

# Intersecting Two Passions: Art and Medicine

## Doctor works to promote diversity

A Portland physician is adding her influence to Oregon culture and the arts.

Dr. Nathalie McDowell Johnson is the newest member of the Oregon Cultural Trust Board after her nomination earlier this year by Gov. John Kitzhaber.

A surgical oncologist at the Legacy Cancer Institute and medical director of the Legacy Breast Health Centers, Johnson started her professional life as a dancer with the Ballet Theatre of the Virgin Islands.

She remembers a summer with the company in New York City, which included time with dancers from Alvin Alley's theatre. "Watching those men and women's lives, the rigors, tryouts, rejections... I decided medicine was probably easier," she said with a smile.

A graduate of Howard University, she went on to attend medical school at The University of Virginia and do residency and surgical internship at University of Southern California.

Though she says she still dances, "at a good party," Johnson's medical practice, women's breast health, and education about breast cancer has become her professional crusade.

Johnson's own mother, Lucy George, survived breast cancer in Johnson's childhood, an experience that had a profound influence on her. George also instilled in



Dr. Nathalie Johnson wants to increase access to the arts for underserved populations, especially young people. A surgical oncologist and medical director of the Legacy Breast Health Centers, Johnson started her professional life as a dancer with the Ballet Theatre of the Virgin Islands.

young Nathalie the importance of the arts.

Growing up on St. Thomas, Johnson recalled that her mother, "enrolled us in ballet, took us to plays, the opera, musicals. She made sure to expose us

because, as the daughter of a domestic and a railroad worker in the 40s, these were things she dreamed of but could not access."

Johnson comes to the Cultural Trust

Board with a goal of increased accessibility for underserved populations, especially young people.

"I would love to make sure all Oregonians have the opportunity to take part in the culture, art and heritage that is available," she said. "My mother taught us that, with imagination and creativity, there is no time for boredom."

Johnson has a keen eye on the intersection between her two passions, art and medicine. The Legacy Cancer Institute incorporates art therapy into its programs for children and adults. "Being able to express yourself through art or music is healing," said Johnson.

Music is also played in the institute's Intensive Care Unit, which Johnson says, "slows the heart rate and improves the breathing," for critically ill patients and those at the end of life. "Music actually decreases their need for pain medication," she said. The peace and tranquility the arts provide, "can make a big difference in health outcomes."

Trust Board Chair Bob Speltz was intrigued by Johnson's perspective as a physician. "Dr. Johnson understands the very tangible ways in which access to culture ties directly to improved quality of life," said Speltz. "Her steadfast commitment to expanding access to and participation in culture in Oregon is extraordinary, and her earlier life as a dancer gives her a context for culture as a viable career choice."

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PHOTO BY STEEL BROOKS

Pamela Chipman created a video wall at the new Magnolia housing complex at 3250 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, that pays tribute to the Eliot neighborhood's "golden years" which she refers to as 1941-1957 when jazz and a vibrant black community was nearly inescapable.

## Jazz from the Past

continued ▲ from front

fittingly, and other everyday scenes from the ever-changing community.

Completed on a contract of

less than \$10,000, Chipman says she particularly wanted to highlight the black life that existed and continues to exist in the area, something she says "embodies the soul of northeast Portland"

As the once-booming neighborhood hub of African-American business and culture continues to see rapid changes, highlighted by a bundle of new construction projects, Chipman hopes she can help bring similar art ventures to the neighborhood that acknowledge its history.