

From Hunger Strikes to Board Rooms

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Lucky might not be how most people describe such a situation, but Whitten is known for his ability to spin good luck out of difficult circumstances.

“Yes, it sounds kind of crazy to call myself ‘lucky,’ but I was fortunate enough to have the support of local nonprofits and countless community members,” he explains. “Because of their love, I have the resources and confidence to pursue my hopes and dreams.”

And pursue them, he is. Only this fall, Whitten became executive director of local nonprofit Know Your City, an organization that brings social justice art, media, tours, and events to Portland.

Just 24-years-old, he is already a local fixture for his participation in dozens of high-profile activist moments over the past few years, be they a 55-day hunger strike for housing justice, to leading activist during Occupy Portland protests, to a run for mayor in 2012. He talks about the issues that brought him to those events and the evolution and change in his political organizing techniques.

While Whitten expresses he has burnt out on some levels of his



PHOTO BY OLIVIA OLIVIA/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Cameron Whitten adorns his Know Your City office with an illustration of Martin Luther King, Jr. walking.

youthful activism, he recalls Occupy, the social justice movement that started with Occupy Wall Street protests against social and economic inequality around the world, as a life changing moment for him.

“I remember the streets of downtown, filled with tens of thousands of people, all mobilized

with the dream of a better community. It gave me conviction. I felt something stirring inside me, telling me that my experience as a homeless kid, as an abused kid, as a low-income person of color, instilled me with stories that could be used as a vehicle of change to make my community better,” he

and racism were a problem affecting a large community of people it made him feel like he was not alone in fighting those issues.

His journey to establish a footing in Portland often meant finding a place to hang his head at night, including the dozens of times local churches gave him a place to

by volunteering and getting deeply involved with the group. He was asked to join the organization’s board of directors and later was nominated for the executive director position by the departing executive director.

Whitten says he excited to help the community through his new role, thought he has not forgotten his roots. Earlier this year he was awarded a scholarship to take the school aptitude test, which was presented to him by Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum. He is finishing up his degree in Economics at Portland State University. He says that hasn’t stopped him from experiencing discrimination, however.

“Earlier this year, I was trespassed from the Portland Streetcar,” he says of his ongoing experiences as a black man in the notoriously white city.

He says it happened after a streetcar he was riding had a leaky vent that was releasing a slightly burning smell, which worried several riders.

“I felt the need to say something,” he explains, but says the driver ignored him. He says he went back twice, to which the driver responded with mounting hostility, telling him to leave him alone and that the issue was not a problem. Eventually, Whitten was told to get off the streetcar.

“I refused to do that because people of color are constantly being told we are threatening or aggressive and I believe it needs to stop,” he says, explaining he was on the advisory board of the Portland Bureau of Transportation and TriMet, and a firm believer that public transit should be accessible to everyone.

When he refused to leave, Portland Police took him off the car and issued him a citation for trespassing in the second degree.

“I was used to standing up for other people, for other issues, but this time, it really hurt, because I was standing up for me, for my own right to be black and exist,” he explains.

The charges eventually dismissed, but he says he no longer takes the streetcar because of what happened, even though all Portland State University students are allowed to ride it free of charge.

“Discrimination exists and there is work to be done,” he says.

The late civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. gives him inspiration to continue his work, sediment made clear by then illustration of King that overlooks his office.

“I’m honored,” he says, “I am so inspired by the leaders who came before me and I always tell myself I have more work to do.”

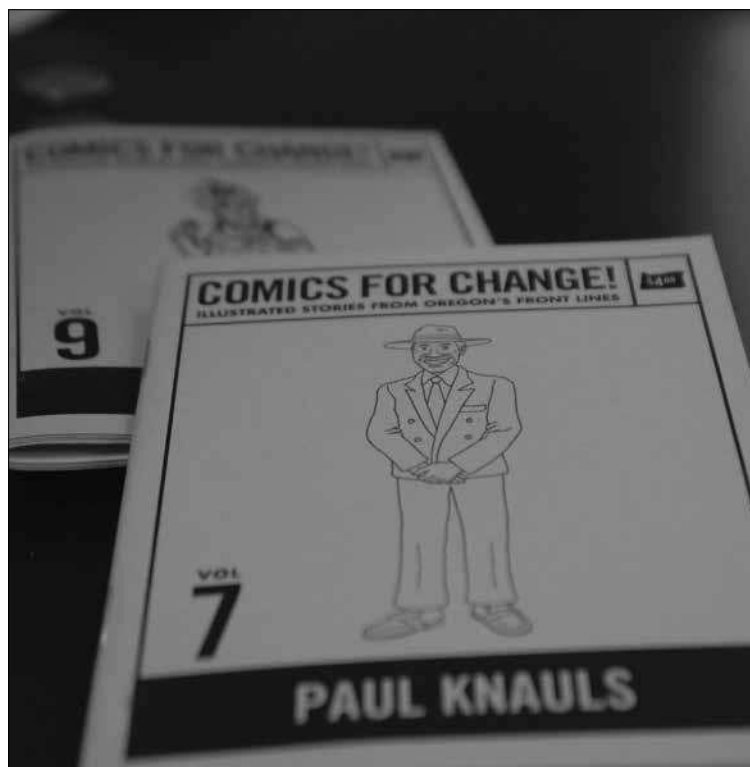


PHOTO BY OLIVIA OLIVIA/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Know Your City is known for dozens of popular history and city-based art projects, including Comics For Change, featuring different community leaders like Paul Knauls (above) the unofficial “Mayor of Northeast Portland.”

says. “While Occupy didn’t have the tactics, lasting presence, or outcome I would have like to see at this moment, I wouldn’t be doing the work that now fulfills my heart if I hadn’t been there.”

Whitten says getting involved in justice issues helped him find what he called a “sense of purpose and belonging.” When he started seeing that poverty, family abuse

stay, or the friends and people he met along the way took him in. I myself recall a day when Whitten was on my couch, and if you ask other locals about him, you might find they or someone they know have also hosted him, met him at a rally, or broken bread with him somewhere down the road.

Whitten says he moved up into his position with Know Your City

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