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LOCAL NEWS

Fighting for Social Justice

Native American activist in City Council race

BY MINDY COOPER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Dedicated to the fight for justice and real change, one local Native American woman, after 17-years advocating for minorities in Portland, is on the May Primary ballot for a seat on the Portland City Council.

Jeri Williams, 51, has seen a plethora of problems unique to minority communities within the city in her employment with the Portland Office of Neighborhood Involvement, and as a native Oregonian and Klamath tribe member.

She has seen how the wheels of politics turn within the city.

The people in leadership actually chose what they are going to prioritize, she said. "We should be powerful leaders."

Although Williams acknowledges that she could choose to keep her mouth shut and make really good pay and benefits, "That is not how I am made," she said.

According to Williams, the word 'equity,' is continually used when addressing the work that needs to be done within the city. "But we keep talking about equity, and yet we have no equity on who gets elected to City Council, and who are the higher ups in the bureaus," she said. "I believe we need to have people of color in office with good political analyses of race in order to shift that paradigm."

Williams, a grandmother of eight, is excited to one day see a better future for minority youth in Portland.

"I was a welfare mom," she said. "And I have dealt with the police and know what it is like to be pulled over when you are a brown skinned person in this city, because I mostly lived in north-east."

She proudly pulls out a wallet size image of two smiling grandchildren. "I want them to have a future where they feel like they can do anything, and I don't think they have that opportunity just yet," she said.

"I worry about the future of my grandchildren and my children, and quite frankly I am not confident that anyone who is running right now knows the experience of what I, and other people of color, have gone through while living in the city of Portland."

When Williams, who grew up with five siblings in Salem, first moved to Portland, she was a single mother with a history of

became an organizer," she said. "I learned the power of organizing, working collaboratively and building collaborative partnerships, like defeating the expansion of the I-5 freeway when no one said we could."

According to Williams, some of the people who empowered her the most were individuals she didn't initially think of as advocates.



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

After nearly 17-years as an activist and advocate for minority communities in Portland, Native American and single mother Jeri Williams has joined the race for a seat on the Portland City Council.

domestic violence.

"I was trafficked in 1989 when I came here after I got away from an abusive ex-husband," she said. "I got involved with drugs and gangs and that part of my life lasted about four years."

Also periodically battling homelessness, her children were taken from her for a number of years by the state until she was able to get her act together.

She said, however, with the help of the community, she was able to turn her life around and carry her past experiences to make for a better life.

"I came from the streets and

Williams said she was recently looking at the campaign pins she made for her election contest, and the emotions of everything she has overcome came to her in full-force.

"I would never be running for office if someone didn't step up and help me get straight, and do what I need to do to give back to my community," she said.

Last week, while in the waiting room of a health care facility, Williams said she began to talk with a woman and her daughter in the clinic. "We were laughing and

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