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PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Damaris Webb (from left), Laura Lo Forti and S. Renee Mitchell meet outside the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center to promote the inaugural Vanport Mosaic Festival, coming May 27-30 to the IFCC and other venues. A series of events, including theater, poetry, film and a reunion of former Vanport residents will pay tribute to the history and cultural significance of a city that brought African Americans and others to Portland for work during World War II before being lost to a Memorial Day flood 68 years ago.

Celebrating a history, culture and legacy

Last year, when three women artists came together to discuss their separate Vanport-related projects, they had no idea where their shared interest would lead. Still, the talking continued, historians, educators, and other artists joined the conversation, former Vanport residents expressed excitement, and eventually, the word "festival" was put on the table.

Vanport Mosaic

The three artistic co-directors "story midwife" Laura Lo Forti, theater artist Damaris Webb, and S. Renee Mitchell, a former columnist for The Oregonian are now responsible for curating a series of events, including theater, poetry, film, academia and a residents' reunion, to celebrate the history of Vanport, once the second-largest city in Oregon that at its peak had more than 40,000 residents.

"We have to amplify the silent stories of the past, and listen intentionally so we can better understand who we are, and why the city of Portland is how it is today," says Webb. "If we don't celebrate and engage with these living stories now, they'll be gone forever."

This coming Memorial Day marks the 68th anniversary of the Vanport Flood, which destroyed Vanport, a city whose historical impact remains largely unknown, especially to the thousands of new residents who have recently moved into the metro area.

This year's inaugural Vanport Mosaic Festival, scheduled for May 27-30, seeks to educate the public on the history, culture, and legacy of Vanport, which brought together a mix of races across the country to work in Portland's shipyards during World War II.

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