

People: Union to King

40 Years of Service

What's in a Name?

By Lisa Loving, Special to The Skanner News

We take it for granted now: Martin Luther King Junior Boulevard. But back in the 1980s, when local citizens started organizing to change the name from Union Avenue, the struggle was so bitter that The Skanner publisher Bernie Foster—who helped lead to campaign—received death threats.

King actually visited Portland back in the 1950s, visiting with parishioners at the Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church. A few elders alive today still remember that visit, which is commemorated with photographs in the book, "A Heartfelt Welcome: The Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church Collection."

Starting in the mid-1980s, a multi-racial committee was convened by *The Skanner* Publisher Bernie Foster to campaign for a street honoring King. The group included such beloved figures as Rev. John Jackson, Rabbi Emmanuel Rose, Carolyn Leonard, State Director of Affirmative Action Kathleen Sadaat, Michael Chappie Grice — even U.S. Rep. Les AuCoin had a delegate on the panel. They researched and created a proposal to the City Council to choose a street in the city and rename it.

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to the city said.

The committee collected about 4,000 signatures in support of the namer change, and eventually persuaded the City Council to vote; it passed.



Carolyn Leonard removing Union Avenue street sign at corner of NE Martin Luther King, Blvd. and NE Simpson St.

The Associated Press reported at the time that White supremacists—in particular a married couple who had picketed King while he was alive and claimed he was a Communist—had formed a competing committee called Citizens for Union Avenue that

Richard Barrett visited Portland to campaign against the name change, the Husses denied any connection with him.

Meanwhile their committee collected more than 50,000 signatures on petitions to reverse the name change, qualifying for the May 15 primary ballot. Polls at the time showed the initiative winning 2 to 1.

However it was eventually declared illegal by a judge and never made it to the ballot.

When the signs were changed in 1990, Rosalie Huss and about two dozen counter protesters heckled the ceremony.

"Unfortunately, I think the city is going to take a bad rap over this, particularly as we try to attract other people of color to Portland," Foster told the AP. "You have to ask what kind of message are we sending."

worked to prevent the name change.

The couple, Walter and Rosalie Huss, had no ties to Union Avenue; they argued that they were simply concerned citizens. When White supremacist leader

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Growing up in LA. I wrote a letter to the editor at 12 years old that was published in the L.A. Sentinel. Just like then, *The Skanner* has meant I have a local newspaper where I can read about, and be inspired by the topics which affect me and my community. Without *The Skanner* our issues would or could be ignored.

You're not only a watch dog for the people, but an educated source; an alternative to the status quo; a place to see people of color excel in all walks of life. The Black Press is very important! I commend you on achieving 40 years! Please don't let your stories go untold. Black children should know the story of a group of people here and in almost every city in America who emerged because the mainstream media didn't include them.

—Ted Salter



Bernie Foster, Carolyn Leonard, Betty Thompson and Michael ("Chappie") Grice with recently-removed Union Avenue street sign at Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard party