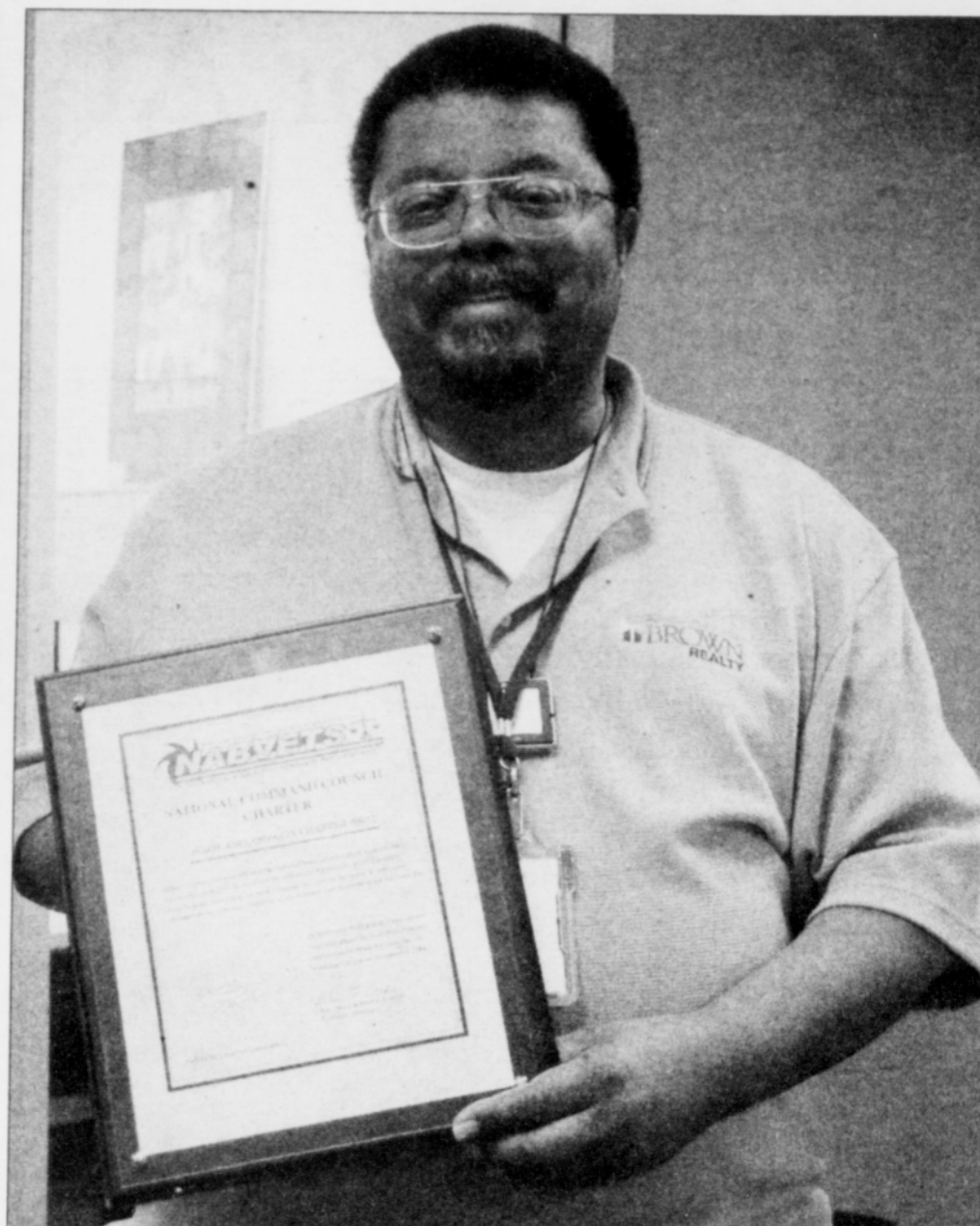


PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Retired Lt. Col. Leneld E. Brown is founder of the Portland chapter of the National Association of Black Veterans.

Advocating for Those Who Served

continued **▲** from front

trying to attain my benefits, I didn't understand the procedure."

For over 24-years, Brown served his country. In 1994, however, he suffered from a stroke and was forced to find other options because of his current state of health.

"I was looking for something to do, and I wanted it to be some kind of volunteer work because I couldn't function as an engineer," he said. "I am a disabled retired vet, and I wanted to volunteer my services."

In his own personal efforts, Brown recalls the difficulties he had in retrieving his benefits once he became retired. "It was frustrating," he said. "I wasn't looking to be a leader," he said. "But because I had such a hard time getting my benefits, I wanted to help educate others about the process."

