

Change Agent

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office is charged with recognizing and removing systemic barriers to the fair and just distribution of city resources. The goal is supporting human rights and opportunity for everyone to achieve their full potential.

James says diversity is a component of equity. For example, he says public officials can't be satisfied when a pool of job or contracting applicants lacks diversity, "That's where we come in and look at where was the lack of access? What were the barriers?"

The office can't make city bureaus hire more people of color, for example, but it can influence their hiring decisions, he says.

Studies show that in Portland and Multnomah County, commu-

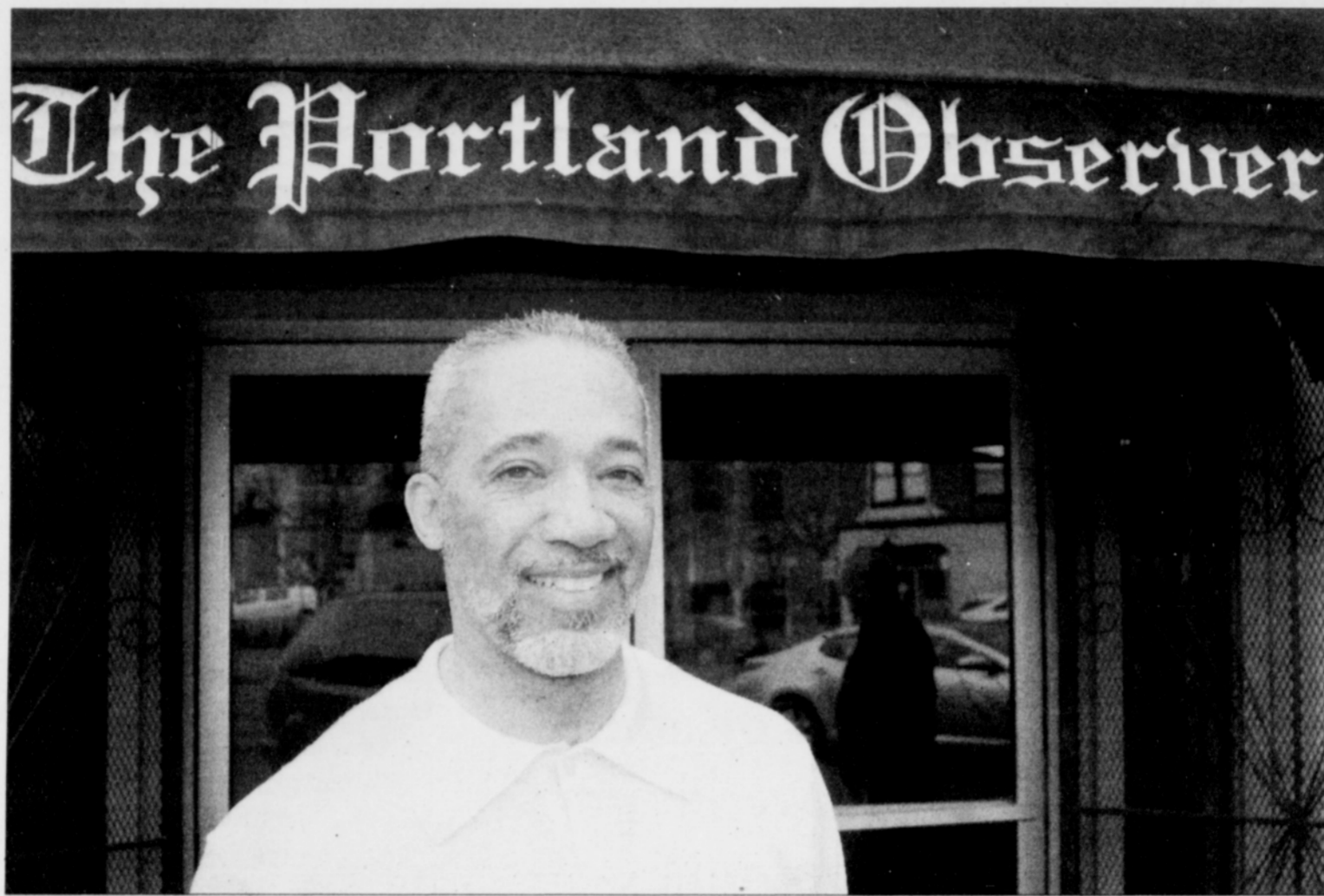


PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Dante J. James is the first bureau director for Portland's Office of Equity and Human Rights.

