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Interview with Deborah Cochrane

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1 PSU Portland Civil Rights Project – Oral History

2 Narrator: Deborah Cochrane (DC)

3 Interviewed by: Chris Riser (CHR)

4 Date: March 8, 2010

5 Transcribed by: Chris Riser

6 Audited by: Rebekah Averette

7

8 **CHR:** Okay. My name is Chris Riser, and today is Monday, March 8, 2010. I'm here with Deborah
9 Cochrane in the PTP [Portland Teachers Program] office on the Cascade Campus of Portland
10 Community College, and we are going to discuss the Whitney Young Learning Center and the Portland
11 Teachers Program today.

12

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

15

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

21

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

23

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

27

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

33 base in Nuremburg, came back to the States and lived with just my father, because the other wife had
34 left him.

35

36 Then [I] went to live in kind of a foster home in Eugene. So, I moved to Eugene and graduated from
37 high school in Eugene, got in a lot of trouble with drugs and alcohol and people that were in a lot of
38 trouble. And then, there was a woman named Pearl Hill, who lots of people knew, [who] was very
39 much a part of some of the history that you're looking at—in Oregon, not so much in Portland, and
40 Pearl was from Portland, who ran the Upward Bound program at the University of Oregon [U of O].
41 Typically, people got into Upward Bound in high school, but I missed that boat. Pearl knew my foster
42 mother. In fact, my foster mother had been, I think in some ways, a mentor to Pearl, because Pearl
43 was kind of wild in her day. Pearl got me into college kind of through the back door of Upward Bound.

44

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

53

54 I basically went to college with a lot of African American kids from Watts and Oakland, and Portland.
55 A lot of kids came down from Portland. But, anyway, I was the only White kid in the group—at least
56 that Herb mentored. He took a cadre of us, and we had work-study. We all got pretty good financial
57 aid packages because we were all coming out of poverty. I was rural poverty, but all of the other kids
58 were urban poverty. So, he hired us all—he had created this thing called the Center for Self
59 Development. It was a part of EOP. Out of that Center, he taught a number of classes called
60 *Vocabulary Improvement* or *Speech*; different kinds of really basic skills classes for kids coming
61 from—you know, we were pretty raw, pretty rough around the edges, all of us, whether we were
62 from rural—I think I was the only kid from rural, but we were all rough—spoke pretty poorly—lots of
63 cussing and all of that kind of stuff.

64

65 Herb basically hired us as self-development assistants, and he used that time to teach us. We learned
66 how to write proposals, he taught us how to teach. That was really where I learned to teach, was
67 from Herb, not through a traditional school of education. He taught just everything. He taught us
68 about language, he taught us about the power of language. He really transformed a lot of us from kids
69 who probably wouldn't have made it to kids who had a shot at getting good jobs, being articulate
70 about what we thought, and being critical thinkers. He pushed us pretty hard. There were times when
71 I didn't like Herb very much, and I think a lot of us didn't like him very much, because he had *really*
72 high expectations for us. I spent the whole four years—that became my home and my security. I think
73 it was probably one of the first times in my life that somebody made me feel like there was a future
74 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
75 for a lot of us. Many of us from that cadre went on to do this kind of work because it was such a
76 natural link.

77

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

82

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

91

92 Then, when I came back to Oregon, I think I worked—I don't remember everything, but I worked for
93 Upward Bound one summer at U of O. So, I went back to my roots and taught writing and journalism
94 for Upward Bound. I did a lot of youth programs for years around Eugene and Portland. I don't
95 remember what year it was, but I moved to Portland to work for the Public Defender's office as a trial
96 assistant. Herb was already here in Portland running the EOP program at Portland State [University]

97 (PSU), and I hadn't been here but about four months, and called Herb to say that I was in town. He
98 hired me to run the tutorial program for EOP for all of Portland State, which kind of expanded to the
99 whole school, rather than just Upward Bound, EOP, and special programs.

