



Mapping Out Our Histories

New project looks for lost stories of Williams Avenue and the Civil Rights Movement in Portland



By Lisa Loving
Of *The Skanner News*

Emma Colburn is a Portland native who works with youth in the classroom; she has a passion for designing unusual educational projects to connect teenagers with their heritage and their neighborhoods.

Last summer she led a New Columbia class in map-making that brought kids together with senior citizens at the Urban League.

More recently Colburn started creating an art installation built around preserving the history of the Williams Avenue corridor. Incorporating watercolor portraits she painted of people at the Senior Center, Colburn is also piecing together a series of community maps and plans more art from Williams Avenue's past.

To do that, she is counting on local residents to help her winnow down which buildings should be memorialized in the history project.

Her portrait collection is on display at the McCoy Academy through the end of the month – and she is hoping people will seek her out to share more stories of Portland's past. Contact her at the McCoy Academy, 503-281-9597.

The Skanner News: Tell us about this history project that incorporates art.

Emma Colburn: The project is called Vibrant Heirlooms. I first moved back to Portland two years ago, I heard that they were going to be creating this development at the Coliseum called Jumptown, to capitalize on the history of the neighborhood while also playing reference to the Blazers. So that's when I first got involved, because I had been involved in cultural heritage tourism in Chicago and in Wisconsin and through working out there I realized that sometimes there's a potential for cultural heritage tourism but that also for it to go the other way and become kitsch if it wasn't well done.

So I wanted to see what was going on with that and learn about some of the neighborhood's history myself. So I ended up writing a grant that was funded by the Regional Arts and Culture Council. Originally it was called "Vanishing Heirlooms," and it was the same project but once I got into it I said, wait, it isn't vanishing, it's still very vibrant. So I changed the project title to Vibrant Heirlooms.

TSN: When you say heirlooms and you mean buildings?

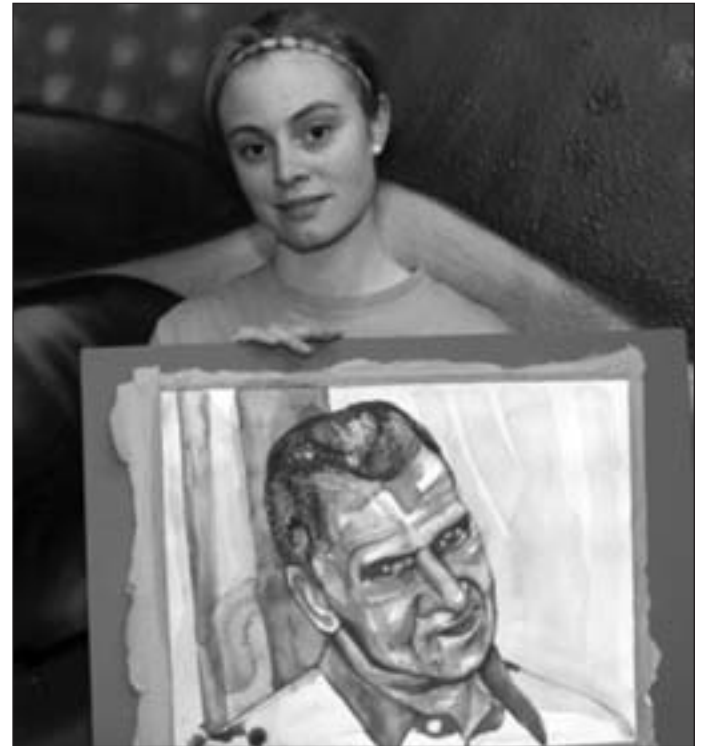
Colburn: I'm talking about both the architecture of the neighborhood and the people that passed on that inheritance. Also the people who are inheriting it, which I consider to be the children of the neighborhood and also the newcomers to the neighborhood. It's called Vibrant Heirlooms and it's a series of watercolor portraits of seniors who go down to the Loaves and Fishes center on MLK. Some of them lived in Portland, as well as Vanport and The Villa (Columbia Villa), and the Boise-Elliott neighborhood, and some of them are newcomers. Like if they didn't spend a lot of time in Portland and they got here in the 70s.

TSN: That's so Portland – oh, the 70s – 40 years ago, those are all newcomers. That's totally the way we think.

Colburn: That's how people describe themselves here – 'oh I don't really know about that, I'm a newcomer, I've only been here since the 70s.'

So what I realized as an educator is we teach our students year after year about Civil Rights, and we always talk about the same leaders in the South. I think that's a problem because I think we need to teach young people how to see their history in their everyday landscape, because that makes them more engaged in the subject that you're teaching. Like, 'oh, I go past that every day, the civil rights movement wasn't just something that happened in the South.' I think it's important that we understand how it impacted our daily experiences. So as an educator it's frustrating because there's not a lot of curriculum – I don't

That's how people describe themselves here – 'oh I don't really know about that, I'm a newcomer, I've only been here since the 70s.'



Artist and educator Emma Colburn with a watercolor portrait from her series of paintings of clients at the Urban League Senior center.

know of any curriculum about Portland civil rights, civil rights leaders in Portland, places where rallies happened, even acts of segregation happened – like where is the document that lists all of the places where Black people weren't allowed, that had "Whites Only" signs? I'd like to see that, because I'd like to share those locations with my students instead of reading a picture book about MLK.

So the wider picture of this project is that it will be turned into an arts-based geography curriculum about the civil rights movement using local geography. So it will be map-based. Also we'll use portraits and the art of portraiture to teach local geography.



Colburn's students from New Columbia spent weeks last summer visiting seniors in North Portland, learning how to sew and listening to stories about 'The Villa.'

TSN: Did you already start to do that this summer with your students at New Columbia?

Colburn: That was a beginning, more for myself as an educator. What we did do was personal interviews with people at the senior center who had grown up in "The Villa" when it was "The Villa" and not New Columbia. We spent time every week down there sewing – they taught us how to sew, and that was an ice-breaker-introduction. Because then one week we broke up into one on one interviews with the seniors, who remembered growing up there.

That program was very short, so we didn't follow it through the way that I envision doing it eventually. I know that it was meaningful for the seniors, and those are the seniors that I painted. I followed up, for myself as an artist. Now that I've painted the images they're going to be installed at the Urban League, on Russell, so that's exciting. We're going to have a reception with the seniors there.

Right now I work with a group of students at Grant, I work as

See ART on page 3