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Racism in Portland: What are we doing?

City, schools, police addressing racial issues • Talking is one thing, but can Portlanders act?

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There was the black resident who asked why his white neighbors needed “those big dogs for protection.”

And there was the white woman who wondered why her black neighbors “couldn’t entertain in the backyard like everyone else,” Judith Mowry recalls.

Both innocent remarks – made during sessions of the city’s “Restorative Listening Project” – are examples of the undercurrent of racism that’s alive in Portland today, many observers say.

Often considered the model of political correctness, Portland isn’t like other parts of the country where racism can spill into the open, numerous people interviewed by the Portland Tribune attest.

They say racism here is more the silent type: subtle under-the-radar comments, actions or policies that are often fueled by naivety or misguided or cultural perceptions.

“It’s polite,” says Maria Lisa Johnson, director of the city’s two-year-old Office of Human Relations. “In cities that are much more racially diverse, these things get sorted out with fists or a lot of debate or interaction. In Portland, those debates aren’t afforded. We tend to segregate naturally here. We need to be more intentional about this work.”

The question isn’t whether racism exists in Portland. Rather, people are asking: “What are we doing about it?”

A number of things, as it turns out. And they all lead to one activity: talk.

The city is leading two different tracks of dialogues to address race-based conflicts; the Portland Police Bureau is doing targeted outreach to minority communities; and the Portland school district has an ongoing diversity training called “Courageous Conversations.”

One man who’s found himself in the middle of much of the work under way is state Rep. Lew Frederick, 58, a former TV reporter and school district spokesman who has emerged as one of the black community’s leading voices – especially in the recent discussions over police and schools.

Part of Frederick’s credibility comes from his own personal experiences – as a child of the South who was mentored by none other than Martin Luther King Jr.; as an Irvington resident of 33 years who’s been stopped outside his home more than once by police, asking if he was lost; and as a husband whose wife has struggled with chronic mental illness and a lack of hospital resources.

Race filters into every part of his life, he says, yet he still encounters people who deny that there’s a problem. “I look at them and go, ‘really?’ ” he says, citing one recent example he finds “atrocious.”

The liberal blog Daily Kos reported this week that Art Robinson, the Republican candidate looking to unseat Southern Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio in the November election, sells a line of home



L.E. BASKOW / TRIBUNE PHOTO

State Rep. Lew Frederick – who has roots in the South and was inspired to activism by his childhood friend’s father, Martin Luther King Jr. – has a lot to say about debates on local racial issues. “Things can change,” he says, “but unfortunately you have those who don’t want to change.”

schooling materials that includes a 19th century English boys' adventure novel suggesting Africans are like retarded children.

The book, by author George Alfred Henty, is the type of propaganda that reinforces the racism charge for many people, Frederick says.

In the South of his childhood, Frederick says, "I dealt with people throwing things at me and truly threatening to kill me on a regular basis."

Here, subtle racism manifests itself much differently: usually rooted in good intentions, such as the school board's recent attempt to drastically overhaul Jefferson High School amid the African-American community's protests.

"They were clueless about all of the context to the kinds of things they might be doing," he says. "I would never begin to say that the board members who looked at the decision in any way were intentionally racist, because I don't think that's true; I know them very well. But clueless – yes."



TRIBUNE PHOTO: L.E. BASKOW • The Rev. Jesse Jackson came to Portland in February after the police shooting death of Aaron Campbell, which fueled anger among many in the black community.

Conversations all over town

Some of the race-related dialogue efforts are new. Some have been occurring for a few years, but seem especially relevant now that tensions have flared in the Jefferson debacle and recent fatal police shootings of Keaton Otis and Aaron Campbell.

The school district's "Courageous Conversations" effort with author Glenn Singleton began three years ago in an attempt to transform the culture of the district. At first, it was just administrators who were trained. Now, it's trickled down to a team of teachers at every school. The two-year contract costs \$500,000.

District spokesman Matt Shelby says the training is different from typical equity training, which focuses on technical solutions such as adopting a new teaching practice.

"But what this does," he says, "is force people to look at how race affects their own life personally first, and then start to look at how some of the same forces play out in the institution."

Similarly, the police bureau is making a concerted effort to reach out to disenfranchised communities on their own turf, through simple conversations.

Police officers are visiting downtown shelters at meal time to engage with the homeless in "dining room dialogues," and they are making friendly appearances at black churches and events such as the recent Juneteenth festival, a celebration of black history.

Police also attended a town hall meeting at New Columbia last Thursday – three days after the homicide of Billy Moore, a recent high school graduate gunned down on the street. “The community wants the police there,” Police Chief Mike Reese tells the Tribune.