100

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

102

103 **DC:** Educational Opportunity Program. It was one of those programs that came out of the 60s or
104 70s that was targeted at first generation—kids who would have been the first in their family to go to
105 college, came from low income backgrounds, and really was this effort to get those targeted
106 populations—poor White kids and students of color—a college educationⁱⁱ. EOP still exists. There's an
107 EOP program still at [Portland State]. It's pretty different these days. Back then it was pretty African
108 American, a lot of really low income kids, and truly first generation kids who—nobody in their family
109 had ever gone to college before.

110

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

117

118 Herb was huge on education. It was always a priority with Herb. So when he became the CEO of the
119 League, education took a top... Herb had been involved—when he was at PSU; I think he'd been on
120 the school board [of Portland Public Schools]. Him and Ronnie—him and Ron Herndonⁱⁱⁱ—had
121 coordinated, and were very much involved in, critiquing what was going on in Portland Public Schools,
122 and the failures of the school district to provide equity to, particularly, the African American
123 community. And there are photographs of Herb and Ronnie protesting and standing on the school
124 board desk, where the board members were sitting down at the Blanchard Education Service Building.
125 They worked together long before he [Herb Cawthorne] ever even went to the Urban League.
126 Herb—if memory serves me right; it was before my time, before I came to Portland, but I think Herb
127 was on the school board for a while. You should check this, but he might have been the first African
128 American on the school board. I could be wrong about that, but that might be an interesting thing to

129 look into. I think he might have been, and if he wasn't, he was certainly one of the first.^{iv}

130

131 So, Herb hired me. I took it over the phone. Herb called me and said, “Do you want to do this?” and I
132 said, “Sure,” because Herb was always an exciting guy to work for. He was always full of exciting
133 ideas. You would love him, because if it was thinkable, for Herb it was doable. You just had to figure
134 out how to do it. Unlike working for these bureaucracies, where every time you ask somebody
135 something, they always say, “No. We don't have the money,” or, “No, you can't do that. It's against
136 policy,” when you took an idea to Herb, he was always like, “Yeah! [hits fist on desk] Let's do that!”
137 So, it was this very exciting time at the Urban League. He hired a lot of young folks who had a lot of
138 energy and were willing to work fifteen hours a day for nothing, because we just loved it and we
139 believed what we were doing. He formed his “inner council,” or his advisory [committee], and we
140 would meet periodically, and all of these people would sit around, and we would just brainstorm and
141 shoot ideas at each other; everything from housing to education to public policy. It was a very exciting
142 time to be engaged in the Urban League.

143

144 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
145 the Urban League, I didn't do anything, right? I had this kind of nice office at PSU. It was in Shattuck
146 Hall. I mean, Shattuck Hall was old, but it was a cool, old building. You know, the Park Blocks; PSU was
147 kind of cool, right? So, I took this job over the phone, and PSU's president—not the president, but the
148 vice president—begged me not to leave. Actually, she offered me enticements, and I actually took a
149 cut in pay to go to the Urban League. That's how exciting it was. You didn't care about the money. You
150 knew that if you went to the Urban League, you were going to get to do things, and if you stayed at
151 PSU you were just going to have your hands tied by the bureaucracy. So I took a cut in pay to go to
152 the Urban League; I didn't care.

153

154 The funny memory was—I don't remember if Herb took me or if I drove there by myself—but what
155 Herb had already arranged, or maybe the Jesuit priests had had it there—on 9th and Alberta
156 [gesturing toward location] was where Whitney Young existed when I ran it. It was already arranged
157 that we were going to have this *one* room in the old school behind St. Andrew's Church. St. Andrew
158 School was behind the church, and we had this little basement room. At that time, the school was not
159 [in operation], so they rented it out to people for different things. It was pretty crappy, falling apart.
160 The first time I went there, and I drove by it, I thought, *What have I done? What have I done??*

161 [Laughing.] But I got over that pretty quickly. But it was bad, and that first year, all we had was this
162 basement room, and somebody else used it during the day. So, every afternoon, we had to set up
163 everything again, and put it all away at night. I don't remember who did it, but some volunteer—it
164 might have been a friend of mine, it was probably a friend of mine—built me a rolling bookshelf that I
165 could put my papers and books on. We'd roll it into this closet at night and then roll it back out in the
166 afternoon. It was a crappy, cold, horrible room. I really hated it.

