

Arrested in the Fight for Civil Rights

Like King,
immigration
advocates
use civil
disobedience

BY DANNY PETERSON
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

When 124 asylum seekers were detained in a federal prison in Sheridan last summer after being caught up in President Donald Trump's zero tolerance immigration policy, civil rights groups, lawyers, activists, and faith leaders took steps to help get all of them out of lockup and bring light to the issue.

Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice, which convenes faith leaders of varying religions throughout Oregon, was one of the many grassroots organizations key to keeping the issue before the public through vigils, marches, and support in solidarity with the asylum seekers, both at the Oregon prison, and the federal Immigrant and Customs Enforcement headquarters in Portland.

All of the asylum seekers were men and a number of them had been separated from their children at the border. Most were applying for entry to the United States to escape persecution or violence from more than 16 countries. They were denied access to attorneys and not allowed to practice their religion when they were first detained.

The American Civil Liberties Union Oregon filed an emergency lawsuit soon after the immigrants were detained in Sheridan to allow them access to lawyers, which a federal judge sided with. Another non-profit civil rights group called Innovation Law Lab represented 80 of the detainees and helped them demonstrate that they fled their home countries due to a credible fear of prosecution and all 124 of the asylum seekers have since been released, as of late November.

For the leaders of the local Interfaith Movement, their involvement is akin to the arrests Rev. Martin Luther King voluntarily faced in actions of civil disobedience in the fight for civil rights. The local faith leaders were inspired to take on a similar course after one of its members hosted a living room meeting to discuss taking action. It was last May when news first broke that the immigrants were being detained in Oregon.

"That began a process of both discernment and strategizing around what would be an effective strategy to get the men released



PHOTO BY DANNY PETERSON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Sarah Loose (left) and Ron Werner look back on their experience of facilitating willing arrests of faith leaders during peaceful protests on behalf of immigrant asylum seekers. They're part of Oregon's Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice, an organization advocating for the rights of immigrants faced with family separation, detention and deportation.

but also to begin to dismantle this family separation apparatus that exists here in Oregon," interfaith organizer and pastor Ron Werner of the Evangelical Lutheran Church told the Portland Observer.

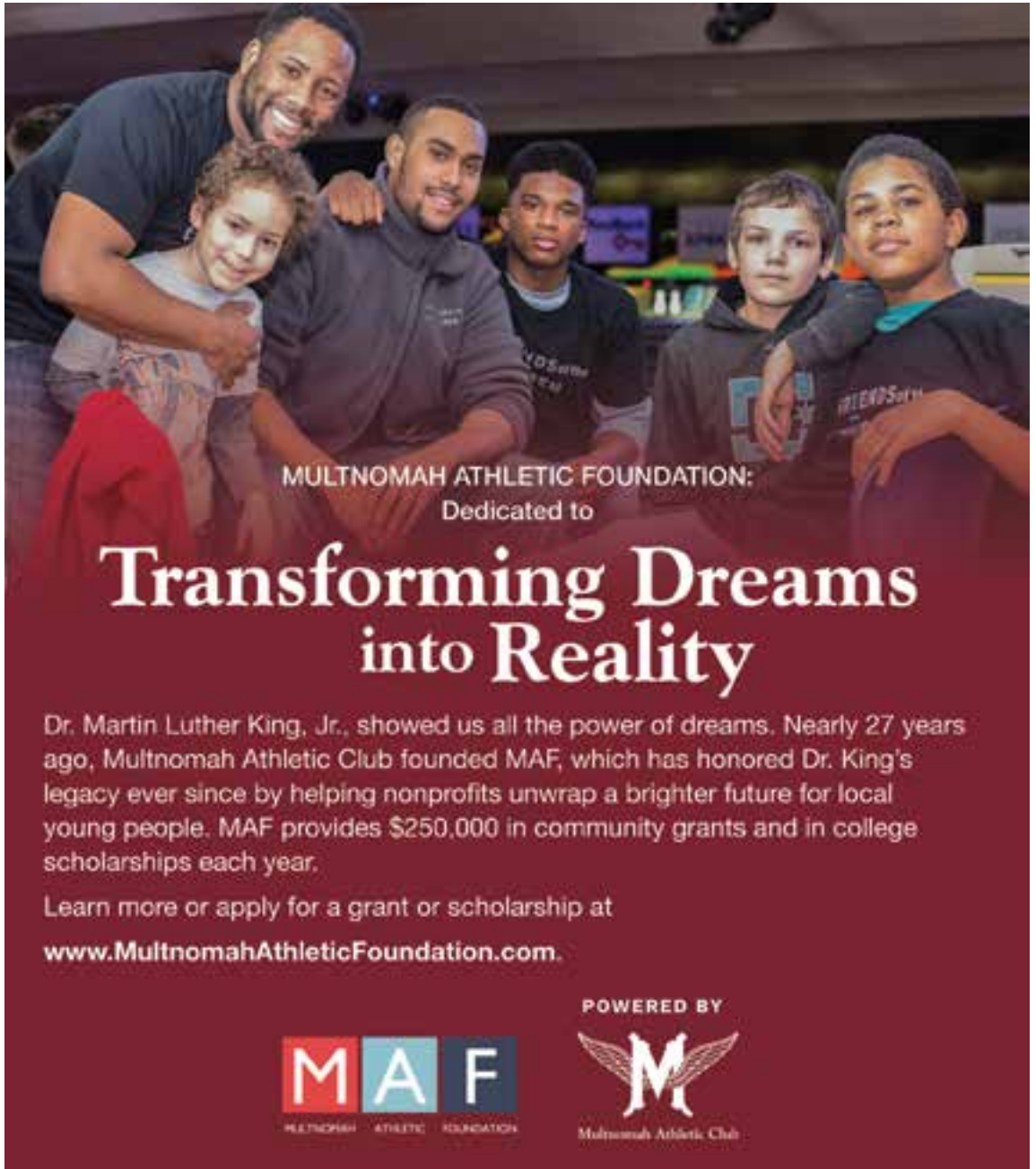
Werner and the other justice advocates began by holding prayer vigils, protests and marches outside of the Sheridan prison. They were joined by at least two other immigrant rights groups in Oregon, Unidos Bridging Community and the Rural Organizing Project.

By July there was finally some progress. With the help of the Innovation Law Lab, 80 of the asylum seekers were determined to be legally eligible for release, but they continued being detained.

The organization sent letters and made phone calls to Eliabeth Godfrey, the acting ICE field office director, but got no responses. That's when the Interfaith Movement decided to escalate their approach by dispatching clergy members willing to risk arrest by engaging in civil disobedience.

Such a tool was strategized early on, Rabbi Debra Kolodny of Portland's UnShul said.

Sarah Loose, also with the immigrant justice group said, "We knew that they were eligible for release and that it was Elizabeth Godfrey who had the sole pow-





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CONTINUED ON PAGE 10