nities of color, people with disabilities and low-income residents fare far worse than residents in

other cities in educational achievement, income and economic prosperity, health out-

comes, and affordable, secure and viable neighborhoods.

James says he wants to change

the narrative that Portland is one of the whitest cities of the top 50 cities in the country and therefore can't have significant issues with race.

"That belies the fact that 25 percent of the population of Portland are people of color, and that half of the students in the public school system are people of color, and 1 in 5 Portland residents are foreign born," he says.

James was asked about the issue of gentrification and the displacement of people of color from their historical neighborhoods.

He said he's never been anywhere like Portland, where minority communities have been bulldozed out of existence.

"The abuse that occurred previously needs to be accounted for as we move forward," he says.

James says while his office is focused on barriers with regard to race and disabilities, its success can have a positive impact on other populations.

"If you improve aspects on race, you will improve results across all the spectrums," James says.

Oregon as 'Whitelandia'

continued ▲ from front

ing point of gentrification, he says neither he nor MacDonald had been clued into how deep these roots ran until they began pre-production for *Whitelandia*.

"We knew what we were getting into as a couple of white people telling the story," Zodrow says, "We wanted to make it clear that we had the technical skills and know-how to put a film together, [but] it wouldn't be our voice."

To help ensure the story is truly being given authentic voicing from

the community, Zodrow and MacDonald have linked with the Oregon Association for Black Affairs as the film's official advisory board. The partnership with the social justice group, whose leader Dr. Cal Henry, first suggested to the two filmmakers that the documentary be made, ensures that all research, interviews, and content gets the okay from OABA members.

They've also partnered with the Oregon Black History Museum in Salem as reference checkers, along with local activist, artist, author, and teacher of Black Studies at Portland

State University, Walidah Imarisha as an individual advisor.

As part of the documentation for the movie, Imarisha is interviewed about Oregon's black history, along with such other community stalwarts such as Will Bennett of GroundWork Portland, and photographer Intisar Abioto, whose blog "The Black Portlanders" documents black life in the metropolitan area.

The NW Film Center has also partnered with *Whitelandia* as a non-profit organization, ensuring all grants and loans to the film are tax deductible, but yielding no say in

the creative process, Zodrow says.

As the *Whitelandia* documentary moves into full production soon, the filmmakers are hoping they will be able to answer a key question in the film: Did Oregon's founders successfully create a "white homeland?" If so, what does this mean for the nearly two percent of blacks that inhabit the state today?

One focal point of the film is Vanport City, the first and largest housing project in the nation for war workers. This construction was responsible for the biggest influx of blacks (and poor whites) to the state

in its history, more specifically the Portland area as many came in search of shipyard jobs during World War II.

"The film really takes a turn there," Zodrow says, "We kind of consider that the jumping off point for contemporary black history in Oregon."

Vanport, infamously flooded in 1946 destroying that project, and leaving its residents, many of them black, without a place to live in a city that did not want them inside its borders.

Some of the subjects interviewed for the film are the sons and daughters of those who survived the flood, as many of the original Vanport residents have since passed on.

