

‘We have progressed, but so has racism’

Vancouver NAACP president advances fight for justice

By BEVERLY CORBELL
 THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

One year in as president of the Vancouver NAACP, Jasmine Tolbert, has taken the battle to eliminate racial injustice to new heights.

When the local civil rights group joined the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington in November to file a lawsuit urging the U.S. Department of Justice to open investigations into “excessive force and discriminatory policing” in the Vancouver Police Department, the Clark County Sheriff’s Office and a joint city-county drug task force, Tolbert was front and center.

“The problem is that systemic racism is alive and well in Vancouver and Clark County, Tolbert said.

In an interview with the Portland Observer for its annual Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday special edition, she described



In her first year as president of the Vancouver NAACP, Jasmine Tolbert has taken the fight against racial injustice to a new level. The civil rights group recently joined in a lawsuit to reign in excessive force and discriminatory policing in Vancouver and Clark County.

the current need for reparative actions to advance racial equality.

“I think that as we have progressed, so has racism,” Tolbert said, “I think the tactics, the same way overt racists laid the groundwork for the systemic racism tak-

ing place now, allowed racism to continue evolving, and while we’ve made progress, so have those systemic policies.”

Tolbert grew up in Clark County and clearly remembers reading books on King and civil rights

leaders Malcolm X and Harriett Tubman that were in her home growing up. She also recalls lessons about civil rights and racism she received from her mother.

“I remember those books explicitly, Dr. King’s message and my mom’s home history lessons, things you didn’t get in school,” she said.

But Dr. King’s message has been watered down, she said, including what’s being taught in schools.

“I wish it was a more holistic picture being painted of the work he did rather than for certain members of society to dictate the way our actions should look,” she said.

In the lawsuit targeting local law enforcement, the NAACP and ACLU point to four officer-involved deaths in Clark County and Vancouver in recent years that included a 16-year-old Pacific Islander high school student; a 28-year-old Pacific Islander man; three white homeless men, one in a mental health crisis; and three Black men, 43-year-old Carlos Hunter, Kevin Peterson, 21, and Jenoa D. Donald, 30.

The civil rights organizations say Hunter, falsely accused of being part of the drug trade, was pulled over and shot 16 times while still fastened in his seatbelt. Peterson was caught in a drug

sting and ran away in fright when two unmarked law enforcement cars boxed him in. He was shot, in the back, 34 times. Donald, who was unarmed, was stopped for a broken taillight, punched in the face and shot twice at close range.

Tolbert said the deaths are examples of how Vancouver and Clark County law enforcement has engaged in discriminatory policing for years against people of color, residents experiencing homelessness, and those with a mental health disability, while showing favor to known white supremacist extremist groups.

“This disparate policing causes lasting harm for residents and undermines public safety for the community at large,” she said.

Calling out highly publicized police actions that erode the already strained relationships between the community and local law enforcement, Tolbert said all residents of Vancouver and Clark County deserve equal and professional treatment by police officers.

“When someone is stopped by the police it should not have to end with them dying. No matter what the person’s background is, no matter what the reason is for the stop. There should be and there

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A Time of Reflection

As we put another year behind us, it’s only natural to take some time to reflect on the months just past. It’s a great time to catalog the accomplishments and joys that the passing year brought, as well as take an honest look at behaviors we might want to change in the year ahead—perhaps that we *need* to change in the year ahead.

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