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No Longer Neglected

**King School
rebound draws
neighbors in**

BY MINDY COOPER
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

After hard work and determination from parents and educators, King Elementary in northeast Portland has finally begun to capture attention as a successful school serving its diverse neighborhood.

Heather Dugas was an active volunteer through the Smart Reading program at King School, even before her children were old enough to attend. As a resident of northeast Portland, she had heard horror stories about King, located at 4906 N.E. Sixth Ave., the closest educational center in her neighborhood.

"I heard people talk about it," she said. "But then I realized this was a beautiful school, with a lot of talented and involved teachers, who want to see the kids succeed."

According to Dugas, parents decisions on where to send their child to school is often based on what they have found online or heard by word-of-mouth, without ever taking a step through the doors to see the school first-hand.

"But if I had based it on those two things, my daughter would not have ended up at King," she said. "I wouldn't send my child to a school that was notorious for gangs."

Opposite from any past notions of King being a school of "gang-bangers," violence and children unable to learn, she has found King children performing at their best both inside and outside of the classroom.

"More research is often times necessary, and sometimes you have to take a chance," Dugas said. "If you believe in your child and your neighborhood and where you live, you can help make your school succeed."

She has encouraged others to



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A sustained upward path for Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in northeast Portland is drawing praise from local residents and parents.

support their local schools as a part of the solution to educational disparities.

In the early 90s, Dugas remembers when her neighborhood was hit with a high level of violence.

"I lived here. It was a dangerous place to be," she said. "You certainly still hear about crime, but I think it is a lot less."

But throughout the past several years, Dugas said she has watched the school begin to blossom through the hard work of parents and educators at King.

"Our whole motto is 'It takes a village', but it really does. I know there is a group of us that we are not going to give up. We are going to see this through."

According to Karen Werstein, also a King parent, there is a plethora of reasons to why the community should support King School, where she sends her son Max and daughter Ruby every day.

She said King students are the ones who welcome her with a hug each morning, hold hands with each other to walk safely to the bathroom, and perform the most beautiful African dances, with giant smiles on their faces.

As a Title I School, King, which is largely comprised of African American and Latino youth, provides free breakfast, lunch and snacks to students every day.

"It is rich with culture and diversity, and the King teachers and parents have really pulled together to create a school that is looking for equity in our school district and our community," Werstein said.

A cornerstone of Portland's black community, King was just selected by the White House to participate as a Turnaround Arts school, which recognized the school for making strides in student achievement with innovative initiatives with the arts.

"This grant is a really big deal," said Dugas. "And new principal Kim

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