

PSU's Black Studies Program Turns 50

By John Kirkland
Portland State

Fifty years ago, following the greatest decade of change for African Americans since the Civil War, Portland State became the first college in the Pacific Northwest to offer a program in black studies.

Over the years, it went from being an experimental program to a full-blown department. Now, after a half-century, it remains unique in the region. While other universities in the Northwest offer courses in ethnic studies or African American studies, PSU is the only one with a full degree-granting department with the word "Black" in its name.

"At the time of our founding, 'Black' was a very powerful and political term," said department chair Shirley A. Jackson (below). "It was a way of throwing off the older ways of referencing people who had Black

skin."

An influential assortment of students and faculty pushed the idea of starting the program in 1968 and 1969 as part of a wave of other universities around the country doing the same. Portland State — which had just gained university status — approved it as an "experiment" on Aug. 22, 1969.

"It was deemed experimental because it was so new — there was no guarantee that this would actually be something that would continue to exist," Jackson said.

Charlotte Rutherford, a former civil rights attorney with the NAACP Legal and Educational Fund who donated a vast collection of her mother's Black memorabilia to the PSU Library, earned her certificate in the program in 1976. She said she took classes from the program — and continues to support it — through her desire to learn "about our histo-

ry as Black people both in Oregon and the in the history of the U.S."

"The public school system then and probably now does little to teach race history and the true story of how Black people (and other people of color) have contributed to and been treated in this country," she said. "I always knew there had to be more information than I had been given in school but I had no idea so much information had been suppressed."

Initially, the program focused on the African American experience, based on what was happening around the country at the time. The few years before its founding saw marches on Washington, D.C. and in the American South, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the assassinations of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., the founding of the Black Panthers in 1966, numerous race-fueled riots in American cities, and the



Lenwood Davis (left), director of the Black Studies Center in the early '70s, with Clarence Barry, the first student to earn a certificate in Black Studies at Portland State, from the 1972 Viking yearbook.

emergence of the Black Power movement.

The program also had the mission of providing assistance and support to Portland's Black community.

"At that time the majority of Portland Black residents resided in an area known as Albina," recalls Phil McLaurin, the center's first director. "Black Studies offered courses to Albina-area residents at a PSU-funded facility known as Albina Presence, and was actively involved in all issues im-

providing the community residents."

The mission broadened in the ensuing years to include courses on the Black experience in Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America. It added travel opportunities, and next December will offer study in Santiago de Cuba and has plans to develop a study trip to New York City — probably the most diverse Black population in the United States.

The curriculum is multidisciplinary, covering

history, sociology, cultural anthropology, literature, film and other fields. Although many believe that only black students take courses in Black Studies, Jackson said it's really for everybody.

"This is a degree that really helps students prepare for working with people in diverse communities, and not just the Black community," she said. "It's about learning to deal with differences and becoming culturally aware."

Briefs cont'd from pg 6

documentary on Feb. 25 called "Oregon's Black Pioneers," which explores the largely unknown history of African Americans who have helped shape the state. From fur trappers and explorers, to farmers and merchants, the earliest black Oregonians lived, worked and built communities despite the racist laws of white settlers who tried to force them out.

"Oregon's Black Pioneers" premieres on OPB TV Feb. 25 at 9 p.m. and will be available to watch online at the same time at opb.org/blackpioneers.

It is written and produced by Kami Horton and edited by Bruce Barrow. The film is narrated by jazz pianist, composer and educator Darrell Grant.

This half-hour Oregon Experience documentary explores the many stories of Black pioneers, including that of Markus Lopeus, the earliest-known person of African descent in the state. He was a sailor who arrived at Tillamook Bay in 1788 with merchant sea captain Robert Gray. It is documented that Lopeus died during a dispute with local Native Americans.

It features rare historical photographs, primary documents, and expert interviews with:

- Gwen Carr, Oregon Black Pioneers organization
- Walidah Imarisha, historian and author
- Janet Meranda, author
- Dr. Darrell Millner, emeritus, Portland State University
- Gregory Nokes, author
- Willie Richardson, Oregon Black Pioneers organization
- Dr. Bob Zybach, forester and historian

OPB is hosting community screening events for "Oregon's Black Pioneers" across the state. Free and open to the public, the events will feature the docu-

mentary and a panel Q&A with special guests.

- Portland: February 20, 7 p.m. at the Oregon Historical Society (doors open at 6 p.m.).
- Corvallis: February 21, 7 p.m. at the LaSells Stewart Center Construction and Engineering Hall at Oregon State University (doors open at 6:30 p.m.)

BPI Hosts Black History Month Book Fair & Cultural Literacy Event Feb. 23

Black Parent Initiative (BPI) is hosting a FREE event for families in celebration of Black History Month and in support of literacy. This is an opportunity for families and the community to come out and enjoy activities, book giveaways, food and drawings. On this day a portion of sales made at any Barnes & Noble using book fair ID# 12368940 will come back to BPI to purchase more culturally specific books to be given away to families in their programs and families in the community.

Black Lit is LIT! takes place from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Feb. 23 at Barnes & Noble Clackamas Town Center, 12000 SE 82nd Ave.

This year the theme, Black Lit is LIT! engages families in the exciting ways reading can excel their lives and experiences.

Partners at OMSI, Portland Children's Museum, Portland Community College STEM Center and Playwell Technologies will be providing the STEM stations. Mystique's Fancy Faces will be adorning attendees with face paint and PACKY Academy will be creating culturally specific works of art with the families.

Oregon Black Pioneers to Host 25th Anniversary

Gala and Fundraiser March 2

Oregon Black Pioneers will host its 25th Anniversary Gala and Fundraiser on Saturday, March 2, 2019, from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. at the World of Speed USA Museum, located at 27490 SW 95th Avenue, Wilsonville.

Join us for a festive evening that will include inspiring words from our special guest speaker, the Honorable Oregon Supreme Court Justice Adrienne Nelson. While admiring historic race cars, boats and motorcycles, you can help Oregon Black Pioneers continue our great work by participating in a paddle raise, and in silent and oral auctions featuring artwork by gifted local and nationally known artists such as Bill Rutherford, Mary Volm, Bonnie

Meltzer and Emmett Wheatfall. The Auctions will include a variety of art forms, including poetry, paintings, sculptures and more. Then end the evening by dancing to great music provided by Ocean 503.

Cost: \$100 per person and \$900 for a table of ten Attire: Semi-Formal Please register at <https://obp25anniversarygala.eventbrite.com>

For more information about the 25th Anniversary Gala: Honoring the Past, Paving the Way to the Future or to purchase a sponsorship or ad, please contact:

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