3-8-2010

Interview with Deborah Cochrane

Chris Riser
Portland State University

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/blackunited_oralhist

Part of the Oral History Commons, Public History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/blackunited_oralhist/2

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Black United Front Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
CHR: Okay. My name is Chris Riser, and today is Monday, March 8, 2010. I'm here with Deborah Cochrane in the PTP [Portland Teachers Program] office on the Cascade Campus of Portland Community College, and we are going to discuss the Whitney Young Learning Center and the Portland Teachers Program today.

So, I'd just like to start out with just kind of a background sketch. If you could talk a little bit about your early life; where you were born and raised, and maybe go into your educational background.

DC: I was born in Oregon in a very small town called Cottage Grove, but really even outside of Cottage Grove. It was a big deal to go into town. We didn't even have running water until I was probably—well, actually, until we moved. I don't remember running water until maybe first grade, second grade, somewhere in there—outdoor toilet, way out in the country. What was the next thing you asked me?

CHR: Where you were born, raised... How long did you live there?

DC: I grew up there, but as I became a teenager, there were problems in my family. And so I got my—how do I explain it? It was such a dysfunctional family. [Pause] I don't know if I want to go into all of that. But, basically, my mother didn't want me.

My mother and father divorced—she didn't want me. I went to live with my father and his second wife. Later she left him. My mother had remarried some guy who worked for the European exchange system, which was connected with the military. So, somehow they scraped the money together to send me to Germany, which was where she was living with him. I got there, and then she left me there, and I lived with another family in Germany. I went to an Army school, you know, on an Army
base in Nuremburg, came back to the States and lived with just my father, because the other wife had left him.

Then [I] went to live in kind of a foster home in Eugene. So, I moved to Eugene and graduated from high school in Eugene, got in a lot of trouble with drugs and alcohol and people that were in a lot of trouble. And then, there was a woman named Pearl Hill, who lots of people knew, [who] was very much a part of some of the history that you're looking at—in Oregon, not so much in Portland, and Pearl was from Portland, who ran the Upward Bound program at the University of Oregon [U of O].

Typically, people got into Upward Bound in high school, but I missed that boat. Pearl knew my foster mother. In fact, my foster mother had been, I think in some ways, a mentor to Pearl, because Pearl was kind of wild in her day. Pearl got me into college kind of through the back door of Upward Bound.

Once I got into college through Upward Bound with Pearl, Pearl connected me to Herb Cawthorne, who was running the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] program at the U of O. That was sort of the beginning of life for me, or the turning point for me. Herb took a cadre of us, and I think I was the only White kid—I was the only White kid in the group. It was mostly African American kids from Watts and Oakland that had been shipped up here, because the university got money—you know, it was that time in the 70s when people—colleges—the effort was being made to increase the number of students of color in colleges across the country, and so there was federal money. Well, Oregon didn't have students of color, so they were shipping them up from California, right?

I basically went to college with a lot of African American kids from Watts and Oakland, and Portland. A lot of kids came down from Portland. But, anyway, I was the only White kid in the group—at least that Herb mentored. He took a cadre of us, and we had work-study. We all got pretty good financial aid packages because we were all coming out of poverty. I was rural poverty, but all of the other kids were urban poverty. So, he hired us all—he had created this thing called the Center for Self Development. It was a part of EOP. Out of that Center, he taught a number of classes called Vocabulary Improvement or Speech; different kinds of really basic skills classes for kids coming from—you know, we were pretty raw, pretty rough around the edges, all of us, whether we were from rural—I think I was the only kid from rural, but we were all rough—spoke pretty poorly—lots of cussing and all of that kind of stuff.
Herb basically hired us as self-development assistants, and he used that time to teach us. We learned how to write proposals, he taught us how to teach. That was really where I learned to teach, was from Herb, not through a traditional school of education. He taught just everything. He taught us about language, he taught us about the power of language. He really transformed a lot of us from kids who probably wouldn't have made it to kids who had a shot at getting good jobs, being articulate about what we thought, and being critical thinkers. He pushed us pretty hard. There were times when I didn't like Herb very much, and I think a lot of us didn't like him very much, because he had really high expectations for us. I spent the whole four years—that became my home and my security. I think it was probably one of the first times in my life that somebody made me feel like there was a future for me, and somebody believed in me. I'm sure it was the same for all of us. Well, not for all of us, but for a lot of us. Many of us from that cadre went on to do this kind of work because it was such a natural link.

When Herb left the U of O, he came to Portland, and did the EOP program up here. I did different things: I went to Europe for a while, lived in the Canary Islands, taught private English lessons, bummed around on nothing, lived back East, worked for the Urban League of Rhode Island in inner city schools.