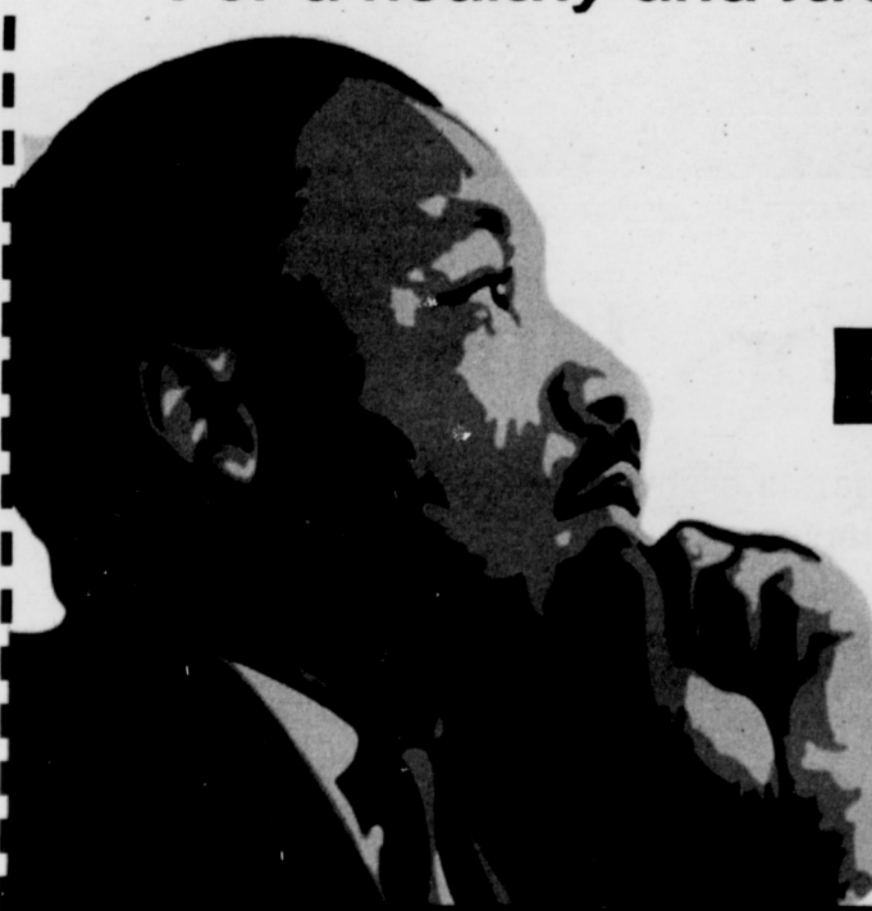
"Those families are really important to us, the ones that are here, still here in the [Albina] neighborhood," Zodrow says, as he and his partners continue to search for possible interviewees of that era.

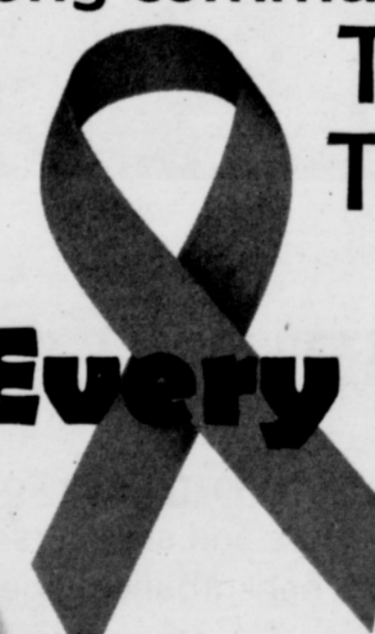
As the filmmakers piece together their scenes for the documentary, Zodrow is becoming more sure that the answer to the question of whether the state has indeed become a "white homeland" is yes, and has the even more sobering revelation that it has "always been state funded".

"They're getting very close to that, and it's always been state funded, and always state sanctioned from day one and continues to be today. So it's a hard story to tell, but we're trying for sure," Zodrow says.

To contact the filmmakers with possible research for *Whitelandia* or to appear in the film, contact Matt Zodrow at Mzodrow@uncolafilms.com. Also be sure to "like" the film on Facebook for continued information on its progressions.

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