167

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

181

182 And then we grew. We started getting a lot more students, we got more money, and we moved
183 upstairs. We rented a little office space and a storage closet. I think we had either two or three
184 classrooms—I can't remember—maybe just two. But again, the building was falling apart and the roof
185 leaked in my office. In the wintertime, students would come and they would sit—I had an old desk
186 like this [touching the hardwood desk] and the students would sit like that [pointing to my position,
187 facing her, but next to the desk rather than in front of it]. If you were in trouble you had to come to
188 Deborah's office, and rain would pour down on their head. The heat didn't work half the time, and I
189 would go over and complain to the priest and the rectory to turn the heat on, because we'd all be in
190 our coats studying. Really, what I tried to create with Whitney Young was—so many kids were—our
191 kids came from schools all over Portland, because at that time kids were bussed all over Portland.
192 Almost all of my kids were from North/Northeast Portland, and they walked to the Center. They lived

193 in the neighborhood, but they went to schools all over the city^v. They represented—probably every
194 high school in Portland was represented. We also did some middle school. We tried to serve middle
195 and high school kids. Most of my kids came from Jeff [Jefferson High School in Northeast Portland],
196 but they really were from everywhere. Almost all African American; probably 95, 97, 98 percent.

197

198 **CHR:** Yeah, I think that report has very detailed statistics on—^{vi}

199

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

204

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

220

221 **CHR:** What was her last name?

222

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

225 kids would have Rap Sessions.

226

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

229

230 **DC:** It came about because one of the things I started realizing was that these kids had a lot of
231 issues. They were becoming aware of—some of it was just teenage stuff: they had issues about girls,
232 or they had issues about fighting, or they had issues about basic teenage stuff. So, some of the Rap
233 Sessions were just about stuff like that. They were also beginning to become more aware—it was the
234 80s—but you have to remember that this was Oregon. A lot of the things that were going on
235 elsewhere, Oregon was always behind, and awareness didn't always come here as quickly. Things that
236 might have been big somewhere else—it seemed to me, anyway—didn't always come here until later.

237

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

242

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

247

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

249

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

251

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

253

254 “Well, because my teacher doesn't read it. She just checks off whether I did it or not and gives it
255 back.”

256

257 This is not high expectations for kids, and this was happening *a lot*. What was going on was these kids
258 were not learning how to write complete sentences. Nobody gave a shit whether they learned to
259 write a complete sentence or not. I really saw the racism going on.

260

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

265

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

277

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

287

288 I'll tell you, I think it converged with other forces; it certainly wasn't Whitney Young alone. But there

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

295

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

297

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

307

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

311

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

318

319 **CHR:** Do you remember Reggie's last name?

320

321 **DC:** I *can't* remember Reggie's last name. I could find out. And Gloria might be helpful, too. Also,
322 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—
323

324 **CHR:** In a different place...

325

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

333

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

342

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

345

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

347

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

353 talk to Ernie. I think he's in his 80s now.

354

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

361

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

366

367 Whitney Young became this really—in my mind, I think it was a great place, bringing people together.
368 I think a lot of kids felt like it was their home away from home. Again, Portland had no ghetto, but it
369 was a time when there were crack houses—crack was really big at the time. We knew there were
370 three crack houses right around us. Cars got broken into in the parking lot. My car got broken into
371 several times. We had some problems. What we ended up doing—I don't know if I should say this on
372 tape or not, but what we ended up doing was, we hired a guy who was part of it. And...
373 [laughing]...once we hired him, our troubles ended. We never had another problem. It was perfect.
374 Those were the days when you could do stuff like that. It was a small enough community that you
375 knew who was who. I never forgot, somebody ripped a tape deck—I remember back in the days, it
376 was tape decks—and I had a tape deck in my car. Somebody stole the tape deck out of my car in the
377 parking lot. All the kids said, "Well, we know where it's at, Deborah. We know where you can go buy
378 it." [laughing]—

379

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

381

382 **DC:** Yeah. Everybody knew everybody! It was a good place. And we had a fairly decent partnership
383 with the school district back then. Matt Prophet really supported us. He understood that the
384 community really needed that after school center. And there were other things going on in the

385 building that were kind of parallel. The church was doing a tutorial program for first through sixth
386 grade down the hall. They had a room down the hall after school. Emma Ford ran that. I think Emma's
387 still teaching. She's not running that [program] anymore, but she teaches full time at Rosa Parks.

