

Young Activist Runs for Metro Council

Position has no incumbent in crowded field

BY BEVERLY CORBELL
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

When Cameron Whitten moved to Portland at age 18, he had no place to live and no resources, but a local nonprofit with a long history of helping homeless youth took him in. Now he wants to give back and is running for the District 5 seat on the Portland Metro Council, a regional government serving Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties.

"I was a client at Outside Inn, I had access to mentors, to meals, to shelter, and I had advocates that helped me enroll in school and be successful," Whitten said, describing his experience with the organization and a concern that too many others, like he was 10 years ago, are still vulnerable.

"Our world is so broken right now, and I think the resources that currently exist do not adequately meet the needs we have," he said. "There are people who are extremely vulnerable with very intense challenge."

Whitten, in an interview with the Portland Observer before the

coronavirus pandemic caused a worldwide health crisis, said he felt lucky that he had been able to find successful employment and a career in public service. But while he credited the support he's had, he also pointed to his own hard work to make a productive life for himself.

To focus on his campaign, Whitten ended his tenure as executive director of the Q Center to devote the time necessary to win an election. Besides the Q Center which offers programs to support the LGBTQ+ community, Whitten has served as founder of the racial justice nonprofit Brown Hope, known for the Reparations Power Hour and Blackstreet Bakery. He also serves on the boards of Reach Community Development and Pioneer Courthouse Square.

A long time activist, Whitten led protests following the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, Sandra Bland and other people of color, and in 2012 he staged a 56-day hunger strike in front of City Hall that focused attention on the suffering caused by the city's housing crisis.

On top of all that, in 2016 he earned his bachelor's degree in economics from Portland State University, and he is currently studying for his master's in busi-



PHOTO BY BEVERLY CORBELL/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Steeped in Portland political activism for a decade, Cameron Whitten is running for a seat on the Metro Council in the May 19 Primary. He most recently served as executive director of the nonprofit Q Center and is founder of the racial justice nonprofit Brown Hope.

ness administration.

"I'm 28 and the impact I have made has been outsized to the

number of years I've been on this planet," Whitten said. "But I think it speaks to my passion and oppor-

tunities that have happened."

Service to others is his life's calling, Whitten said, but his great passion is racial justice, and his initial encounter with racism was when he first got to Oregon.

"We were in Albany and went there to stay at my friend's dad's house, but after one night the dad asked us to leave because he was uncomfortable having a black man in his house," he said. "Coming from Virginia, where I never had experienced overt racism like that, it made no sense to me. I actually laughed at myself and said, 'What! There are racist people in Oregon?' Ten years later I no longer find it funny."

The historic racist devastation of the black community in Portland by gentrification and so-called civic improvements or Urban Renewal, cannot be overstated, Whitten said.

"Place is so important. Place shapes our identity, it shapes our community and it shapes our future," he said. "In Portland, we took that from our black community."

Whitten is so passionate about the loss to the black culture in north and northeast Portland that he even launched a walking tour, "The Hid-

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The Week in Review

COVID Hospitalizations Fall

State officials reported the number of Oregonians sick enough to be hospitalized with coronavirus hit a new low Sunday. There were 92 active hospitalizations May 3. That number represents a drop of more than 40% from the 156 reported hospitalizations on April 8, the first day state officials disclosed active hospitalizations for confirmed cases of COVID-19.



Protest at State Capitol

Hundreds of people opposed to Oregon's stay-at-home order demonstrated at the state Capitol on Saturday as public health officials in the state announced dozens more cases and five additional deaths from COVID-19. Most of the protesters were white and did not wear face masks, and many waved American flags and Trump campaign signs.

Record Unemployment Claims

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown apolo-

gized last week to people who have encountered problems trying to apply for unemployment during the coronavirus crisis. A record number of people have applied for benefits, but many have been stymied by breakdowns in the system. "If you're waiting on an unemployment claim: I hear your frustration," Brown, a Democrat, wrote on Twitter. "I'm sorry for the delays."

Hispanics Hit Hard by Virus

New data show that nearly half of the people who have tested positive for COVID-19 in Washington County, representing Hillsboro, Beaverton and other local cities identify as Hispanic, even though the county's overall Hispanic population is 16.5%. The pandemic brings into sharp focus the systemic social, economic and health inequities that many of our Latinx residents already face, Washington County public health officials announced.

Bottle Drop Complaints

A dispute over large crowds at a BottleDrop center at Hayden Meadows in north Portland has escalated with the owner of the retail strip mall hiring guards and fencing off a vacant lot where people were lining up to return cans. The retail development's CEO Vanessa Sturgeon said the company needed to step in to prevent drug dealing and fights, but representatives of the bottle drop said it was the guards causing chaos.