

Stepping Up and Standing Up

New NAACP president learned about civil rights early

BY BEVERLY CORBELL
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

It wasn't the leadership she sought, but Sharon Gary-Smith's entire life has prepared her to be the new president of the Portland NAACP.

"I come from a family where you didn't get a choice about stepping up and standing up," she said. "The idea of doing the work of justice — moving racial and social justice forward — you did it. You didn't have a choice."

Her parents were local activists and taught her the lessons of the late civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King and the importance of advocating for change at an early age.

Born and raised in Portland, Gary-Smith is the eldest of four daughters of Bobbi Lou Mosley-Gary and Frederick Douglass Gary Jr. Her father was a graduate of Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, the historically Black college in Alabama which molded his outlook, she said, and the family took pride in his being a "Tuskegee man."

"For us, our family, and our community, Tuskegee resonated with them. Their students, young men, came out prepared to support their community," she said. "We understood George Washington Carver's legacy, which they didn't teach us much about in school."

Her mother was also involved in her community, urging others to get involved in fighting for justice.

"She was supposed to be a stay-at-home mama, but she went to the streets, telling other mothers why they needed to get out and fight," Gary-Smith recalled. "She was a pistol and we were fed justice and resistance with food every day



Sharon Gary-Smith, newly elected Portland NAACP president, is from a Portland family historically rooted in advocating for racial justice. "An angry, gentle Black woman," who knows how to channel that passion into constructive action. "Age and experience tempers you," she tells the Portland Observer, "I know how to sit in board rooms...and I know those marching around the building — that used to be me."

and were taught resistance to injustice at every meal."

They also shared their own histories to support their activism.

"My father was born in Hampton, Virginia, where he learned about living in a segregated state," she said. "My mother was from Kansas City, Missouri, the "Show me state," but more importantly, it was the historical swing state (in the vote) on whether slavery would continue."

These were the "missing pieces" in her education that her parents filled in through their own teaching, day in and day out.

The family was considered Black middle class, she said, and she and her sisters were taught, "To those much is giv-

en, much is expected." The advice was reinforced with a lot of support and encouragement.

"They told us little Black girls, 'You're smart, you're bright and we expect you to be excellent.' My parents set the standards, not the school. 'You have an excellent mind. You're smart.'"

Gary-Smith used those smarts when she began her professional career in the mid-1970s when she was chosen to lead the city's anti-poverty agency, the Portland Metropolitan Steering Committee, a \$4 million agency organization that managed 22 community-based programs.

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