So after a lot of hard work and a little bit of time, Brown was awarded a charter for the Portland chapter on Nov. 4, 2006 with essentially no facilitated budget. "I was basically working out of my car with a computer," he said.

Although the Portland chapter, located in an office downtown, originally began with merely 13 veterans, the volunteer-based chapter currently has over 100 members.

Most of the group's efforts go towards education of the processes to attain veterans benefits, Brown said.

On the surface, he said, one would say it is harder for African Ameri-

cans to get their benefits. "I say, there is always 10 percent that don't get the information, and that 10 percent appears to be mainly African Americans," he said.

According to Brown, attaining the information to understand the process is the biggest barrier, which is a frequent problem for many veterans when they first get out of the service.

Brown said more than often, the white soldier gets a break. "It has been like this since the days of the Constitution," he said.

Brown explained, however, there have been drastic, yet slow, changes within the military, especially since the Army was desegregated with President Truman, which began with President Roosevelt.

Brown, who entered the army in 1968, said the number of black officers was very few. "I saw a lot of racism in the military, but things have gotten a lot better," he said. "The military is one of the best places where de-segregation has occurred because it is based on a rank system."

"You are not saluting the color of my face, but the rank on my shoulder," said Brown.

"At one time, all vets qualified for all benefits. But the veteran population is growing, and the benefits seem to be shrinking," he said. "This is hard for African Americans, but equally as hard for all ethnic groups."

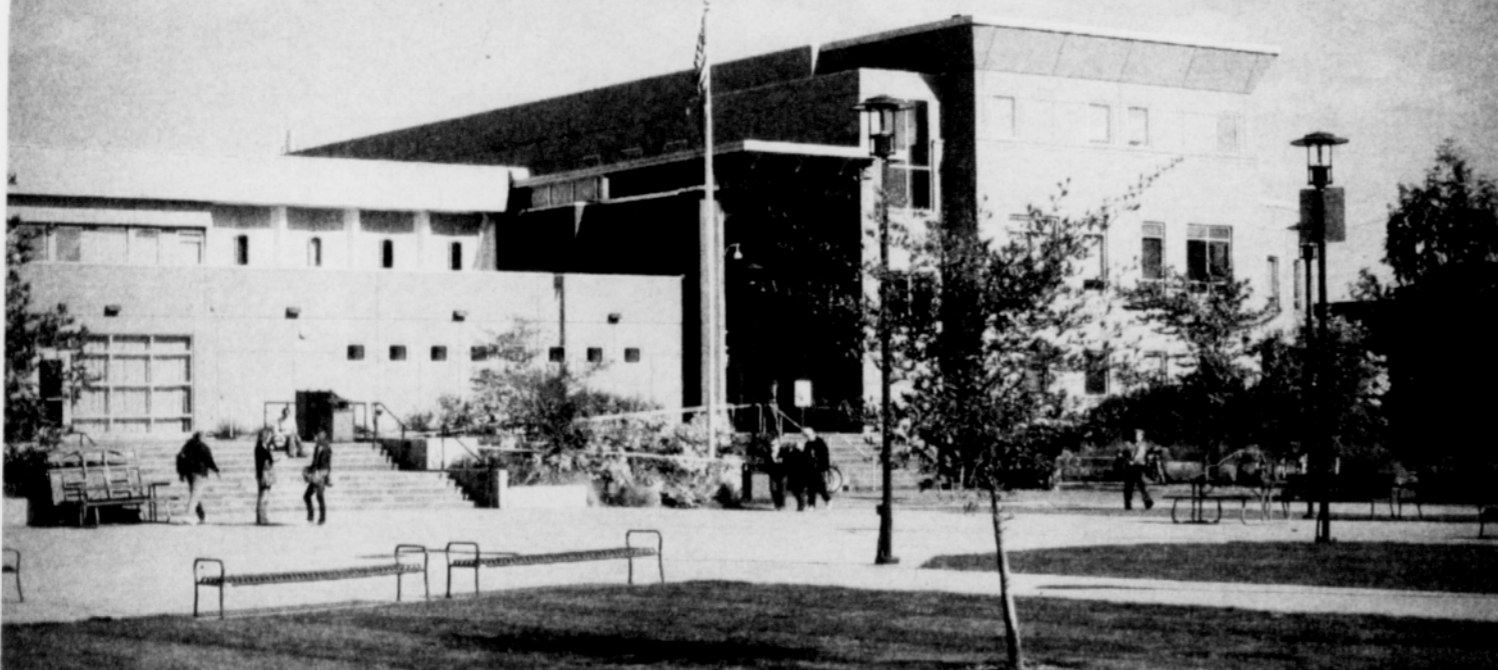
For more information or to contact the Black Veterans chapter, call 503-412-4159.

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