My very good friend and partner that I worked with was murdered on the streets that we worked on. It was a very tough place. South Providence was described by the Wall Street Journal as a hellhole, and it was. I worked with kids who were—and gangs hadn't really come to Portland yet—but back there, gangs were pretty real. In fact, one of the things that I did with the Urban League back there [in Providence] was work with middle school kids who were gang affiliated, or gang “afflicted” they called it. They were kids who had had some contact with the judicial system, but were still in a place that we thought could make changes. We did projects with them, took them on field trips, that kind of thing.

Then, when I came back to Oregon, I think I worked—I don't remember everything, but I worked for Upward Bound one summer at U of O. So, I went back to my roots and taught writing and journalism for Upward Bound. I did a lot of youth programs for years around Eugene and Portland. I don't remember what year it was, but I moved to Portland to work for the Public Defender's office as a trial assistant. Herb was already here in Portland running the EOP program at Portland State [University]
(PSU), and I hadn't been here but about four months, and called Herb to say that I was in town. He hired me to run the tutorial program for EOP for all of Portland State, which kind of expanded to the whole school, rather than just Upward Bound, EOP, and special programs.

**CHR:** Just real quick, can you tell me what EOP is?

**DC:** Educational Opportunity Program. It was one of those programs that came out of the 60s or 70s that was targeted at first generation—kids who would have been the first in their family to go to college, came from low income backgrounds, and really was this effort to get those targeted populations—poor White kids and students of color—a college education. EOP still exists. There's an EOP program still at [Portland State]. It's pretty different these days. Back then it was pretty African American, a lot of really low income kids, and truly first generation kids who—nobody in their family had ever gone to college before.

So, anyway, Herb hired me to work at PSU. Then, when he went to the League, as I told you before, Pam Smith and I—he recruited us to come to the Urban League [of Portland]. I don't remember what Pam—she wasn't a speech writer—I think she did communications for Herb. Herb hired me to develop and run the Whitney Young Learning Center. When I started, there wasn't anything there. A couple of Jesuit priests, if I remember correctly, had tried to start something years before. But it was really small; there really wasn't any money. They didn't really do anything.

Herb was huge on education. It was always a priority with Herb. So when he became the CEO of the League, education took a top... Herb had been involved—when he was at PSU; I think he'd been on the school board [of Portland Public Schools]. Him and Ronnie—him and Ron Herndon—had coordinated, and were very much involved in, critiquing what was going on in Portland Public Schools, and the failures of the school district to provide equity to, particularly, the African American community. And there are photographs of Herb and Ronnie protesting and standing on the school board desk, where the board members were sitting down at the Blanchard Education Service Building. They worked together long before he [Herb Cawthorne] ever even went to the Urban League.

Herb—if memory serves me right; it was before my time, before I came to Portland, but I think Herb was on the school board for a while. You should check this, but he might have been the first African American on the school board. I could be wrong about that, but that might be an interesting thing to
look into. I think he might have been, and if he wasn't, he was certainly one of the first.iv

So, Herb hired me. I took it over the phone. Herb called me and said, “Do you want to do this?” and I said, “Sure,” because Herb was always an exciting guy to work for. He was always full of exciting ideas. You would love him, because if it was thinkable, for Herb it was doable. You just had to figure out how to do it. Unlike working for these bureaucracies, where every time you ask somebody something, they always say, “No. We don't have the money,” or, “No, you can't do that. It's against policy,” when you took an idea to Herb, he was always like, “Yeah! [hits fist on desk] Let's do that!”

So, it was this very exciting time at the Urban League. He hired a lot of young folks who had a lot of energy and were willing to work fifteen hours a day for nothing, because we just loved it and we believed what we were doing. He formed his “inner council,” or his advisory [committee], and we would meet periodically, and all of these people would sit around, and we would just brainstorm and shoot ideas at each other; everything from housing to education to public policy. It was a very exciting time to be engaged in the Urban League.

The funny memory I had was that I said yes over the phone. I don't think I even—I didn't come look at the Urban League, I didn't do anything, right? I had this kind of nice office at PSU. It was in Shattuck Hall. I mean, Shattuck Hall was old, but it was a cool, old building. You know, the Park Blocks; PSU was kind of cool, right? So, I took this job over the phone, and PSU's president—not the president, but the vice president—begged me not to leave. Actually, she offered me enticements, and I actually took a cut in pay to go to the Urban League. That's how exciting it was. You didn't care about the money. You knew that if you went to the Urban League, you were going to get to do things, and if you stayed at PSU you were just going to have your hands tied by the bureaucracy. So I took a cut in pay to go to the Urban League; I didn't care.

