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Celebrating BLACK HISTORY MONTH



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A Legacy Preserved

Daughter of pioneering civil rights couple keeps history alive

BY ZACHARY SENN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A snapshot of Portland's black history is being preserved at Portland State University, thanks to the efforts of the daughter of two of the city's most prominent civil rights leaders.

Charlotte B. Rutherford, a Portland native and herself a former civil rights attorney, has helped to facilitate the preservation of her mother's meticulous documentation of some of the black community's most prosperous days.

The Verdell Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Collection, which now resides on-site at the PSU Library Special Collections Division, continues to impact and inform the community in unprecedented ways.

"She was a collector," Charlotte Rutherford says of her mother, Verdell Burdine Rutherford. The family's roots in Oregon can be traced to when her mother was an infant in 1913. But raised in Yakima and educated as a secretary, she didn't move permanently to Portland until after her high school graduation. Despite being proficient in shorthand and a talented typist, like many black females during the time, she was unable to obtain a job other than domestic work.

Charlotte Rutherford explains that her mother's training as a secretary and her meticulous nature helped guide her preservation of the black history artifacts that are now in PSU's collection, "I don't know why she saved, she just saved!"

The documents feature a wide array of content, from recipes to newspaper clippings to family photos to obituaries.

In regards to the newspaper clippings, some of which date as far back as the late 1800s, Charlotte Rutherford says that her mother began saving articles that reflected the black community in a positive light, "Because she wanted us, her children, to have access to them."



PHOTO BY ZACHARY SENN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Charlotte Rutherford, a former civil rights attorney and the daughter of an historic Portland couple who worked tirelessly to outlaw discrimination and pass other civil rights protections during the Civil Rights Era, honors her late parents by helping preserve Portland's Black History.

Charlotte's father, Otto Rutherford, served in the leadership of the Portland Branch of the NAACP throughout the 1940s and 1950s, and was serving as the organization's president when the Oregon Public Accommodations Act was passed in 1953, the 21st state in the union to pass

legislation outlawing discrimination in public places.

One of the collection's most iconic images showcases both Otto and Verdell Burdine Rutherford present with Rep. Mark Hatfield at the bill's signing. A copy of this image now hangs in the State Capitol in

Salem.

The couple's persistence to enact the watershed civil rights legislation came after 33 years of effort. All they did on behalf of advancing civil rights at the time

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