

Vanport

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nity. Vanport offered furnished houses, schools, recreation centers and a movie theatre. More than 40 percent of the population of Vanport was African American.

The hot summer and major rainstorms swelled many of the tributaries leading to the Columbia. Water levels rose, and on Memorial Day, May 30, 1948, the dam protecting the low-lying city burst. A 10 ft wall of water surged into the city, overturned cars and knocked buildings off their foundations.

Only 15 people lost their lives to the flood, but the city was completely destroyed.

“The Wake of Vanport” captures what is left of the city,

The stories in the films are told through the eyes of the children of Vanport

photographs from albums that were rescued from the houses and memories of those who lived there.

The stories in the films are told through the eyes of the children of Vanport. The narrators share an idyllic memory of the city which was racially integrated during a time of heavy segregation. In this quickly assembled town that was built out of necessity, Black and White kids went to school together, played together and watched movies together.

Some survivors say they could see racial strife with their parents, but for their childhood, Vanport stood out as a place of hope that was too soon lost to the flood.

The narratives shared by the story tellers spoke of the aftermath; the pleasant childhood was soon replaced by a refugee story. Some families sought help from the Red Cross in the Kenton neighborhood where many businesses nearby served White people only.

Community historian O.B. Hill spoke about his family’s search for housing after the flood. He described housing

MAX

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at 50 miles per hour.”

But the story has a happy ending. “I was able to safely stop the bus on the snow. I was the happiest person ever,” Hilliard said.

He made the transition to light rail seven

“It feels like I’m doing my own thing,” he said of driving the MAX. “I get to lock myself up in the cab and roll. And when I’m done with work for the day, I’m done.”

Though he loves his current post, he said

can be a task to maneuver as well, causing the routes to become slippery.

But even with these challenges, Hillard is happy to put in a hard day’s work.

Hilliard is up before sunrise most mornings at the home he shares with his wife, Shawnese, and their three children to report to his shift at 5:32 a.m.



James Hilliard

He does this four days a week, working 10-hour shifts each day.

“James is one of the kindest, most professional employees we could hope to have,” said Don Allison, Hillard’s rail supervisor. “His approach to safety and customer service is top notch.”

And on the days when he’s not driving, Hillard enjoys spending time with his wife and kids, and from time to time getting away from the city to go salmon fishing.

And though he’s not eligible to receive the honor for another four years, Hilliard says he will continue with the formula that won him the recognition in the first place: patience and attention to detail.

Dream

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babwe beyond the headlines of corruption. “And yet we are supposed to be living in this global village.”

In Zimbabwe, Fushai worked as a research economist for the United Nations and the United Agency for International Development. Her work involved analyzing economies that aren’t taxed or monitored.

She also worked to alleviate poverty by giving business training to these “under the table” entrepreneurs. She described this work as targeting “the poorest of the poor” by helping businesses become more mainstream.

Although the work was fulfilling, Fushai left Zimbabwe because she feared the dangerous political climate. Also being an economist in a country with hyperinflation made her job incredibly difficult. Economic theories could not predict outcomes when the inflation rate was skyrocketing.

The Mugabe government printed money to fund involvement in conflicts in the Dem-

ocratic Republic of the Congo, which drove up inflation even more. At its peak Zimbabwe’s inflation rate was 79,600,000,000 percent per month. At that point, the United States dollar was equivalent to 2,621,984,228 Zimbabwe dollars.

“It was just a miracle how the country survived,” Fushai said, laughing.

Her life in the United States was a complete turnaround from Zimbabwe. Fushai went from a well-paying job managing an aid agency to mopping floors at a 7-11 convenience store. In Zimbabwe she had 30-40 people in the office she managed — secretaries, security guards and drivers. At her home she had maids and gardeners as well.

Arriving in the Unites States was unnerv-

ing in the beginning. “Here, you are a pauper when you first come here. You have to do everything yourself,” she said.

Eventually she found work as a caregiver who took care of elderly patients. It was a culture shock for her, because the elderly stay with their families in Zimbabwe. She said she cared for her patients as if they were her own family members.

Fushai describes the caregiver experience as deeply moving to be welcomed into people’s homes during the intimate time of aging and dying.

“It was a life changing thing. Firstly it humbled me and then I thought of a more purposeful way of living — giving back to the society, when I had always enjoyed

these luxuries,” she said.

She hopes her work will join African authors such as the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe by bringing in the stories of the people, rather than the stories of the leaders or stories of political corruption.

Fushai wants to demystify the “dark continent” perception of Africa — the notion that there no civilization there before western civilization. The oral tradition of stories that were passed from generation to generation were ignored by the written British history.

Fushai, the great-great-great-granddaughter of a storyteller, said she has archived these stories and traditions in *Bhindy*. She hopes her work will bring to light these forgotten stories and lead to more mutual understanding between Africa and American cultures.

“I think the more we know and understand and appreciate, the less conflict there will be in this world. People will tolerate and co-exist in a more harmonious way,” she said.



PHOTO BY JERRY FOSTER

Vanport survivors Ethan Scarl, William Woods Jr., Joe Washington, Lee E. Moore Sr., Lamar Elliott, Howard Minor, Mariah Taylor, Kay Hitch and Glenn Varnado were among those in attendance at The Skanner’s showing of the oral history project, “The Wake of Vanport,” at the Embassy Suites in downtown Portland Aug. 28.