



PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Sam Brooks of the Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs leads an organization whose mission is to promote entrepreneurship and economic development for ethnic minorities in Oregon and southwest Washington

## Stay Ready to be Ready

### CONTINUED FROM FRONT

ence to people between the ages of 14 and 21 with the support and mentorship of businesses in Oregon and southwest Washington.

The aim is to promote and develop young entrepreneurs and leaders statewide, but Brooks says it also gives him a chance to talk to young people and share the advice he's learned in his decades of work running businesses.

"I have to credit Magic Johnson, who was on a panel with me in Washington, D.C. years ago and said something that I tell young people today. He talked about sitting on the bench during a basketball game, and said when the coach selected him it was more important than ever to shine."

"You got to stay ready to be ready," Brooks quoted Johnson as telling him. "And I'll never forget that and I tell folks that. The first day, I say to the kids 'Who was the first one here today?' and whoever it was, I walk up to them and give them \$100. Because I want kids to know and value being the first person through the door for an opportunity they might not get again. We all got to stay ready to be ready."

The organization has changed significantly since Brooks helped found it in 1987, and he shared that the climb for minorities in the business sector has not always been easy.

Growing up in the segregated South, Brooks remembers the separate drinking fountains for white and black residents, and the days as a black student you would have to enter delis through their back doors to get a sandwich.

"Once when I was younger," he said, "I walked into a business and I tried to offer them my business card. They turned me away and said they didn't do 'affirmative action hires.' Even when I explained that was not who I was and what I was doing, I left my card anyway, and years later the same people needed me. And guess what? I was the one for the job, but it would cost them a lot more than it did back then. Opportunity doesn't always come where you expect it."

Brooks added that OAME is looking forward to building a technology committee, so that more minorities can get into the future of tech in the United States.

It's still a hard market to crack and we have to find a way to work with the technology folks

and network across our differences, whatever they may be," said Brooks. "But I'm ready, and I know every time we start a committee or a project here, it benefits our communities, and when we focus on the opportunities we have instead of the ones we don't, we can make the best use of what's on the table."

Brooks said OAME was a small organization at the start and took some time to develop, but today it is one of the biggest micro-lenders for business startups in Oregon.

The group has been listed as a premier organization of excellence and has won a Vision Award for Excellence from the Small Business Administration. By providing access to capital, technical assistance, administrative services, information and networking, OAME has become a beacon of hope even amidst an unstable economy for people of color.

Brooks' business savvy and expertise also made him a success at his own company, Brooks Staffing, which now is run by his daughter, Simone Brooks.

Officially retired, he continues to volunteer with OAME to help ensure that a new generation of business owners and dreamers can progress even fur-

ther than what he could ever expect in his own lifetime. "I don't know how many years I have on earth," he said, "but I still have so much I want to do."

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