

Black Men Share Hopes, Dreams



Mohamed Bullo (left), his brother Ahemed Bullo (right) and Iman Abdi lead a northeast Portland tour highlighting the voices, experiences and vision of Black men rising, dubbed the "Dream Chaser's Walk."

'In My Shoes' walk informs county leaders

Dozens of participants showed up on the grounds of Rigler Elementary School in northeast Portland's Cully neighborhood for the recent "In My Shoes" walking tour hosted by Word is Bond, a nonprofit organization that serves young Black men.

It was one of 10 tours organized by the group for Black History Month to highlight the voices, experiences and vision of rising Black men in the community.

"This project is about declaring that Black stories exist in Portland and that we are masters of those stories, and we can tell those stories ourselves and empower our rising Black men to own those narratives," said Lakayana Drury, the group's founder and executive director.

Together, three young Black men took the group of more than 40 community members — including elected leaders from Multnomah County and

the City of Portland, Portland Public Schools officials, and Portland firefighters — on a two-mile trek that they dubbed the "Dream Chaser's Walk."

Ahemed and Mohamed Bullo immigrated to the United States from Ethiopia. Abdi was born in a refugee camp in Nairobi, Kenya, and moved to Portland's Cully neighborhood with his family in 2007. Today, the Bullo twins are college-bound seniors at De La Salle North Catholic High School, while Abdi attends Portland State University.

"This is where I had the aspirations and dreams I'm achieving right now," said Ahemed Bullo, who opened the tour.

"This is where I began growing as a person: my character, my identity," Mohamed Bullo said. "It meant a lot growing up, playing with kids, having a safe place to hang out, during school and after school, and having adults I looked up to at the time."

The second of the tour's eight stops was the construction site of a 50-unit affordable housing project near Northeast Cully Boulevard and Prescott Street.

Initially, the community believed the site would host a traditional apartment building, pushing out those who can't afford it, Ahemed Bullo said.

"There's gentrification going on from St. Johns all the way to Lents Park. But [affordable housing] is what the community and Northeast Portland needs."

Throughout the tour, the guides shared their personal experiences, recited poems by Black poets such as Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes, and reflected on their community.

Ahemed Bullo noted that the narrative of the Cully community is all too often negative.

"Someone may look at the neighborhood and only see the violence," he said. "But there are people like me, Iman and Mohamed who are doing positive things in the neighborhood."

The tour highlighted the beauty of the Cully neighborhood, but also accentuated the needs for housing and better streets and sidewalks. The young men pressed for more investments in a community center, a health clinic, and more libraries and sidewalks.

Word is Bond launched in summer

2017 as a six-week, paid internship program with the goal of "creating positive relationships between young Black men and law enforcement."

Today, Word is Bond has broadened to develop young Black men by helping them build connections with those who provide community safety; offering leadership, professional development, career exploration and public speaking opportunities; and providing education about Black history and storytelling.

The program is sponsored by multiple partners, including Multnomah County, which has worked with and supported Word is Bond since its start, providing the funding to pay participants through the County's partnership with WorkSystems Inc. Other partners include the City of Portland, other nonprofits and private partners.

"I think we're showing diversity on what Word is Bond is," said Drury. "A lot of people know us as the organization that works to bridge the gap between young Black men and law enforcement. And we do that, but we also empower Black men to be leaders in all aspects of their lives."