

# Portland Native is State's New U.S. Attorney

## Natalie Wight is the first Black Woman to hold the office

By BEVERLY CORBELL

Natalie Wight, who was confirmed as Oregon's U.S. attorney by the U.S. Senate earlier this month, is the first person of Black descent to hold the office, and she gives credit to growing up in Portland for her successes.

As a 1992 graduate of Cleveland High, where she played soccer, basketball and track and field, Wight said her high school experience helped give her the will to succeed.

"The people who raised me up were my teachers and my coaches, and they always pushed me to never give up," she said.

That attitude led to many successes in her life, including graduating from Notre Dame law school in 2003 and that same year joining the Department of Justice through the Attorney General's Honors Program as an attorney for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. She then served as an assistant U.S. attorney in California from 2008 to 2012, when she came back to Portland to work in Oregon's U.S. Attorney's office.



Natalie Wight

"I couldn't wait to get back," she said, and one of the first things she did was get in touch with her old high school and start the Cleveland Mock Trial program, which she started with her husband, Casey Nokes, also an attorney. Some schools have mock trials as part of the curriculum, but it's all volunteer at Cleveland, where the kids come in after school and on weekends.

Wight also spearheaded a mock trial program at Notre Dame, where the program for law students was pretty intense, she said, but it's more geared toward

high school kids at Cleveland.

"It's a little mix of everything, and we mostly focus on getting them ready for graduation and college and do a little of mock trial," she said. "We teach them how to evaluate a case, to be analytical and about both criminal and civil cases."

The program starts in October and ends with statewide mock trial competition at the Multnomah County Courthouse.

"We've only gone to state once," she said, "but we pride ourselves on being the runner-up every year."

In her volunteer work and in her job, where she often puts in 12 to 14 hour days, underlying it all is her love of children and her concern for their futures, Wight said.

"My vision is that I want to know how our cases affect children, both as victims and as defendants," she said. "I want to know how our work can help bring justice to kids, and at the same time support them," and that includes her own sons, ages 16 and "almost 15."

In her 18 years with the U.S. Attorney's Office, most recently Wight served as the deputy chief of the Organized and Violent Crime Section, where she focused on child exploitation, human trafficking, kidnapping, Indian Country, robberies, assaults and other violent crimes. She also served as an assistant U.S. Attorney in the office's Civil Division, defending the United States in cases involving civil rights, torts, medical malpractice, employment law and prison

litigation. She has also been a Department of Justice attorney recruitment ambassador since 2011 and the U.S. Attorney's Portland Reentry Court Coordinator since 2015.

"The reentry program is for people who have finished their sentences and they're still on probation," she said, "and we focus only on the highest risk and highest need individuals in reintegrating back into the community," she said. "They very often have serious substance abuse, and extensive criminal history and serious trauma."

Together with a team of many experts, overseen by the district court and run by a federal judge, the goal is to help them learn to succeed in life.

"I represent the prosecutor's office and work with individuals from probation and others, like mental health, as part of the reentry court team," she said. "We do a lot of work with them to help with families to get the help they need, especially women in the program, where a lot are trying to regain parental rights and get housing. It's part of my job, but quite different from my day job of prosecuting."

That helps give her life balance, she said, because not everyone gets a life sentence and helping them makes for safer communities.

"It's wonderful, but challenging," she said. "It's very rewarding and grounding to see the day-to-day that someone has to go through."

## Power Through Community Economics

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

way for more businesses of Color to tell their stories and share their value propositions with the communities they support. People gravitate to people with good and very clear visions for success."

Mr. Randall emphasized that community economics is essential for establishing economic parity and economic equity in our state. Two groups he highlighted that perform exemplary versions of community economics are the Mexican American and the Asian-American communities. Randall said that generally, the Asian Community, and more specifically the Chinese American community, have what are called family clubs. "These clubs are where the community will pool, lend and donate money and resources to each other to make sure everyone in the community has what they need." He explained that a very similar system emerged from the Mexican American Community, where "relatives and families will band together under the concept of ensuring the community is taken care of."

That spirit of community economics, of it taking a village to raise a child, is precisely what

NAMC-Oregon brings to the table as a critical convener in our various diverse communities, McCoy said. "NAMC believes it doesn't just take a village to raise a child, it takes a village to raise a community. We have so many different great organizations doing amazing work, but we're siloed. We're in our own individual communities. We do not impact broader swaths of folks unless we are working together. That was the driving force behind the BBAO and our wider association partnerships."

"The fact that NAMC, an organization run by, and focused on People of Color, and the Portland Business Alliance (PBA), a largely White organization, have joined forces to put together an organization that is designed to bring about economic prosperity for the Black Community is crucial," said Randall, and is a sign that the village that Nate described is growing.

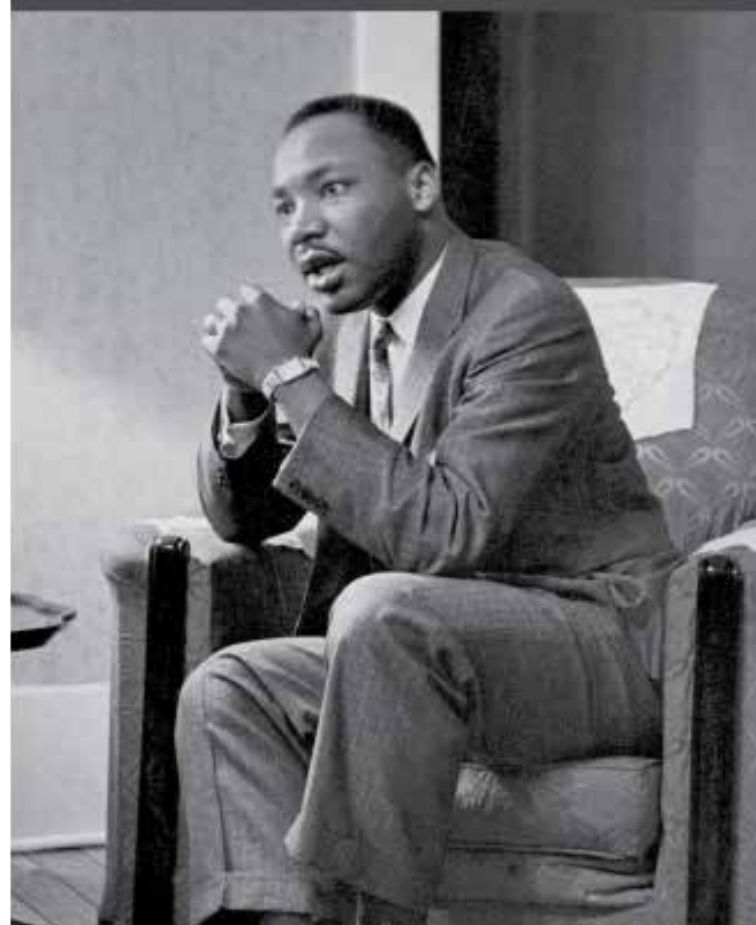
Randall continued, "BBAO's mission and vision are clear. We are an organization that is designed to bring about economic prosperity," he said. "We just need to show people what we [the Black Community] can do." The White Community has access to the lion's share of the capital and opportunity in Oregon.

"Because of our history, we're often afraid to put ourselves out there, to jump into these predominantly White spaces." Lance explained that the BBAO will fight to "make sure that we are prepared to take advantage of these opportunities." He said the end game for him isn't control or power, "the end game is equity, prosperity and everyone having what they need."

"Growth for BBAO, or any of our close association partners like LatinoBuilt, NAYA, or AGC, is growth for NAMC," McCoy said. "We are a village. A community." He emphasized. McCoy said, "To that end, NAMC and our partners are trying to zero in and set new tables that specifically address gaps in wealth creation, home ownership, and business revenue to create programs and policies for the retention and expansion of businesses of Color."

The growth of these businesses of Color, said McCoy, "is a universal benefit to us all. On the surface, it allows these smaller companies to grow, thrive, and more significantly contribute to the tax base. But more crucially, it allows our Communities of Color to ensure they have what they need so that no one falls through the cracks."

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