The funny memory was—I don't remember if Herb took me or if I drove there by myself—but what Herb had already arranged, or maybe the Jesuit priests had had it there—on 9th and Alberta [gesturing toward location] was where Whitney Young existed when I ran it. It was already arranged that we were going to have this one room in the old school behind St. Andrew's Church. St. Andrew School was behind the church, and we had this little basement room. At that time, the school was not [in operation], so they rented it out to people for different things. It was pretty crappy, falling apart. The first time I went there, and I drove by it, I thought, What have I done? What have I done??
[Laughing.] But I got over that pretty quickly. But it was bad, and that first year, all we had was this basement room, and somebody else used it during the day. So, every afternoon, we had to set up everything again, and put it all away at night. I don't remember who did it, but some volunteer—it might have been a friend of mine, it was probably a friend of mine—built me a rolling bookshelf that I could put my papers and books on. We'd roll it into this closet at night and then roll it back out in the afternoon. It was a crappy, cold, horrible room. I really hated it.

But we had kids right away. I hired a staff. Herb had gotten money, I think, from Matt Prophet, through the school district, and I hired staff. A wonderful woman named Mama [Ayoka?] Avel [Gordly] would probably remember her, because Mama Ayoka worked during the day at the BEC, the Black Education Center, which was an Afro-centric school just down the street on... 7th and Alberta? It wasn't very far away. It was in a kind of an old house that they made into a school. It had a Black bookstore. It didn't have very many books in it, but it was a nice store. Mama Ayoka was a teacher there during the day, and I hired her to come up. So she would work really long hours, because she would leave the BEC and come up and tutor. We were open until 8:00 or 8:30 at night. Then, I would take kids home... in my car. I would drive kids from around the neighborhood and take them home. It was so much fun though. I hired a guy named Jimi Johnson, who's still around by the way. In fact, I saw him not too long ago. And a guy named [name unconfirmed], who was from Ghana, he was my math tutor. Several other people came and went, but Ayoka, Jimi and [Osay?] were long term. I think they were with me through the whole thing.

And then we grew. We started getting a lot more students, we got more money, and we moved upstairs. We rented a little office space and a storage closet. I think we had either two or three classrooms—I can't remember—maybe just two. But again, the building was falling apart and the roof leaked in my office. In the wintertime, students would come and they would sit—I had an old desk like this [touching the hardwood desk] and the students would sit like that [pointing to my position, facing her, but next to the desk rather than in front of it]. If you were in trouble you had to come to Deborah's office, and rain would pour down on their head. The heat didn't work half the time, and I would go over and complain to the priest and the rectory to turn the heat on, because we'd all be in our coats studying. Really, what I tried to create with Whitney Young was—so many kids were—our kids came from schools all over Portland, because at that time kids were bussed all over Portland. Almost all of my kids were from North/Northeast Portland, and they walked to the Center. They lived
in the neighborhood, but they went to schools all over the city. They represented—probably every high school in Portland was represented. We also did some middle school. We tried to serve middle and high school kids. Most of my kids came from Jeff [Jefferson High School in Northeast Portland], but they really were from everywhere. Almost all African American; probably 95, 97, 98 percent.

CHR: Yeah, I think that report has very detailed statistics on—

DC: The details are in there. Some of the photographs I wanted to show were—a couple of years, either somebody donated a table or Herb gave us a table at the Urban League Dinner. I was able to fill the whole table with kids. I have these photographs of kids all dressed up. We would all meet... it was so fabulous. I love those kids.

I started building the Center into, not just a homework assistance program, but I started an African American History Series. I started inviting leaders from the Black community, elders and leaders, to come in and talk. I would invite all of the parents. Everybody could come those nights; it wasn't just homework. So, Ronnie would come and talk about Black History. I wonder if Avel has mentioned him. He's passed away, but... Burt... Dr.... I can't remember his name right now. He actually wrote a book about Black History in Oregon, and everybody called him Dr. something. Gloria would know, too. That woman, Gloria Phillips. She's around. Gloria might be somebody you want to talk—Gloria worked for me, too: Mama [Nana?]. She was known as Mama Nana. Mama Nana and Mama Ayoka both worked at BEC and then came up and tutored with me. Mama Nana, by the way, later went through the Portland Teachers Program. Some of the teachers at BEC weren't actually Oregon Licensed teachers. They had been teaching for years, but they weren't—. So, when I became the director of PTP, Mama Nana went through the Portland Teachers Program, got her license and taught for a while before she retired. She's still around, by the way, and I have her phone number if you wanted to talk to her. Because she worked at Whitney Young and was a very good friend, colleague, and a long time member of this community.

CHR: What was her last name?

DC: Phillips. Gloria Phillips, but we called her Mama Nana. Anyway, I started the Black History Series, I started a lot of things. It sounds funny now, but we started “Rap Sessions.” You know, the
kids would have Rap Sessions.

CHR: Yeah, tell me about that. Because I saw that in the report, and I wondered what that was all about.

DC: It came about because one of the things I started realizing was that these kids had a lot of issues. They were becoming aware of—some of it was just teenage stuff: they had issues about girls, or they had issues about fighting, or they had issues about basic teenage stuff. So, some of the Rap Sessions were just about stuff like that. They were also beginning to become more aware—it was the 80s—but you have to remember that this was Oregon. A lot of the things that were going on elsewhere, Oregon was always behind, and awareness didn't always come here as quickly. Things that might have been big somewhere else—it seemed to me, anyway—didn't always come here until later.

