

Restoring History and Community: The Albina Arts Story

Bonnie Johnson, who is now in her 70s, fondly remembers regularly visiting the former Albina Arts Center, which was just two blocks from her Northeast Portland childhood home. It was a safe place where she felt fully accepted, even though she says she couldn't read or write well as a child.

"Me and my brothers, we would come here four or five times a week," Johnson said. "There were adults here who seemed to love us and care about us and wanted us to learn. It was just a place we could eat and have fun and feel safe until our mothers got home. That's what is missing now. A lot of kids are home, and they don't have many places to go."

In 2016, after decades of the building falling into disrepair, the Oregon Community Foundation accepted temporary ownership of the one-story structure, at the request of the State of Oregon. Now, OCF is in the process of figuring out how to gift the building back to a Black-led nonprofit that is willing to center arts, healing, and intergenerational community-building within the space, in perpetuity.

Since June, OCF has organized a community-led visioning process, led by Ericka Warren, a 3rd-generation Portland native and a consultant with Try Excel-



The Soul Restoration Center, operating out of the former Albina Arts Building, holds events to celebrate and uplift the Black community

lence, to find the right steward for this beloved community asset. A group of mostly Black organizations and individuals have been meeting online to decide on the parameters that will frame an eventual Request for Proposals (RFP) process. Last Wednesday, the group met in person for the first time.

"If we want culture to be honored here, then we better make sure that who we transfer it to is obligated to abide by the intent of all of us who have participated in this process," said Jeana Woolley, a commercial real estate developer who has managed the former Albina Arts Center space for many

years. Woolley was one of 20 people who attended last week's discussion in The Soul Restoration Center.

In the early 1960s through the '70s, the former Albina Arts Center, located off the corner of Northeast Killingsworth Street and Williams Avenue, was once a significant cultural nucleus for Portland's Black community. Over the years, it has been a community hub, arts center, meeting place and a source of many cherished memories. Most importantly, it gave intentional space for the development of artistic and intellectual resources within the historically Black Albina neighborhood.

Today, four separate places of business rent a portion of the building. This includes Turn! Turn! Turn!, a music and art event space that also houses North Portland Community Acupuncture; FaithBridge, which supports women seeking healing from abuse, divorce, incarceration or recovery; The Vital Compass, a Chinese medicine pharmacy and cooperative clinic; and The Soul Restoration Center, which offers creative, youth-focused and healing-centered, intergenerational programming for Portland's Black community, as part of the City of Portland's Black Youth Leadership Fund,

initiated by City Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty.

Over multiple discussions over the past few months, the 23-plus participants in the community-visioning process have emphasized the following desired values for the next owner:

1) Be Black owned, have a strong local connection to Portland, and a reputation for serving and/or affirming the Black community.

2) Keep arts central in future programming, with a commitment to preserving the history of the Albina Arts Center.

3) Create a safe and affirming space for the Black community, with programming that focuses on healing.


The community conversations also have elevated the need for applicants to provide details of the nonprofit's vision of the space for the next five to 10 years; a concrete plan for future creative programming; and a business model that would allow for the building, which needs significant upgrading, to be revitalized and expanded. Although the space has not operated as the Albina Arts Center for more than 50 years, the emotional ties to the space from those who considered it a second home and nurtured their creative urgings within its wall have not waned.

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