388

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

396

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

398

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

400

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

403

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

408

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

410

411 **DC:** I took a pay cut to go to the League. So, to make extra money I wrote grants as a consultant,
412 which I found out didn't pay very well. Usually, whatever extra I made, the government took away, so
413 I quit doing that. Anyway, when I was doing it, I wrote a grant—the school district hired me as a
414 private consultant to write a grant for North Portland, for the community center out there. I was
415 working on that, and I was in Ernie Harzog's office. Ernie told me about this position, this program
416 called the Portland Teachers Program, that they were looking for the right person, and I should think

417 about it. I said, “Well, they need a person of color for that.” He said, “You should apply for it. Go
418 ahead and do it.” I think that's where I heard about it. Because he'd given me permission, even
419 though I thought it should be a person of color, I went ahead and applied for it, and here I am today.

420

421 **CHR:** Who was involved with the—

422

423 **DC:** In the early years?

424

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

426

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

433

434 My recollection—and I came to the game late in terms of the pressures that were going on behind the
435 scenes. What I think happened was the Black United Front, and maybe some other groups, were
436 pressuring the district, and were saying, “We're tired of our kids not seeing people who look like they
437 do in front of the classroom. And why aren't you hiring more teachers of color?” And Portland
438 was—Portland Public Schools was—they were going on recruiting trips. They were spending a sizable
439 amount of money, I think, going on recruiting trips to try to get people of color to come here, who
440 had teaching degrees, and people of color didn't want to come here. Why would you want to come to
441 Portland, Oregon? There wasn't a huge, thriving Black community. There wasn't, you know—it was a
442 tough sell. A person who might be of interest for you to talk to, if you were going to do a long term
443 project, would be a woman named Trish Ryan. Trish Ryan worked for Portland Public Schools in H.R.,
444 and was one of those early people who had a lot to do with shaping what happened before I came.
445 Her and... somebody from PCC [Portland Community College], and somebody from PSU—a woman
446 named [Mary Kennick?—was on the first tier of interviews. I had to interview with these three or
447 four women. Then I went on to interview with an executive. But Trish was one of those people, and
448 she's still around. I think she was also a principal at one time in Portland Public Schools.

449

450 For about two years, Portland Public Schools had been trying to respond to this pressure about why
451 all the teachers were white. I think they knew there was no—they needed help. So they connected
452 with PCC and PSU. Committees were formed and research was done to look at [whether] there was
453 anything else in the country. They paid a guy to do a little bit of research and write this little paper.
454 The real turning point for them was when they got two grants. One they got was a FIPSE grant—I
455 forgot what they were called... Federal Innovation in Post Secondary Education. They were grants that
456 the government gave to try new, innovative things in higher education. They got a FIPSE grant to start
457 the AFE, the Academy for Future Educators, and in some ways it jumped the gun of PTP. Somehow,
458 they made it all come together. Then they wrote a letter—it wasn't a big grant, it more like a
459 letter—to the Oregon Community Foundation. The Oregon Community Foundation agreed to give
460 them the seed money to start the Portland Teachers Program, which basically meant hiring a director.
461 What they realized was that this wasn't going to go anywhere unless we have somebody full time who
462 can coordinate these three bureaucracies and all of these different committees that were meeting at
463 the different colleges and the school district. And they needed somebody who could bring that all
464 together and then do something with the students—you know, get the students together.

465

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

474

475 I really wasn't particularly excited about leaving, but people came to me and said, “We need you to
476 do this. We feel like you're the right person to do it, because you do have the connection in the Black
477 community, you do understand Portland Public Schools because you worked with them...” and I
478 worked at Portland State. The only piece, I hadn't really worked with PCC. I seemed to be in the
479 position to do it.