I know when I came back from [having] lived on the East Coast and worked in inner city schools back there... I remember when I came here—and I still think this to this day—this is Disneyland. There is no ghetto in Portland. There never was. That's not to say that there weren't issues and problems, and certainly inequity, especially in education. Whitney Young was a place where that was very, very clear.

These kids were coming to Whitney Young, and it was clear that, in many cases, they had teachers who didn't care, did not have high expectations for them. You would ask to see their homework—we were basically a homework assistance program—and you'd ask to see their homework, and they'd give you something and say, “Well, here's my homework. I'm gonna turn it in tomorrow.”

And you'd say, “Well, honey, you have some good ideas here, but you really need to work on this.”

And they would say, “No, it doesn't matter.”

You would say, “Why do you say it doesn't matter?”

“Well, because my teacher doesn't read it. She just checks off whether I did it or not and gives it back.”
This is not high expectations for kids, and this was happening a lot. What was going on was these kids were not learning how to write complete sentences. Nobody gave a shit whether they learned to write a complete sentence or not. I really saw the racism going on.

We would get phone calls from principals and teachers saying, “I'm going to send 'so and so' up there.” They would describe some kid, “This kid threw chairs in the principal’s office, kicked the counselor, and did all this,” and I'd think, Oh, God, you know? The kid would come and there was never—like they had described some other kid.

We never had a problem at Whitney Young. We never—I think one time, maybe twice, I told—and I remember who the two kids were, and one of them, I knew his parents. If I saw either one of them today, they'd give me a great big hug, and I'd love 'em back. I made them leave. They had to stay away for three days. One of them, I'll never forget, his name is Maurice. I kicked him out for three days. I don't even remember what for now. It wasn't anything terrible; he just kept not following directions or something. Sometimes the staff would push me to—I think sometimes they thought my discipline could have been better. But, he sat outside everyday for the three days. There was a big tree on the corner. I'll have to check and see if that tree is still there. He sat under that tree, from the time we opened until the time we left [laughing] everyday for three days. He couldn't come in, but he didn't have anywhere else to go, right? And if you don't think that broke my heart, it took everything I had not to go out there and get him and say, “You can come back in.” So that was tough.

The Black History Series. One of the reasons that I started that is because if you brought up the issue of Black History and some of the great people in Black History who had contributed to building America, a lot of Black kids were not interested. In fact, they'd act like they were embarrassed, or they didn't really want to hear about it. Well, I learned was what was going on in schools is whenever Black History came up, it was about slavery. That's all they heard, was that Black people had been slaves. They didn't want to be connected to that, because it was embarrassing; it was this thing about humility and degradation. It was not the positive piece. They weren't getting the richness. They were only getting this horrible picture of what their heritage had been. That's one of the reasons that I started the Black History Series.

I'll tell you, I think it converged with other forces; it certainly wasn't Whitney Young alone. But there
was a group of young Black males who came to my program regularly, who came to me and said,
“We... we”—and I said to them, “You need to be demanding. You need to go to your schools and you
need to demand that they teach you Black History class. You need to demand this.” And they did.
Again, I don't think it was just Whitney Young doing that. I think there were other forces converging,
but these forces sort of converged, and about that time they started the first Black history class at
Jefferson High School, which, by the way, Jeffrey Brooks taught.

CHR: That's right. I remember he [inaudible]—

DC: I didn't know Jeffrey at the time. Jeffrey and I didn't really meet until I started with Portland
Teachers Program, which was about five or six years later. It was interesting because it would've
been—it's too bad we didn't meet because we probably would have gotten in a lot of trouble. But I
think there were these forces converging around the city, and this awareness was beginning to rise up
about the importance of kids learning the truth about history. Kids were starting to move past this
embarrassment about the slavery piece, [to] understand that there was a richer piece, and wanted to
know what it was. What was beautiful was when I started the Black History Series, we moved from
embarrassment to kids coming in my office and saying, “I want more. What can I read?” and me
getting books and bringing them in, and bringing in more people. So it was a pretty exciting time.

And then, this group of young Black men. They were juniors and seniors in high school. Oh! Brilliant
young men; articulate, critical thinkers really beginning to figure all of this stuff out. They came in and
said, “Teach us how to write proposals. We want to write a proposal. We want to form this group.”

And they had other people helping them, too, from other avenues. But, they would sometimes meet
at Whitney Young. They ended up forming this group. I can’t remember the name of the organization
they started, but they started doing these really fabulous things. They would pick a street and clean it
up. This is on their own, by the way. You know what I mean? Young high school African American
males. I can't remember what they were called. They had a name. They ended up being flown—a
couple of them, the leaders of it—Reggie was one of them...