When they’re out and about, officers answer questions and accept criticism without being defensive. “It’s about conversations,” Reese says. “We can collect all the data in the world and be the most professional police force in the world, but if people don’t trust us, then we’re missing the mark.”

The city’s Office of Human Relations – which Frederick helped to revive two years ago – last fall began piloting a series of intensive, three-hour sessions of facilitated dialogue among groups that include whites, Latinos and other minorities.

The progress will be incremental as those people get back into their communities with a wider world view, says Director Maria Lisa Johnson.

Although all the touchy-feely work could be dismissed as nothing more than a kum-ba-ya moment, it’s not just a bunch of talk for talking’s sake, organizers say.

Johnson points to research called the “contact hypothesis,” which says that when people who are different from each other come together with the chance for positive interactions during a period of time, they change their thinking of each other.

“It’s in that transformation of their hearts and minds that we hope to influence policy and practice,” she says.



TRIBUNE PHOTO: L.E. BASKOW • Portland Public Schools Superintendent Carole Smith discusses the possible closing of Jefferson High School with community leaders Ron Herndon and Tony Hopson (right) at a school board work session in June.

Loving diversity, but ...

In a similar approach, the city Office of Neighborhood Involvement’s Restorative Listening Project is specifically addressing the quality-of-life issues that stem from gentrification, such as noise and parking.

Program coordinator Judith Mowry helped start the effort three years ago when she began hearing a lot of the same comments from neighbors: “People would say ‘I love the diversity; I want the diversity,’ ” Mowry says. “But a lot of people had never lived with diversity. ... ‘I would get a lot of “‘I’m not racist, but –,’ and ‘It’d be a great neighborhood if –’

“We needed a place to talk about race without everybody freaking out. We have a feeling Portland’s

such a great city, but this has showed it's a toxic environment for people of color.”

That's not just her opinion. Last July's "State of Black Oregon" report by the Urban League of Portland revealed systematic disparities in every aspect of government.

The report made a total of 42 broad policy recommendations, which will be pared down by month's end into more strategic action plans in three areas – health care, jobs and education, says Marcus Mundy, president and CEO of the Urban League of Portland.

Mundy says it's been a rocky year with modest progress, but the recent confluence of events has been “alarming.”

“This is the year of living dangerously for black people in Portland,” he says. “It seems like it's a worse year (than others).”

While this initiative addresses just the black community's inequities, other minority groups in the Portland metro area under the umbrella group, Coalition of Communities of Color, have also called attention to inequities in an April 19 report.

More than one in four people in Multnomah County and more than 45 percent of children in Portland Public Schools are classified as minorities. Yet, despite their numbers, the report says, they continue to be underserved and disproportionately represented in poverty, the criminal justice system and other areas.

Tackling racial profiling

Born in Pullman, Wash., Frederick spent most of his childhood in Baton Rouge and Atlanta, and came to Portland in 1974, is state's highest-ranking black leader and the only black man serving in the Oregon Legislature.

That fact isn't lost on him. “For many black men, they stay below the radar because they've seen media attacks if they become visible,” Frederick says.

Everything from their style of dress to their finances to their habits, family life and comments come under scrutiny. That reality keeps many aspiring black men out of politics, he says.

As for his own ambitions, Frederick says he's been asked to run for mayor and City Council in the past, but he declines, citing all of the work he wants to do at the state level.

Policy-wise, he hopes to make inroads in improving the mental health system for people like his wife as well as for black men in particular. He points to the fact that mental illness played a role in both the Otis and Campbell deaths.

“The questions for me are: Are there issues with black males we can perhaps address?” he says. “There's a stigma. There's a lack of culturally competent psychiatrists.”

Frederick also says there's major work to do to tackle racial profiling, a subject the police have a detailed plan to address. After the Otis shooting, he says, “I had four young men tell me they were afraid to drive.”

Portland police have collected detailed data on their traffic stops since 2001, using it to assess just how much of a racial bias is present in officers' stops. They compare their data to Census information. Blacks, for example, comprise about 15 percent of traffic stops, while they account for 6 percent of the population age 16 and older.

But experts say that's an unfair basis for comparison, because the data is skewed by the fact that the police patrol more heavily in neighborhoods with higher crime rates. Within the next six months, Portland police will have the technology to adopt more “benchmarks” for comparison than just Census data – a recommendation made by a Portland State University study last fall.

The steps police are taking – including vigilance over racial profiling, the targeted outreach and a drive, as the budget allows, to hire more officers with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds – won't magically restore trust overnight, Reese says. But he hopes it will be a step in that direction.

“I think there's always going to be concerns about how police do their jobs,” he says. “I think this will show that police operate with respect and professionalism.”

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