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'City of Roses'



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## Voices of First Families

### Vancouver's African American community tells its 70-year story

BY MINDY COOPER  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Despite a growing population and strong presence throughout the Vancouver area, the African American community in Clark County has been historically overshadowed and consequently, often taken for granted.

In an effort to shed light on the positive contributions and perseverance that has made the city it is today, Vancouver residents came together last week for a 'first families' reunion to celebrate the African American community and the release of their 70-year story in the recently completed book *First Families of Vancouver's African American Community: From World War II to the 21st Century*.

Local author Jane Elder Wulff interviewed 35 families who migrated to Vancouver in the 1940s to work in war-related industries and chose to stay and make their homes here.

With the families' approval and several community partnerships, NAACP Branch #1139, which was chartered in 1945, agreed to sponsor and help publish their stories that became the historical thread of the newly published book which illuminates what is known as a "hidden history."

Throughout the past four years, Wulff, a resident of Washington State for more than 60 years, interviewed black families whose lives she immersed herself within throughout the duration of the writing project.

"There is a whole community story," said Wulff. "The book is letting children know the larger story they are a part of and not just the bits and pieces."

Although the people who told their family histories were not the very first residents of the area, Wulff said they were primarily the first African American families who made Vancouver their permanent home.

"The point is," she said, "they came and established themselves, and they are still here, and nobody knows it."



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Local author Jane Elder Wulff interviewed 35 families who migrated to Vancouver and chose to stay for her recently completed book *'First Families of Vancouver's African American Community: From World War II to the 21st Century'*.

*Relationships get pretty complicated sometimes. I had to figure out who married who, and that kind of thing. I knew why they came, but I wanted to know why they didn't want to leave.*

— Jane Elder Wulff, Author

After a steering committee of NAACP volunteers contacted dozens of original family members for recollections and photos, Wulff set out on a mission to conduct inter-

views in an effort to weave the voices of Vancouver's community, which is seldom recognized.

"Relationships get pretty complicated

sometimes. I had to figure out who married who, and that kind of thing," she said. "I knew why they came, but I wanted to know why they didn't want to leave."

In an effort to capture as much detail of their stories and build real relationships with each of them, Wulff said she conducted hundreds of in person and phone interviews, and attended church services at AME Zion Church and potluck gatherings regularly.

"I feel so grateful," she said. "Everyone was so welcoming. I was amazed."

Although Wulff, in the beginning of the project, received help from "the matriarchs,"

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