CHR: Do you remember Reggie's last name?
DC: I can't remember Reggie's last name. I could find out. And Gloria might be helpful, too. Also, there's a kid that I still see once in a while named Nate. Although I don't want to say it on tape. He's—

CHR: In a different place...

DC: Yeah, but much beloved. He might remember. There's also some guys around. You know that picture that I showed you in the library, of Ronnie and Reverend [John H.] Jackson, and I said, “The guy behind Ronnie?” That guy is still around. He used to come to the Center, and he might remember those guys, too. Anyway, they ended up getting flown to New York and being on The Today Show, or something. One of those morning shows... Good Morning America, or something like that. I didn't see it, but they told me about it. There was that kind of energy going on. There were some really good things happening.

And then at the League there was a lot of—Herb was again—it was an exciting time to be working there. We did things like that. We did the Black History. I did a whole parent involvement thing. I realized what a difference parent involvement made, so I really began to reach out to parents of kids who were coming to the Center. In fact, I designed a contract. If the kids wanted to come to the Center, they had to bring their parent in and their parent had to sign [it]. I think once a month we invited parents, we had a big potluck, some parents volunteered, and we did poetry readings. I was into poetry clear back then... and kids were, too. We did poetry and, again, whenever we would do speakers we would invite the parents to come.

Then Matt Prophet. I went to Matt, who was the superintendent at the time, and told him how passionate I was about seeing parents become partners in their children's education. Matt—

CHR: He was Superintendent of PPS [Portland Public Schools].

DC: Uh huh. African American guy, who's still around, by the way. You can probably still talk to Matt, too. I saw him about a year ago on my walking trail around Columbia River Golf Club. And Ernie Harzog, too. Ernie was the Assistant Superintendent; also African American. Ernie Harzog was one of the founders of the National Association of Black School Educators. vii We have an interview with him on tape that a PTP student did that you could watch if you wanted to. Ernie is around. You can still
talk to Ernie. I think he's in his 80s now.

I went to Matt and said, “I really want to do the parent involvement thing,” and Matt brought in—his name is going to come to me... He brought in two guys, and one was named Dr. [Robert L.] Green, from the Midwest somewhere. Dr. Green had been a good friend of Coretta Scott and Dr. King, and Andrew Young and all of those people. He'd actually been the Chair or the leader or the Director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, their education piece. He had marched with King and he was a professor at a college somewhere in Ohio, I think.

Dr. Green and I became really good friends. Matt brought him out to work with me, to design this parent involvement piece. We brought—I don't even remember how many parents—50 or 60 parents together, and spent the day with them. I'm trying to think of the other guy's name, too. He was incredible as well.

Whitney Young became this really—in my mind, I think it was a great place, bringing people together. I think a lot of kids felt like it was their home away from home. Again, Portland had no ghetto, but it was a time when there were crack houses—crack was really big at the time. We knew there were three crack houses right around us. Cars got broken into in the parking lot. My car got broken into several times. We had some problems. What we ended up doing—I don't know if I should say this on tape or not, but what we ended up doing was, we hired a guy who was part of it. And...

[laughing]...once we hired him, our troubles ended. We never had another problem. It was perfect. Those were the days when you could do stuff like that. It was a small enough community that you knew who was who. I never forgot, somebody ripped a tape deck—I remember back in the days, it was tape decks—and I had a tape deck in my car. Somebody stole the tape deck out of my car in the parking lot. All the kids said, “Well, we know where it's at, Deborah. We know where you can go buy it.” [laughing]—

CHR: [Laughing]...if you want to get it back.

DC: Yeah. Everybody knew everybody! It was a good place. And we had a fairly decent partnership with the school district back then. Matt Prophet really supported us. He understood that the community really needed that after school center. And there were other things going on in the
building that were kind of parallel. The church was doing a tutorial program for first through sixth
grade down the hall. They had a room down the hall after school. Emma Ford ran that. I think Emma's
still teaching. She's not running that [program] anymore, but she teaches full time at Rosa Parks.

Then downstairs was OMSI. OMSI had been criticized for being an elitist organization that didn't really
reach out to the Black community. So, they had gotten a grant or something, and they started a
satellite in the Black community. They had computers and a little science program. Cottrell White,
who is still around, by the way, ran that for OMSI. So Cottrell, one or two nights a week, was
downstairs, and we'd send the kids back and forth. They were rewarded. If you did this, then you got
to go to the Science Center, or got to go play with computers. It wasn't there the whole time I was
there, but it was there part of the time.

CHR: How many years would you say you were there, if you had to venture a guess?

DC: I'd have to look it up. Four or five years.

CHR: Wow, so, then you transitioned to—can you talk a little bit about the transition to Portland
Teachers Program?

DC: I think the way this happened is—and my memory could really be wrong. But, I think I was
talking to—I used to do private consulting for—I used to write grants as a private consultant. I was full
time for Whitney Young, but to make extra money, because back then—well, the Urban League is
typically—

CHR: You left the Urban—you took a pay cut when you left [PSU].

