

Helping Women

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"It's creating spaces for women to heal. It sets an atmosphere where you can be somewhere that is safe."

The program doesn't force someone into a mold, but rather meets women where they are. Anyone can take part, no matter their faith, or even if they don't practice a faith. Comparable to practices and traditions such as Inipi (Lakota sweat lodge ceremonies) or yoga,

the work is meant to reach people who desire a connection to healing and spirituality.

"The program is about a connection to healing and faith, and what Black women have identified as their needs," she stressed.

FaithBridge is also centered on authenticity and lived experience.

"I'm very transparent about my own story. When we start I say, 'Tell me your story, instead of how you are,'" Saunders said.

Most women, when they're in a traumatic place, don't want to talk about themselves, Saunders says. "I ask them, 'What did you want to be when you grow up?' Do you know how many women can't address that because they're emotionally stunted? Time stops at places of trauma.

"What we have to do is find where the door got opened and work to shut the door. We move through the why — why are they doing what they're doing, not where they've been."

Saunders' work is changing lives. "I've met women from the very

first week who still call me," she says.

She mentions one client in particular who has post-traumatic stress disorder and other behavioral health challenges, leading her to relapse from time to time. "But she keeps going," Saunders says.

"I continue to give her hope, so she still calls. I start over with her. We go through the work and she's back on her feet again and back connecting with her faith. She may fall down again and then we'll go deeper. But the answer for her is healing."

Someone's community may hold and reflect back a certain narrative about their life, Saunders says. "And everybody knows your story. So how do you take your story back?"

"For many African American women, faith is what we relied on for our existence. Through slavery and the trauma, what we turned to was faith. It was a faith we had prior to coming to these shores. Long-term healing is what is needed."

(Editor's note: Thank you to Jessica Morkert-Shibley of Multnomah County Communications and her team for contributing this story.)

Connecting with Nature

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

excited about us and wants us to apply for another grant" for next summer.

Because many public places, including public swimming pools and other recreational sites were off limits to Blacks historically because of racism, many never learned to swim or learned about the outdoors, Brannon said.

Teaching the young hiking guides are Metro staffers Jazz Bias and Jason Ligons, both African-American and environmental professionals.

"Kudos to Metro staff," Brannon said. "It's the first time I've worked with a quasi-governmental organization where everyone was BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color)."

"It's good exposure (for the kids) to see these careers," she added.

Both Bias and Ligons hope some follow in their path, she said.

"One of the things Jason and Jazz said was that if one of the kids went on to pursue environmental education as a career, it would make the entire program worthwhile," Brannon said.

The young guides carry out mindfulness exercises and learn things like how some native plants have medicinal uses, like a salve made from the green part of

plantains, she said.

"People normally pull out plantains, which is considered a nuisance plant, but is actually really useful," she said. "It's really good for moisturizing when you mix it with coconut oil. It's good for the skin."

The hiking groups have been small because of Covid, she said, and have mostly been families with kids, but everyone is welcome.

The benefits of being out in nature are myriad, Brannon said.

"The hikes are so they can build positive memories out in nature, and also includes mindfulness and stress release to include meditation and the stress of racial trauma," she said. "We talk about safe spaces and how nature clears your mind. They get exercise and get away from cell phones," even though some kids "freaked out" with no cell service at Oxbow Park.

Another move that will help ensure the safety of Black community members and other people of color is the recent passage of Oregon Senate Bill 289, environmental equity legislation that carries penalties for people who do hate crimes in nature, she said.

"It falls in nicely in line with trying to get Black folks in nature that hasn't always been welcoming," Brannon said.

While all the hikes currently



A new hiking program geared to Black kids and other young people of color build positive memories out in nature. "We talk about safe spaces and how nature clears your mind," said J'reyesha Brannon, chair of the Portland NAACP's Environmental Justice committee, a lead organizer of the program.

are accessible by car, Brannon would like to see transportation made available to area parks in the future.

"Eventually we'd like to get a shuttle bus, and we've got another grant in the works (from Portland General Electric) for an EV (electric vehicle)," she said.

The grant application is for \$80,000 and Brannon said she is not super optimistic because of the high price tag, but she'll keep trying.

"We want to make sure these

hikes are accessible," she said.

Thanks to Metro's support, Brannon said the program will not only continue next year, but will be expanded and will likely include other groups with similar missions, such as the People of Color Outdoors Meetup group, founded in 2017 by Pam Slaughter, who helped write the Senate bill, Brannon said.

"I hope next time I can partner with her," Brannon said. "She's already doing this and that will make it even better for the kids."

In a publication by the Portland Audubon Society, Slaughter explained the reason many Black people are not as acquainted with the natural world as they should be.

"Black people and other people of color sometimes experience verbal abuse, threatening behavior, and even physical attacks while enjoying the outdoors," she wrote. "As a result, going outdoors to enjoy nature can feel like a potentially dangerous thing to do."

But spending time in nature can lead to healthier, happier communities, she wrote. "It's more important for people of color to connect with nature. It's critical."



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