

# The INSIDE

# LOCAL NEWS



METRO

page 12



The Week in Review

page 16

CLASSIFIED/BIDS

pages 10

**The Portland Observer**  
 Established 1970 USPS 959 680  
 4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.,  
 Portland, OR 97211

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Michelle J. DePass begins her third year as president and chief executive officer for the Meyer Memorial Trust, one of the largest private funders of community advancement initiatives in the state. "MLK was a beacon of life for me," she told the Portland Observer, describing the impact the late civil rights leader has on her life and as a community advocate for change.

## Advancing Justice, Equality

### Meyer Memorial Trust leader on MLK, new headquarters

BY MICHAEL LEIGHTON  
PORTLAND OBSERVER EDITOR

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

The words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., penned from his 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail has been a lifelong inspiration to Michelle J. DePass, an esteemed Black executive overseeing the Meyer Memorial Trust, one of the largest private funders of community advancement initiatives in the state.

DePass helped the Trust put down permanent roots in the historically Black Albina community of north and northeast Portland this fall, by opening a new headquarters to advance a Board mission to create a transformative future for people of color in Oregon, one where there is more economic opportunity and less hate and injustice.

DePass will begin her third year as president and chief executive officer for the organization in April.

"MLK was a beacon of life for me," she told the Portland Observer, describing her life as a community advocate for change and the impact the late civil rights leader had on her. DePass previously has served as civil rights

lawyer, environmental justice advocate, community organizer and former assistant administrator for U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under former President Obama.

As a young Black woman, she was inspired by Dr. King's advocacy for the economic empowerment of Black Americans and other people who struggle to survive and prosper. Now advancing equality is work she and her staff of 40 employees conduct through the Meyer Memorial Trust.

"We cannot be free until we have opportunity," she said, echoing the words of the late civil rights leader and reflecting on his legacy as Portland and the nation approach the Martin Luther King Jr. National Holiday on Jan. 18.

The Meyer Memorial Trust is now firmly allied with powerful allies in private and governmental affairs who acknowledge that injustice in Oregon is founded on historical anti-Black and anti-Indigenous bigotry.

This summer, for example, the Trust embarked on a new "Justice Oregon" plan to advance racial justice and equity in Oregon by allocating \$1.3 million to local Black-led and Black-serving organizations, part of a five year, \$25 million commitment to fight injustice by making strategic investments in the lives of Black Oregonians.

The funding initiative came in the wake of two months of nationwide demonstrations in response to the death of George Floyd, a

Black man who died after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly 8 minutes.

The Meyer Memorial Trust was established in 1982 from the estate of Fred G. Meyer, the founder of the one-stop Fred Meyer stores of Portland lore. Over the course of its history, the Trust has awarded over \$800 million to more than 3,470 community organizations.

The new Meyer Memorial headquarters, located at 2045 N. Vancouver Ave., is both a testament to advancing economic and environmental justice and the story of the late Fred Meyer himself, who founded his grocery empire as a German immigrant and lived and worked in the same Albina neighborhood while leaving a legacy of promoting the community.

The new building was developed and constructed under rigorous goals for minority and women-owned business participation, DePass said, and used the latest efficiencies for energy use and building materials, like next-generation wood products made in Oregon. The headquarters is in line to receive LEED Platinum certification, the highest rating possible for environmental innovations, she said.

DePass is proud of the diverse workforce that benefitted from the project. She said about half of the construction workforce budget went to women and minority-owned subcontractors, while 30 percent of the journey

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

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