DC: I took a pay cut to go to the League. So, to make extra money I wrote grants as a consultant,
which I found out didn't pay very well. Usually, whatever extra I made, the government took away, so
I quit doing that. Anyway, when I was doing it, I wrote a grant—the school district hired me as a
private consultant to write a grant for North Portland, for the community center out there. I was
working on that, and I was in Ernie Harzog's office. Ernie told me about this position, this program
called the Portland Teachers Program, that they were looking for the right person, and I should think
about it. I said, “Well, they need a person of color for that.” He said, “You should apply for it. Go ahead and do it.” I think that’s where I heard about it. Because he’d given me permission, even though I thought it should be a person of color, I went ahead and applied for it, and here I am today.

CHR: Who was involved with the—

DC: In the early years?

CHR: Yeah. Who was it that was putting this together?

DC: They had actually been—groups of people had actually been meeting for two years before they hired me. So, the Black community, in particular—and I would guess—I've tried to get this story from Ronnie. Some day, I'm gonna get it out of him; at least, his memory of it. It's interesting, because everybody you talk to has a different memory of how the Portland Teachers Program was started. I've talked to many people who have said they started the Portland Teachers Program. So, you really have to figure out what really happened in between. We may never know.

My recollection—and I came to the game late in terms of the pressures that were going on behind the scenes. What I think happened was the Black United Front, and maybe some other groups, were pressuring the district, and were saying, “We’re tired of our kids not seeing people who look like they do in front of the classroom. And why aren't you hiring more teachers of color?” And Portland was—Portland Public Schools was—they were going on recruiting trips. They were spending a sizable amount of money, I think, going on recruiting trips to try to get people of color to come here, who had teaching degrees, and people of color didn't want to come here. Why would you want to come to Portland, Oregon? There wasn't a huge, thriving Black community. There wasn't, you know—it was a tough sell. A person who might be of interest for you to talk to, if you were going to do a long term project, would be a woman named Trish Ryan. Trish Ryan worked for Portland Public Schools in H.R., and was one of those early people who had a lot to do with shaping what happened before I came. Her and... somebody from PCC [Portland Community College], and somebody from PSU—a woman named [Mary Kennick?]—was on the first tier of interviews. I had to interview with these three or four women. Then I went on to interview with an executive. But Trish was one of those people, and she's still around. I think she was also a principal at one time in Portland Public Schools.
For about two years, Portland Public Schools had been trying to respond to this pressure about why all the teachers were white. I think they knew there was no—they needed help. So they connected with PCC and PSU. Committees were formed and research was done to look at [whether] there was anything else in the country. They paid a guy to do a little bit of research and write this little paper. The real turning point for them was when they got two grants. One they got was a FIPSE grant—I forgot what they were called... Federal Innovation in Post Secondary Education. They were grants that the government gave to try new, innovative things in higher education. The got a FIPSE grant to start the AFE, the Academy for Future Educators, and in some ways it jumped the gun of PTP. Somehow, they made it all come together. Then they wrote a letter—it wasn't a big grant, it more like a letter—to the Oregon Community Foundation. The Oregon Community Foundation agreed to give them the seed money to start the Portland Teachers Program, which basically meant hiring a director. What they realized was that this wasn't going to go anywhere unless we have somebody full time who can coordinate these three bureaucracies and all of these different committees that were meeting at the different colleges and the school district. And they needed somebody who could bring that all together and then do something with the students—you know, get the students together.

So, they hired me. I went through the process with great resistance in some ways, though, because I truly loved the Whitney Young Learning Center, and I was deeply attached to the kids and the—. The beauty of the Whitney Young Learning Center was that it was not a public school. We could create—and we did—so we were able to respond to kids needs. Every night, the drive home for me was thinking about *Joe Blow, Jill and Johnny didn't get this, so what can I do differently to make Joe and Jill decide they want to read this? Or How could I improve their writing?* So, the beauty of Whitney Young was this constant—and we had this CEO who was a “yes” person, “yes” to ideas. The creativity was just fantastic.

I really wasn't particularly excited about leaving, but people came to me and said, “We need you to do this. We feel like you’re the right person to do it, because you do have the connection in the Black community, you do understand Portland Public Schools because you worked with them...” and I worked at Portland State. The only piece, I hadn't really worked with PCC. I seemed to be in the position to do it.
I took a leave of absence. Herb had long gone. We’d gone through some interim people, and Darryl
Tukufu had just come to the Urban League. I really liked him. He was a very dynamic leader. I went to
Darryl and said, “Can I take a year's leave of absence. I don't think this thing will last, [laughing] and I
can't believe they'll fund something like this for more than a year.” Darryl gave me the leave and I
came here. In November of 1989 they made it official. They had a reception and they did a press
conference to announce the Portland Teachers Program, what it was going to be about, and to
introduce me to—and it was right here, next door in the auditorium. Matt Prophet, who was the
Superintendent of Portland Public Schools, and I don't remember who the president was at PSU, and
then Dan Moriarty who was the President [of PCC]. The three of them did this big press conference.
They had a big reception to introduce me, to introduce the program, and off we went, and here we
are today.