480

481 I took a leave of absence. Herb had long gone. We'd gone through some interim people, and Darryl
482 Tukufu had just come to the Urban League. I really liked him. He was a very dynamic leader. I went to
483 Darryl and said, "Can I take a year's leave of absence. I don't think this thing will last, [laughing] and I
484 can't believe they'll fund something like this for more than a year." Darryl gave me the leave and I
485 came here. In November of 1989 they made it official. They had a reception and they did a press
486 conference to announce the Portland Teachers Program, what it was going to be about, and to
487 introduce me to—and it was right here, next door in the auditorium. Matt Prophet, who was the
488 Superintendent of Portland Public Schools, and I don't remember who the president was at PSU, and
489 then Dan Moriarty who was the President [of PCC]. The three of them did this big press conference.
490 They had a big reception to introduce me, to introduce the program, and off we went, and here we
491 are today.

492

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

497

498 **DC:** What happened was—I don't remember what year it was, but I'm sure I could find the
499 paperwork. I think it was about year 10 [1999-2000]—somewhere in there. We got challenged. A
500 white woman filed a grievance with the Office of Civil Rights in Seattle saying that we discriminated
501 against white people, because we didn't have any white students in the program. Our literature was
502 pretty clear. It said this program targets these historically underrepresented groups in the teaching
503 profession, and we listed them, which was—come to find out—basically against the law [laughing]. So
504 we spent a year being investigated by the Office of Civil Rights. I spent a year in frequent meeting
505 with attorneys from the three institutions and the administrators from those three institutions. My
506 legs were black and blue because people next to me were always kicking me under the table. I was
507 pretty angry. I was pretty adamant about sticking to the mission because when 94% of the teachers in
508 the state of Oregon are white, I did not feel compelled to create space in my program for white
509 students. I have nothing against white students; I have nothing against white teachers, but to me the
510 imbalance was so neon flashing—it was this ongoing battle with me about, "Deborah, you need to
511 change, and your program needs to change. You need to allow white people to come to the
512 program," and me saying, "That's not logical. It doesn't make sense. Why have the Portland Teachers

513 Program? It doesn't make any sense." And I'll never forget and attorney from the state, and African
514 American guy, who leaned across the table—we were always sitting at these big conference tables
515 with all these very important people; attorneys, presidents, and, you know—and he leaned across the
516 table and said, "But, Deborah, wouldn't you let someone in who was like—what if there was a White
517 person like you?" And I stood up, I think—or I pounded my fist on the table and said, "I wouldn't let
518 myself in" [Laughing]. It's funny now, but at the time I was really angry and I didn't think it was funny
519 at all. And I wasn't laughing. I think that was one of those—I think Dr. Ollée, who was president of
520 [PCC] Cascade at the time, Dr. Millie Ollée—I think she kicked me under the table, said I must sit
521 down, and she grabbed my arm [laughing]. So, that was a very miserable year for me, and very
522 controversial, obviously. It even got some press. That guy is still around. He's a very conservative
523 radio talk show host.

524

525 **CHR:** Lars Larson?

526

527 **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
528 was outraged about the Portland Teachers Program, and how dare a program be targeted at specific
529 groups and not include White people. The outcome was [that] we had to change our language, and
530 we had to make sure that we made the program accessible to anyone who wanted to apply, which we
531 do now.

532

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

535

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

545 and we had to—one of the tutors sat on him. We had to call the police. I was there to stay. Once
546 people got to know me, and saw that I really cared about kids, that I really cared about equity, I really
547 cared about justice, I felt supported and I felt protected.

548

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

560

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

568

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

575

576 **CHR:** Well, I think that about does it.

577

578 **DC:** Okay. You did good.

579

580 **CHR:** Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

581

582 **DC:** Yeah. You bet.

583

584 **CHR:** Now I get to start typing.

585

586 **DC:** But I want you to add the piece about the guy from South Africa.

