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Committed to Cultural Diversity

# Nikki Brown Is Not Your Ordinary Clown!

## Celebrating Juneteenth and encouraging reading and literacy to kids

By BEVERLY CORBELL

This year's Juneteenth celebration at Lillis-Abina Park on June 17 and 18 will start with a parade and Nikki Brown Clown plans to be front and center.

Brown is more than just a clown and was last year's grand marshal for the Good in the Hood celebration, honoring her work in promoting literacy to Black kids.

But it didn't start that way. In about 2012, Brown got bored after years working for Multnomah County, so she decided to become a clown, starting out at children's birthday parties.

"I was booking gigs over weekends and made more than I was making at the county," she said, so she left her job and became a full-time clown.

But she wanted to do more, she said, and she wanted to promote reading and literacy. Birthday parties paid well, but it bothered her that the only way kids could connect with her was for the parents to pay.

So she left her county job, and about a year later, through a series of events, Brown connected with the Multnomah library system to read children's books at 10 events, and spearheaded Black family nights and Black literacy through the Black Parent Initiative.

"At first I would just read a story, but now I have a signature way of reading a story that includes music," she said. "Something in a story reminds me of a



Nikki Brown the Clown

song, so I jump and dance around."

Brown studied children's literature in college and said she has "an unhealthy amount of children's books in my house, but that ended up being what was needed."

Although she started out the traditional way — doing children's birthday parties

— Brown gave that up and now works for four county library systems, including Multnomah, Washington, Scappoose and the city of Albany, promoting reading and an appreciation for literature for BIPOC kids. And she just signed a contract with Portland Public Schools.

"Last week I started doing end of the school year events, twisting balloons and coloring sheets to interact with the kids," she said. "Because I promote dance and music and get the kids moving, the DJ calls me up and I get everybody moving. They can either read a book or get into dance and movement."

Although she makes her own costumes and learned to put on professional clown makeup at clown school, she wears a little heart on the tip of her nose instead of a big round ball because she doesn't want to be intimidating to kids.

"I wear my heart on the top of my nose. As an African American woman, I don't want to be scary," she said.

And when she's not being a clown, Brown is doing public speaking about "the need to foster brown folks and also about child abuse prevention," and she practices what she preaches.

"I am a certified foster parent, and on May 17 my husband and I adopted three brown boys from the California foster care system," she said.

Brown said she's also a big supporter of the Juneteenth celebration and spreads the word all year long.

"I tell adults to put it on their calendar and also try to tell the story of the mother of Oregon Juneteenth, Clara Peoples," who she remembers as someone who always fed those in need.

Peoples moved to Oregon in 1972 to work in the shipyards, Brown said, and was amazed that no one there had heard of Juneteenth, which marks the day, June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger of the U.S. Army arrived in Galveston, Texas and informed enslaved people of African descent that they were free.

The Juneteenth event is also free, starting with a parade at the King School on Martin Luther King Blvd. at 11 a.m., followed by two days of celebration featuring food vendors, live music, raffles and more. For more details, got to [juneteenthor.com](http://juneteenthor.com).