

Advocacy Work Transforms Young Leader

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Whitten said he's experienced struggle from a very young age, both in his home and in the form of systemic oppression.

"I've experienced what it's like to be denied your basic humanity, your basic rights. And one thing that I just vividly remember, ever since I could remember, was that I had nobody there to advocate for me. It took me a while but I realized I am an advocate, I could be my own advocate, and I could advocate for others. And I've been doing that ever since," Whitten recalled.

Searching for his place in the world, Whitten bought a Greyhound bus ticket from his home town in Virginia and headed west, back in 2009.

"Portland just became my destiny," he said.

A couple years after that, Whitten became involved with the Occupy Portland movement, an offshoot of Occupy Wallstreet in Zuccotti Park, New York City, which brought international attention to the economic inequalities that plague the United States in response to the 2008 economic recession.

The Portland chapter of the movement became the largest encampment of its kind on the West Coast, drawing in an estimated 10,000 people at its launch on Oct. 6, 2011.

Whitten was there for the entire 39+ days that the protestors occupied Chapman Square in downtown and other city parks. He said that experience, the first civil organizing work he'd ever done, emboldened him to be more courageous in telling his own story and confidence in his abilities. And he'd sacrificed housing, going to school, and other responsibilities to participate.

"At this time I didn't have a degree, didn't have a driver's license, didn't have a job. I was just some young, black, queer kid and thinking that I wasn't worth much, I had no value. And Occupy was like 'no, you are human, you have value.' And I've taken that and kept it going," Whitten remembered.

In the year following the Occupy movement, Whitten



PHOTO BY DANNY PETERSON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

In addition to his role as executive director of the Q Center, Cameron Whitten, is behind the non-profit group Brown Hope, a social justice group geared toward lifting local African Americans up economically. Brown Hope has hosted regular community building meetings for people of color and has funneled donations made by white donors as economic reparations for the suffering black people have experience because of the history of racism in America.

staged a 55-day hunger strike in front of City Hall to bring attention to housing issues and even ran unsuccessful campaigns for Mayor and Oregon State Treasurer, still in his early 20s.

Now 27, his advocacy work has transformed quite a bit since then, moving toward more sophisticated, long-term strategies, to address inequities.

"It's interesting to have come from a background of direct action and anti-establishment politics and now I'm at a place where I work at a desk every day. And I'm schmoozing with the Mayor or major donors or real estate developers. So the work does not seem the same to me at all. But I do feel I have the opportunities to take the learning that I had and that paradigm and to find ways to really just shift the structures that I could operate in," Whitten said. "I really want to build a movement and not so much be a part of a movement," he added.

In addition to working at the Q Center, Whitten is the founder of Brown Hope, founded last year, and focuses on social justice issues. The organization has two main programs: one is an on-going event for black, brown, and indigenous community members to come

together and build community, discuss, and take action on local political issues and receive

"reparations" in the form of donations from white donors; another is Blackstreet Bakery, an economic development program for black people in plant-based baking.



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