587

588 **CHR:** Oh. Yes!

589

590 **DC:** I'll bring those photographs in.

591

592 **CHR:** Okay. You can—we're still recording, so you can—

593

594 **DC:** Just quickly tell you about it?

595

596 **CHR:** Yeah.

597

598 **DC:** I can't think of his name, but I'll get it for you and I'll bring you the photographs. Two things:

599 one, I also want to tell you about Kamau Sadiki. He's not in Portland anymore, he's in Washington,

600 D.C., and his wife was Amina Anderson, who was the first director of the Black United Fund, not the

601 Black United Front, but the Black United *Fund*. Kamau and Amina were powerful forces in the Black

602 community in Portland.

603

604 Kamau became a very good friend of mine, and Kamau was one of the people I used to bring up to the

605 Center for the Black History series, because Kamau belonged to a group called the Sirius Group, which

606 studies the African origins of science and math. In his daytime job, Kamau was an engineer with the

607 Army Corps of Engineers here in Oregon. In his private life, Kamau was a scholar and researcher with

608 this Sirius Group that studied the African origins of science and math. Kamau had been to Africa many

609 times, and he had put together a slideshow that really was about the African origins of science and
610 math. He debunked a lot of these myths about the Greeks who had invented all of these theories
611 about math, and really had done the research to show you where science and math had really come
612 from.

613

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

619

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

631

632 **CHR:** Nuh-uh.

633

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

635

636 **CHR:** The public library?

637

638 **DC:** Yes. This is the best library in town. They have a huge African American literature section, and
639 history section. But upstairs—they've fixed it up now—it's... not a ballroom, but this huge, open,
640 beautiful space, and that's an old building that was absolutely gorgeous. We put on the play up there,

641 and it was a really big deal, of course. I'll bring you those photographs. They should be included.

642

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

647

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

649

ⁱ 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.

http://articles.latimes.com/1990-04-07/local/me-439_1_urban-league-funds (accessed March 1, 2015)

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

ⁱⁱ 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).

ⁱⁱⁱ Oregon History Project entry on Ron Herndon

http://www.ohs.org/education/oregonhistory/historical_records/dspDocument.cfm?doc_ID=44DF2F6E-1C23-B9D3-68A6C4379B07F2F8 (accessed March 1, 2015)

^{iv} Gladys McCoy (1970-1978) and Evelyn Crowell (1978-1979) preceded Herb Cawthorne as African American members of the Portland Public School District's Board. However, Cawthorne was the first African American male board member. See Mark Friesen, "African American elected officials" OregonLive.com, September 28, 2007, http://blog.oregonlive.com/oregonianopinion/2007/09/african_american_elected_offic.html (accessed March 12, 2010); see also Nigel Jaquiss, "The Numbers Game," Willamette Week, 1999, <http://wweek.com/html/25-1980.html#battle> (accessed March 12, 2010).

^v 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)

Rawley, Steve, "The Continuing History of Racism in Portland Public Schools"

<http://ppsequity.org/2008/07/01/the-new-look-of-pps-equity/>

(Accessed March 2, 2015)

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- ^{vi} Portland, OR, Portland Public Schools, Research and Evaluation Dept., *Whitney M. Young Learning Center in the Portland Public Schools. 1986-87 Evaluation Report*, Stephanie Mitchell, August 1987,
http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED292826&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED292826 (accessed March 6, 2010).
- ^{vii} Ernest E. Harzog was President of the National *Alliance* of Black School Educators from 1979-1981. See National Alliance of Black School Educators, "Our Past Presidents," *About*,
http://www.nabse.org/about_pastpresidents.html (accessed March 12, 2010).
- ^{viii} Dr. Robert L. Green was Education Director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from 1965-1967. He is currently Dean and Professor Emeritus of the Urban Affairs Programs at Michigan State University. See Harry Walker Agency, "Robert L. Green: Nationally Known Scholar & Expert on Urban Issues," *Our Speakers*,
http://www.harrywalker.com/speaker/Robert-Green.cm?Spea_ID=638 (accessed March 12, 2010).