CHR: Wow. That's amazing. Can you talk a little bit—because, when I came into the program [PTP],
which was Fall, 2007, I just remember hearing when I was talking with you about PTPs public presence
and how there was a period where you kind of retracted; where the program retracted from public
view. I know there was some controversy. Can you talk about what happened?

DC: What happened was—I don't remember what year it was, but I'm sure I could find the
paperwork. I think it was about year 10 [1999-2000]—somewhere in there. We got challenged. A
white woman filed a grievance with the Office of Civil Rights in Seattle saying that we discriminated
against white people, because we didn't have any white students in the program. Our literature was
pretty clear. It said this program targets these historically underrepresented groups in the teaching
profession, and we listed them, which was—come to find out—basically against the law [laughing]. So
we spent a year being investigated by the Office of Civil Rights. I spent a year in frequent meeting
with attorneys from the three institutions and the administrators from those three institutions. My
legs were black and blue because people next to me were always kicking me under the table. I was
pretty angry. I was pretty adamant about sticking to the mission because when 94% of the teachers in
the state of Oregon are white, I did not feel compelled to create space in my program for white
students. I have nothing against white students; I have nothing against white teachers, but to me the
imbalance was so neon flashing—it was this ongoing battle with me about, “Deborah, you need to
change, and your program needs to change. You need to allow white people to come to the
program,” and me saying, “That's not logical. It doesn't make sense. Why have the Portland Teachers
Program? It doesn't make any sense.” And I'll never forget and attorney from the state, and African
American guy, who leaned across the table—we were always sitting at these big conference tables
with all these very important people; attorneys, presidents, and, you know—and he leaned across the
table and said, “But, Deborah, wouldn't you let someone in who was like—what if there was a White
person like you?” And I stood up, I think—or I pounded my fist on the table and said, “I wouldn't let
myself in” [Laughing]. It's funny now, but at the time I was really angry and I didn't think it was funny
at all. And I wasn't laughing. I think that was one of those—I think Dr. Ollée, who was president of
[PCC] Cascade at the time, Dr. Millie Ollée—I think she kicked me under the table, said I must sit
down, and she grabbed my arm [laughing]. So, that was a very miserable year for me, and very
controversial, obviously. It even got some press. That guy is still around. He's a very conservative
radio talk show host.

CHR: Lars Larson?

DC: Yes. I didn't hear, and I'm glad I didn't hear it. I guess he did a rant on the radio about it, and
was outraged about the Portland Teachers Program, and how dare a program be targeted at specific
groups and not include White people. The outcome was [that] we had to change our language, and
we had to make sure that we made the program accessible to anyone who wanted to apply, which we
do now.

CHR: Is there anything in particular that you wanted to talk about that I didn't ask you about, or
anything—any stories or events?

DC: I think the only thing I'd like to say that pops into my head—I might think of stuff later—is that
both Whitney Young and Portland Teachers Program—. What I have valued is, with Whitney Young in
particular, I really valued the Black community. I always felt supported. Not at first, because at first
there was a lot of animosity towards me. I was a White girl. What was I doing, you know? But once I
think people saw that I was authentic, that I was willing to roll up my sleeves and work hard, and that
you couldn't scare me away—I think part of that whole thing of being on the corner of 9th and Alberta
was—I really had to dig my feet in, because it was a tough corner, even though it wasn't tough in
comparison to back east. It was a tough corner for Portland. But, you couldn't scare me away. You
could break into my car, you could—there was a guy who—well, this is a long story, but he came in
and we had to—one of the tutors sat on him. We had to call the police. I was there to stay. Once people got to know me, and saw that I really cared about kids, that I really cared about equity, I really cared about justice, I felt supported and I felt protected.

Then when I moved to Whitney Young—or moved to the Portland Teachers Program, I felt the same way. I felt like, number one, PTP wouldn't even exist without the Black community. The Latino community and the Native American community has really also—in fact, the Native American community has really supported me and guided me. All of them have. I feel like there are leaders in those communities that I can call up on the phone, and did, from day one—not in any formal advisory sense, but I would call Ronnie on the phone, I would call [Maurie?] on the phone, or call—there was a guy who was fabulous—he's not here anymore—from the Latino community. Larry Sanchez. He was the man in Oregon, in the Latino community. He's now in Washington, D.C., I think. I would say, “Larry, I need to have lunch with you. How do I do this? How do I do that? How do I be respectful?” They were always there for me, to guide me, to protect—I would say, “They're not going to fund us next year,” and they would say, “Oh, yes they are!”

I think that's an important piece of the story, the sense of community. Whitney Young and PTP were never a single person. They were always a synergism of energy and passion and purpose and vision. I could have never done either one of them without elders, community leaders, parents, and in PTP, students, who shared that vision with me, who were there to support and back me up. That's been the beauty of both of those programs. When people say, “What's the key? How did you make PTP work for 20 years?” I always say two words: building community. That's the secret: building community. You're in PTP. You think about it. What do I do? I build community.

When I first started, the meetings weren't required. What I saw was, the people who came, they were voluntary. But what I saw was, the people who made it, who did well, who completed, who graduated, were the people who came to the meetings. So, I said, that's it. I'm going to require the meetings. Every year in PTP, I learned something new, added something new that students taught me through just being reflective about what was working and what wasn't. It really became this synergism. That's all I would want to add.

CHR: Well, I think that about does it.
Okay. You did good.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Yeah. You bet.

Now I get to start typing.

But I want you to add the piece about the guy from South Africa.

Oh. Yes!

I'll bring those photographs in.

Okay. You can—we're still recording, so you can—

Just quickly tell you about it?

Yeah.

I can't think of his name, but I'll get it for you and I'll bring you the photographs. Two things: one, I also want to tell you about Kamau Sadiki. He's not in Portland anymore, he's in Washington, D.C., and his wife was Amina Anderson, who was the first director of the Black United Fund, not the Black United Front, but the Black United Fund. Kamau and Amina were powerful forces in the Black community in Portland.

Kamau became a very good friend of mine, and Kamau was one of the people I used to bring up to the Center for the Black History series, because Kamau belonged to a group called the Sirius Group, which studies the African origins of science and math. In his daytime job, Kamau was an engineer with the Army Corps of Engineers here in Oregon. In his private life, Kamau was a scholar and researcher with this Sirius Group that studied the African origins of science and math. Kamau had been to Africa many
times, and he had put together a slideshow that really was about the African origins of science and
math. He debunked a lot of these myths about the Greeks who had invented all of these theories
about math, and really had done the research to show you where science and math had really come
from.

Boy, you want to talk about turning kids on [to learning]. That was a huge piece of my Whitney Young
piece, and I brought it with me to PTP because I felt like all teachers should have this information. I
can no longer do it because Kamau moved to Washington, D.C. He used to come every other year and
do those. That's a really important person, and a really important piece of history in Portland, the
contributions of Kamau Sadiki.

The other one was—his name was [unknown]...something. I don't remember who introduced me to
him, but he was a playwright in exile from South Africa during apartheid. Somebody sponsored him to
come to Portland. I even remember where they—they gave him a little rent free place, or he lived
somewhere, because I used to take him home. He heard about the Whitney Young Learning Center,
and he wanted to come. I fell in love with the guy—I mean, not fell in love with him—but really liked
the guy, and he loved the Learning Center, and he loved the kids. So, he wrote a piece about—“How
would you like it if I wrote a play and produced it?” So, he did. He would come up there two or three
nights a week, and I have some photographs of the kids working with him. Then we performed it. We
did invitations and we did flyers, and the parents came—and the beautiful upstairs, old—I think it was
actually before they remodeled, but it was beautiful, even then. I don't know if you've ever been
upstairs?

**CHR:** Nuh-uh.

**DC:** Go across the street to the library here.

**CHR:** The public library?

**DC:** Yes. This is the best library in town. They have a huge African American literature section, and
history section. But upstairs—they've fixed it up now—it's... not a ballroom, but this huge, open,
beautiful space, and that's an old building that was absolutely gorgeous. We put on the play up there,
and it was a really big deal, of course. I'll bring you those photographs. They should be included.

And, I mean, for my kids, you know? These were kids who... I think nobody ever believed any of these kids were going to do anything, and they were brilliant—not just the kids in the play. What happened for me at Whitney Young was it just deepened my passion for justice, because what I saw was Black kids just being thrown away all over the city.

CHR: Thank you so much, Deborah. This was fantastic.

Herb Cawthorne went on to be hired by the San Diego Urban League and was subsequently investigated for financial mismanagement. Some financial irregularities at the Portland Urban League were also later attributed to him.


An interview with Herb Cawthorne: http://library.sdsu.edu/scua/heart-cawthorne (accessed March 1, 2015)

The Whitney Young Learning Center does not appear to be in existence any longer, however, they do have a current youth program, http://ulpdx.org/programs/youth-program/ (accessed March 6, 2015).

Oregon History Project entry on Ron Herndon


Prior to 1980, mandatory busing was in place in PPS. Many African American students were bused outside of their neighborhoods to attend predominantly white schools. For recent discussions about busing, see Slovic, Beth “Portland Public Schools Transfer Policies: Five Things to Know About Proposed Changes” Willamette Week, http://www.wweek.com/portland/blog-32434-portland_public_schools_transfer_policies_5_things_to_know_about_proposed_changes.html (accessed March 3, 2015)

