

A Look at Portland's African American History

By Helen Silvis
Of The Skanner News
and Travel Portland

Black pioneers were among the earliest non-Native people to settle in Oregon, but it was not until World War II that thousands of African Americans migrated to the Northwest to find work in the shipyards and keep the railroads running. Today Portland is home to more than 41,000 African Americans, most living on the east side of the Willamette River.

Despite daunting barriers and discrimination, African Americans have made important contributions to Oregon in politics, medicine, the environment, sports and the arts. Portland's many parks, for example, make the city one of the greenest in the nation. That's thanks largely to Charles Jordan, a former city commissioner who championed green spaces in cities, far ahead of his time. In July 2012, the city renamed a community center in Jordan's honor.

NOTABLE BLACK PORTLANDERS

Notable black Americans on the Portland entertainment scene include actor Danny Glover; blues vocalist Linda Hornbuckle; pianist Janice Scroggins; Grammy-winning jazz bassist Esperanza Spalding; saxophonist Mike "Philly" Phillips; jazz drummer Mel Brown; jazz singer Julianne Johnson-Weis; R&B singers Liv Warfield and Andy Stokes; funk performer/producer Tony Ozier; and rappers Cool Nutz, Rose Bent, Soul P, Luck One, Illmaculate and Animal Farm.

MORE COMMUNITY HISTORY

This section was produced in collaboration with Flossin Media.

African Americans in Oregon politics

The early 2000s marked a historic milestone as three African American females, former state senators Margaret Carter, Avel Gordly and Jackie Winters, served in the Oregon State Legislature simultaneously. These three senators made landmark reforms for both African American communities and Oregon as a whole, including removing the last remnants of anti-black exclusionary legislation from Oregon's constitution.

Margaret Carter became the first African-American woman elected to the Oregon Legislative Assembly in 1984. She advocated for education for those most in need, and legislation to observe Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday as a state holiday. Carter retired from the Oregon Senate in 2008 to head up the Department of Human Services. In 2011, her alma mater and former employer, Portland Community College, named the Senator Margaret Carter Technology Education Center in her honor.

Portland native Avel Gordly was elected to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1991 and became the first African American woman elected to the Oregon State Senate in 1996. She served a total of 17 years before retiring from office in 2008 to become an associate professor in the black studies department at her alma mater, Portland State University. As senator, Gordly helped pass legislation requiring statewide multicultural health service. In 2008, Oregon Health Science University renamed its behavioral health center the Avel Gordly Center for Healing, and committed to meeting mental needs in the African American community. Gordly recently published her memoir, "Remembering the Power of Words: The Life of an Oregon Activist, Legislator, and Community Leader."

Senator Jackie Winters moved to Portland with her family during WWII along with many other African Americans who sought gainful employment in the shipyards and railways. Her father launched a short-lived daily newspaper, which helped shape Winters for public debate and advocacy. As an adult, Winters moved to Salem, Ore., and



the board. Though it is not their primary objective, these men have played a part in paving the way for minority leadership.

Another notable education program headed up by African Americans is Self-

Despite daunting barriers and discrimination, African Americans have made important contributions to Oregon in politics, medicine, the environment, sports and the arts.

gained acclaim for her regional restaurant chain, Jackie's Ribs. Winters was elected to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1998, becoming the first African American Republican ever to serve in the Oregon Legislative Assembly. She won election to the Oregon Senate in 2004 and still holds office. She advocates for increased state education funding and helped create the Oregon Food Share Program, which has grown to include a statewide system of food banks. She sits on the powerful ways and means committee that oversees the state budget and is a popular guest on many national television forums.

African Americans in Portland education

Portland Community College (PCC), Oregon's largest and most diverse college, has been helmed by three African American men since 2004. Dr. Preston Pulliams is PCC's fifth district president and CEO. In 2010 he was named the Regional CEO of the Year by the Council for the Advancement of Support of Education. Dr. Algie Gatewood is president of the Cascade Campus in Northeast Portland — one of PCC's largest, most diverse campuses. Harold Williams, a self-proclaimed "junkyard dog," has staunchly helped create and defend policy for more than 20 years as chairman of

Enhancement Inc (SEI). Tony L. Hopson Sr. started SEI in 1981 as a summer basketball camp for at-risk youth. Some 30 years later, it is a fully accredited academy serving primarily African American students ages 8-25 in urban North and Northeast Portland. In 2010, SEI partnered with former NBA star Alonzo Mourning's charity to replicate its program in Miami.

Making strides through sports

African American Portlanders have come a long way since Bobby Robinson and Charles Williams broke color lines as high school sports stars in 1924, playing before huge crowds at the old Multnomah Stadium in Portland. Both went on to be the first African American athletes to play at the University of Oregon.

Since its inception in 1970, the Portland Trail Blazers NBA team has featured scores of African American players. Michael Harper, Brian Grant and Jerome Kersey are just a few who still work with the organization and call Portland home. In 2007, the franchise hired Larry Miller as their first African American president. Miller was also the first black executive at Jantzen Sports and Nike's first black vice president. In 2011, the Trail Blazers appointed their first female African American chief operating officer, Sarah Mensah. Mensah received national press and helped establish

a Portland chapter of the National Association of Black Sports Professionals.

From NBA pro to CEO, Terrell Brandon is one of the community's most consistent entrepreneurs. A two-time NBA All Star, Terrell retired in 2004 after 11 years in the league. He has since launched and invested in several businesses, including Terrell Brandon's Barbershop, Flossin Magazine and concert promoting. His annual New Year's Eve Experience at the Crystal Ballroom draws sold-out crowds.

Beloved former Blazer "Rasta man" Brian Grant, who still calls Portland home, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2008. Since then, the Brian Grant Foundation has hosted a popular event to raise funds for Parkinson's education and awareness. "Shake It Till We Make It" consists of a celebrity gala and golf tournament, and has featured Muhammad Ali and Michael J. Fox, who both live with the disease.

Playing a role in Portland's "Official Festival"

One of Portland's most celebrated events is the world-famous Portland Rose Festival, held in each year in May/June with highlights such as the Rose Festival Parade, a waterfront carnival and the selection of a queen from among princesses representing every Portland high school. In 1980, Robin Marks became the first African-American Rose Festival Queen. This honor includes a college scholarship and has since been bestowed upon several other African American women.

In 2007, the Portland Rose Festival reached two notable landmarks: celebrating its 100th anniversary and being lead by its first African American president, Leslie Goodlow-Baldwin. Leslie led the festival to top honors that year, winning the highly coveted Grand Pinnacle Award from the International Festivals & Events Association.



The National Newspaper Publishers Convention June 25-28 in Portland

SPONSORS:

