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Reclaiming Public Space: How Black Portlanders Transformed Irving Park, 1960s-1980s

By

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On a typical summer day, Portland's Irving Park bustles with activity in practically every corner of its sixteen acres. Walking along its winding paths, under towering Douglas firs, the noise of the city gives way to the delighted screams of children on the playground and the splash pad, the boisterous sounds of simultaneous basketball games, dogs barking in the off-leash area, and music playing from someone's radio. The fresh, green smell of grass mixes with the smoky aroma emanating from the grills in the picnic area. It's a beautiful sight—everywhere you look, people are taking advantage of their public space. What you cannot see, however, is any indicator of the park's history as a vital community gathering place for Black Portlanders.

Bordered by Northeast Fremont Street just a block east of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Portland's historic Albina district, Irving Park was a hub for Portland's Black community from the 1960s to the 1980s.¹ Black people had lived in Albina since the early twentieth century, but the neighborhood experienced a major influx of Black residents after the Vanport Flood of 1948. Due to racist real estate practices, thousands of displaced Black families were forced to find shelter where they could, and Albina was one of the few places they could purchase or rent homes. Housing discrimination, compounded with mid-century urban renewal projects, further displaced Black residents on the eastside. By the late 1960s, most of Portland's Black population resided in crowded conditions in neighborhoods around Irving Park along Northeast Union Avenue (now Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard).² Nearly four in five Black

¹ Albina refers to the North and inner Northeast neighborhoods of Eliot, Boise, King, Humboldt, Overlook, Irvington, and Piedmont today. Albina had stretched into Southeast Portland before urban renewal projects, such as the expansion of Interstate 5 and the construction of the Lloyd Center and Veterans Memorial Coliseum, forced scores of Black families to relocate in the 1950s-60s.

² Carl Abbott, *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth Century City* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983). See also Michael N. McGregor, "The Vanport Flood," *The Oregon History Project*, Oregon Historical Society, 2003; Roy E. Roos "Albina area (Portland)," *The Oregon Encyclopedia*, Oregon Historical Society, 2008.

Portlanders called Albina home in the late twentieth century, before gentrification priced out scores of Black families from the area.³

Existing scholarship on Albina spotlights the Black community's struggle for civil rights against the city's disinvestment and the Police Bureau's use of deadly force. Lucas N.N. Burke and Judson L. Jeffries' 2017 book *The Portland Black Panthers: Empowering Albina and Remaking a City* provides vital insight into Black radicalism in Portland and how the Portland Panthers helped shape the city's political and physical landscape.⁴ Portland State University Professor of Urban Studies and Planning Karen J. Gibson has also conducted extensive research on Portland's Black history, demonstrating how over sixty years of residential segregation and neighborhood disinvestment resulted in gentrification and displacement.⁵ In addition, Gibson's study with Leanne Serbulo about racial discrimination in the policing of Albina argues that the overwhelmingly white Portland police have been "critically important agents of an oppressive structure that resisted change in Portland and cities nationally."⁶

This project expands on the work of these scholars to explore the role of public space in community organizing and resistance efforts in Albina, highlighting not only the challenges but

³ For an in-depth study of the contemporary gentrification of the Albina district, see Red G. Rick, [The Gentrification of Albina](#) (2021) and Carter William Ause, "Black and Green: How Disinvestment, Displacement and Segregation Created the Conditions For Eco-Gentrification in Portland's Albina District, 1940-2015" (Honors thesis, Portland State University, 2016).

⁴ Lucas N. N. Burke and Judson L. Jeffries, *The Portland Black Panthers: Empowering Albina and Remaking a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017). See also Jules Boykoff and Martha Gies, "'We're Going to Defend Ourselves': The Portland Chapter of the Black Panther Party and the Local Media Response," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 111, no. 3 (2010).

⁵ Karen J. Gibson, "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940–2000," *Transforming Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2007): 3–25.

⁶ Gibson and Leanne Claire Serbulo, "Black and Blue: Police-Community Relations in Portland's Albina District, 1964–1985," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 114, no. 1 (2013): 6-37. Graduate students have also contributed meaningful scholarship to Albina's history: Katherine Eileen Nelson, "'On the Murder of Rickey Johnson': the Portland Police Bureau, Deadly Force, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Oregon, 1940-1975" (MA diss., Portland State University, 2018): https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds/4434/; Joshua Joe Bryan, "Portland, Oregon's Long Hot Summers: Racial Unrest and Public Response, 1967-1969" (MA diss., Portland State University, 2013): https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/open_access_etds/995/.

also the victories and joys elicited by communal use of Irving Park. Whereas existing literature focuses on the struggle of displacement, this spatially informed approach demonstrates the Black community's resilience, strength, and humanity despite institutionalized anti-Black racism. By claiming and investing in public space, Black Portlanders exercised agency over their stories.

Although we often take their existence for granted, public parks are imperative for the vitality of a functioning democratic society. Occupying public space is an inherently political act that takes on new dimensions in resistance movements. Parks provide an open setting for people to come together to share space; in other words, parks are sites for building community at its most basic level. Historian Andrew Kahrl has argued that “in an age when personal wealth closely correlates with political influence, public spaces afford marginalized voices in society places where they can go and be heard, where dissident views can be aired and nonconformist lifestyles can be expressed freely, and where a diverse nation can engage in the hard work of becoming a diverse society.”⁷ With this significance in mind, cultural geographer Don Mitchell has studied the increasing rate of the privatization of public space in late-stage capitalism. Mitchell celebrates people's resistance against this trend, stating that “if the end of public space is a tendency, then sometimes that tendency is thwarted by people acting democratically.”⁸ In this way, Black Portlanders envisioned and utilized Irving Park as a democratic space—one to serve their needs and sustain their community. Irving Park provided not just a place for recreation—how parks were traditionally intended—but also a site of protest and activism for Black Portlanders in the face of institutionalized poverty and oppression.

⁷ Andrew Kahrl, *Free the Beaches: The Story of Ned Coll and the Battle for America's Most Exclusive Shoreline* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018): 292.

⁸ Don Mitchell, “People's Park Again: On the End and Ends of Public Space” in *Environment and Planning* 49 no. 3 (2017): 503-518.

Some scholars have researched these spatial and environmental issues in the context of Black history specifically. Environmental historian Brian McCammack explores the multifaceted connections Black Chicagoans forged with urban green spaces in *Landscapes of Hope*. In the chapter “Playgrounds and Protest Grounds,” McCammack analyzes the complex and even contradictory meanings Black Chicagoans tied to urban parks during times of severe racial unrest. He argues that Black people’s ability to claim public green spaces in their neighborhood, such as Washington Park, was particularly valuable because it gave them a place to be in community without having to worry about white violence or cultural expectations. Yet at the same time, this separate natural haven represented Black Chicagoans’ increasing segregation.⁹ Geographer James A. Tyner highlights how the Black Panthers’ spatial strategies to assert control over their communities were integral to their community survival programs in his essay “‘Defend the Ghetto’: Space and the Urban Politics of the Black Panther Party.”¹⁰

These studies on the multifaceted meanings attached to place have informed and framed my research, leading me to investigate how Black Portlanders used public space during times of pronounced racial inequity. To explore this topic, I drew on material from the City of Portland Archives, the Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland State University’s Rutherford Family Collection of Historic Black Newspapers of Portland, and the *Oregonian*, the state’s preeminent newspaper. As I mined the archives, Irving Park came up again and again, leading me to wonder what purposes this park served, what meanings residents attached to the space, and what visible and invisible battles were fought over these sixteen acres.

⁹ Brian McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

¹⁰ James A. Tyner, “‘Defend the Ghetto’: Space and the Urban Politics of the Black Panther Party,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 1 (2006): 105-118.

The evidence shows that Irving Park served a constellation of interrelated and concurrent purposes for the Black community, from rebellion to mutual aid, cultural celebration to education, and of course, recreation. Further, what I found disrupts the narrative pushed by the city and media outlets that communities and public spaces needed top-down revitalization. Black Portlanders used public space to revitalize their community from within. In spite of racist housing policies designed to geographically and socially confine Black people, Albina residents claimed a number of public spaces, such as Irving Park, carving out a place for themselves in the urban landscape. The history of Black Portlanders' relationship to Irving Park is ultimately a story of citizens mobilizing to take charge of their community's survival and flourishing.

A SPACE OF POLICE SURVEILLANCE AND REBELLION

“Where else but in Albina do cops hang around the streets and parks all day like plantation overseers? Just their presence antagonizes us. We feel like we’re being watched all the time.”¹¹
 – **“Bitter, Frank, Articulate Youth of Albina Speaks Up,” *The Oregonian*, August 6, 1968**

For two days and nights in the midsummer heat of 1967, Portland experienced its most destructive bout of civil disorder to date. That summer, a wave of urban uprisings swept the nation as Black youth turned resentment and outrage into action in over 150 U.S. cities. Black Power activists across the country claimed public spaces to demand redress to anti-Black racism in housing, employment, education, and policing.¹²

¹¹ William Sanderson, “Bitter, Frank, Articulate Youth of Albina Speaks Up,” *The Oregonian*, August 6, 1968, 6M 4J, cited from Bryan, “Portland, Oregon's Long Hot Summers,” 19.

¹² For more on the Black Power movement, see Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (Baltimore, Md: Black Classic Press, 2007); Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*, 1st Anchor Books ed edition (New York, NY: Anchor, 1993); Huey Newton and Elaine Brown, *To Die for the People*, ed. Toni Morrison, Reissue edition (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers, 2009); Stokely Carmichael and Mark Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (Vintage House 1992); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*, 1st Edition edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics*, New edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

In Portland, “the long, hot summer of 1967” manifested as a two-day rebellion in and around Irving Park.¹³ What began as a nonviolent “Sunday in the Park” rally to protest racist urban renewal policies became violent when some Black youth began throwing bottles and rocks at white passersby, then vandalized and looted nearby businesses. As day turned to night, demonstrators firebombed several buildings. Mayor Terry Schrunk enforced a curfew to quell the disturbance, dispatching 400 police officers and sheriff’s deputies to patrol a thirty-block area surrounding the park. Despite police intimidation, the next day over 200 African Americans continued to occupy Irving Park. That night, unknown culprits firebombed a nearby building full of urban renewal equipment, prompting Mayor Schrunk to order the police to clear the park of all remaining protesters. After the two-day upheaval, police had arrested ninety-eight people—over fifty of them Black—and property damages totaled \$50,000. Neglecting to address the underlying structural inequalities that sparked the rebellion, the city government and local media portrayed the uprising as a result of outside agitators.¹⁴

¹³ I choose to use the language of “rebellion” or “uprising” rather than “riot” to restore agency to the protestors, legitimize their anger, and clarify that the action had resulted from layers of inequality. In the 1960s as today, mainstream media outlets frame Black resistance as a nuisance or illegitimate. It is crucial to remember that when a person does not have their basic human needs met, they are perpetually in survival mode. Living in this insecure psychological state leads to a certain kind of rage and polarizing attitude toward the government.

¹⁴ Lucas N. N. Burke and Judson L. Jeffries, “Claiming Albina in the Era of Model Cities,” in *The Portland Black Panthers: Empowering Albina and Remaking a City* (Seattle, University of Washington Press: 2016): 48–98.



Photo of the “Sunday in the Park” rally at Irving Park on the front page of *The Clarion Defender*, August 3, 1967, from the Rutherford Family Collection of Historic Black Newspapers of Portland. For the *Defender*’s full page of photos of the Irving Park incident, see Appendix A.

Various inciting factors led to the Irving Park rebellion, but the main point of contention stemmed from inequalities in treatment by the police. Black youth considered the heightened police presence in Albina parks and neighborhood to be evidence of their continued oppression—a constant surveillance that one local resident compared to plantation overseers.¹⁵ Many Black youth pointed to the unequal policing of Irving Park compared to other city parks. A week after the disturbances, twenty-year-old Oliver O’Farrell told the Black newspaper *The Clarion Defender* that the police “hang around” Irving on Sundays, creating tension and provoking incidents.¹⁶ Black Power activist Colden Brown, Jr., who spoke at the “Sunday in the Park” rally, echoed this discontent, identifying a pattern of racism in the City’s unequal permit enforcement for parks predominantly patronized by white Portlanders versus Irving Park. Noting

¹⁵ “Where else but in Albina do cops hang around the streets and parks all day like plantation overseers? Just their presence antagonizes us. We feel like we’re being watched all the time.” From William Sanderson, “Bitter, Frank, Articulate Youth of Albina Speaks Up,” *The Oregonian*, August 6, 1968, 6M 4J, cited from Bryan, “Portland, Oregon’s Long Hot Summers,” 19.

¹⁶ “Special Picture Page of Irving Park Incidents,” *The Clarion Defender*, August 3, 1967, p. 3, PSU Special Collections, Rutherford Family Collection Historic Black Newspapers of Portland.

that the police would not interfere with the “hippies” at Lair Hill, Brown observed: “Irving Park is the Black people's park...Because our activity was sponsored by blacks for blacks, the city fathers decided that it would need policing. After all, they seemed to be implying that Black people cannot police themselves.”¹⁷ These complaints emphasize that the rebellion was a conflict over control of space. Frustrated that they were treated as though they couldn’t be trusted, Black Portlanders sought freedom from abusive and excessive policing of their community, their public places, their sliver of the city.

Citizen harassment and social control were the Portland Police Bureau’s main priorities in the Albina neighborhood, not public safety, according to Gibson and Serbulo in their 2013 article “Black and Blue: Police-Community Relations in Portland's Albina District, 1964–1985.” Using sociologist Robert Staples’ 1975 article on race and crime, Gibson and Serbulo show how many Albina residents, and so-called “blighted” inner-city residents across the county, perceived their struggle with residential segregation and racial isolation in terms of colonial oppression. Black Portlanders saw themselves as subjected to the unjust authority of white-dominated institutions such as the police bureau—an inequitable dependence on outsiders for political and economic resources that constituted an “internal colony.”¹⁸ As stated by City Club of Portland in their 1968 report on institutionalized racial discrimination: “The policeman in the ghetto is a symbol, finally, of a society from which many ghetto Negroes are increasingly alienated.”¹⁹

This tension over policing exemplifies how public parks can be platforms to protest injustice while also representing the very injustices themselves. Mitchell has asserted that

¹⁷ Colden Brown, Jr., “Rapping About Albina,” *Vanguard*, September 27, 1967, 10, cited from Bryan, “Portland, Oregon's Long Hot Summers,” 22.

¹⁸ Gibson and Serbulo, “Black and Blue,” 8.

¹⁹ City Club of Portland, *Report on Problems of Racial Justice in Portland*, June 14, 1968, quoted in Gibson and Serbulo, “Black and Blue,” 7.

“public space [has] to be understood as both a space of conflict and a space essential to the creation and resolution of conflict.”²⁰ Irving Park must have held these complex meanings for its Black constituency. It served as a refuge for Black Portlanders, a comforting, familiar place for recreation and relaxation with others experiencing similar forms of daily oppression. Yet the ever-present threat of state-sanctioned violence also defined the setting. Therefore, the protesters’ occupation of Irving Park to protest unjust policing can be understood as an attempt to reclaim their community space in the face of extreme adversity.

A SPACE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND MUTUAL AID IN THE AGE OF MODEL CITIES

“The purpose of our program is simple: to help our people survive.”²¹ - Kent Ford, cofounder of the Portland Black Panther Party

Starting in the 1950s, metropolitan areas across the United States implemented urban renewal projects to combat what was perceived to be blight and disrepair in inner-city neighborhoods. With the use of federal funds granted in the Housing Act of 1957, city planners designated certain areas to be substandard and thus eligible for clearance and redevelopment, often forcing poor residents to relocate. This process of labeling Black neighborhoods blighted and in need of revitalization contributed to Portland’s long history of systematic disinvestment in Albina.²² The construction of the Lloyd Center, Veterans Memorial Coliseum, Interstate 5, Oregon Route 99, and the Legacy Emanuel Hospital expansion chopped up Portland’s Black neighborhoods, destroying commercial buildings and several hundred homes.²³ Therefore, by the

²⁰ Mitchell, “People’s Park Again,” 511.

²¹ “Breakfast, clinic programs belie militant panther image,” *The Oregonian*, November 12, 1971, 23.

²² Gibson, “Bleeding Albina,” 11.

²³ For a broader history of racial segregation in Portland’s urban planning history, see: *Historical Context of Racist Planning: A History of How Planning Segregated Portland*, City of Portland, Oregon Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (2019). <https://www.portland.gov/bps/planning/adap/history-racist-planning-portland>. See also: Wollner, Provo, and Schablisky, “Brief History of Urban Renewal in Portland, Oregon,”

passing of the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development Act of 1966 (eventually known as the Model Cities program after the term “demonstration” became associated with urban rebellions), Black Portlanders were disillusioned with the city’s superficial vision of “progress” embodied by the bulldozer.²⁴ But seeing that the Model Cities program represented a new approach to urban ills, one that centered public involvement in all stages of development and sought to bring about comprehensive social, economic, and physical changes, many Albina residents jumped at the opportunity to redefine their community based around their needs. This period would be characterized by citizen participation and rehabilitation rather than top-down clearance.²⁵

In the spring of 1968, Albina residents engaged in numerous meetings with Model Cities officials to voice their concerns and propose ideas for the project’s direction. The Albina residents involved in Model Cities planning were likely older adults who had access to these kinds of political forums. These members of the Black community hoped to address the community’s frustrations through a different avenue than the more radical young adults who had demonstrated the year prior. These residents proposed a wide range of improvements for their neighborhoods, from employment and economic development to education, culture, and recreation. Resident input led to the creation of seven working committees made up of community members to oversee different facets of the Model Cities program. Lingering tensions related to Irving Park frequently came up throughout the committees’ meetings, especially

<https://prosperportland.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Brief-History-of-Urban-Renewal-in-Portland-2005-Wollner-Provo-Schablisky.pdf>

²⁴ Francesca Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

²⁵ See Appendix B for a map of the Model Cities area in Northeast Portland.

pertaining to the park's safety, recreational programming, employment opportunities, and physical condition.²⁶

Residents agreed that Irving Park felt unsafe, but they differed when it came to ideas for making it safer. Some complained there were too many uniformed police in the area, while others felt there needed to be more. This complaint extended to a lack of personal contact with any city leadership. Some claimed the only city officials to frequent Albina were police officers and City Hall aides, leading Reverend Rozell Gilmore, director of the Albina Neighborhood Service Center, to decry what he and many others saw as “a conspiratorial policy to ‘forget Albina.’”²⁷ At issue was not only the excess or lack of police presence, but also the quality and responsiveness of law enforcement. Residents complained that police were inattentive to citizen needs and failed to enforce laws in Northeast Portland. To remedy this, citizens suggested the creation of a walking beat, a Police-Community Relations office, and a local police precinct, as well as increasing awareness about police services.²⁸ With the memory of the rebellion fresh on everyone's minds, residents hoped that improved rapport and communication would mitigate friction between the police and Black youth.

Outdoor recreational programs were seen as another important way to improve Albina's standard of living. Providing recreation opportunities for young people in Irving Park specifically was even more pressing in hopes of preventing future disturbances there. But the present state of park programs left Albina residents feeling neglected, and they wanted a seat at

²⁶ “Citizens' Views of Needs in the Model Cities Area - Portland Model Cities Report Number 1, Planning Report Number 1,” April 11, 1968, Model Cities (Archival) - Model Cities Subject Files - Citizens Views, City of Portland Archives, A2001-014, AF/71471.

²⁷ William Sanderson, “Vocal Young Albina Activists Prod 'Establishment' Into Changes in Policing, Recreation, Employment,” *The Oregonian*, March 31, 1968.

²⁸ Morton Spence, “3 Neighborhoods Air Improvement,” *The Oregon Journal*, March 12, 1968; “Citizens' Views of Needs in the Model Cities Area,” City of Portland Archives.

the table. In a meeting with Mayor Schrunk, residents expressed their opposition to having park programs “imposed” on them, demanding that the Parks Department involve the Black community in its programming. Robert Nelson, chairman of the School Community Action Committee, charged Schrunk’s administration with “perpetuating rather than solving problems” by its “disregard of the grassroots community.”²⁹

In addition to greater community participation in recreational programming, Albina residents hoped that Model Cities would create accessible, entry-level job opportunities for young Black people, such as construction and maintenance at local parks and recreation centers. A lack of available park jobs was a repeated point of contention that had factored into the previous year’s uprising. As a twenty-year-old Albina resident observed a day after the protests: “There are no Negroes employed on the park’s maintenance staff. Right here in our own neighborhood, white people have all the jobs.”³⁰ As this young person emphasized, frustrations over park jobs exacerbated the tensions of unemployment by making economic disparity visible in public places. Seven months later, Black Portlanders still felt they were rarely hired for the manual labor jobs they were qualified for and applied to. Many chalked this up to the discriminatory hiring practices under Parks and Recreation director Dorothea Lensch of requiring a college education. Pointing out that higher education was financially inaccessible for many in the Black community, Lizzie Sheppard of the School Community Action Committee called this requirement “another way of segregating our children and others in the low economic field.”³¹ Anxious to avoid further unrest, city officials closely monitored the complaints of the

²⁹ “Mayor Told: Parks Don't Meet People's Need,” *The Oregon Advance Times*, March 21, 1968. PSU Special Collections, Rutherford Family Collection Historic Black Newspapers of Portland.

³⁰ William Sanderson, “Negro Youths Fear Mayor ‘Missed Message’ of City Hall Discussion,” *The Oregonian*, August 2, 1967, 6M, 15, quoted from Bryan, “Portland, Oregon's Long Hot Summers,” 48-49.

³¹ “Mayor Told: Parks Don't Meet People's Need.”

Black community and sought to address lingering frustrations. Explicitly citing the meeting publicized by the Black newspaper *The Oregon Advance Times*, Mayor Schunk wrote to Parks Commissioner Francis Ivancie asking him to reassess their hiring practices for summer park aides.³²

While some residents pushed the city to improve its park programming in 1968, other Black community members created their own organizations to give young people something productive to do. The “7 of Diamonds” teen club was one such group that came out of a community effort to convert an abandoned building on North Williams Avenue into a youth recreation center. Over \$1,200 in donations came pouring in from readers all around the state after *The Oregonian* published an article about the club’s fundraising goals, showing that concern over recreational opportunities for Portland’s Black youth extended beyond local communities. Anxieties surrounding Irving Park were integral to the goal of creating different spaces for young people to convene. As the advisor of 7 of Diamonds, Nathan Proby, put it: “When it’s finished, the club will offer these kids an alternative to hanging out in Irving Park where last year’s trouble started.”³³

That summer, on the one-year anniversary of the uprising, the Citizens’ Planning Board held a rally “where [the] last year’s trouble started” to announce the progress of the Model Cities planning. Nearly 300 gathered in Irving Park to enjoy free food, live music, and speeches from local Model Cities leaders. During his speech, Larry Lakey, spokesperson for the Employment and Economic Development working committee, encouraged the establishment of more Black-owned businesses in Albina. According to *The Oregonian*, “Lakey told the audience to ‘think

³² William Sanderson, *The Oregonian* staff, “Vocal Young Albina Activists Prod ‘Establishment’ Into Changes in Policing, Recreation, Employment,” March 31, 1968, *The Historical Oregonian, 1861-1972*.

³³ John Painter, Jr., “Albina Teen-Agers ‘Swamped’ With Materials for Clubhouse”, *The Oregonian*, April 14, 1968, 26.

black,' an instruction which produced several shouts of 'black power.'" That this rallying cry of Black liberation became integrated into a federally funded, municipally administered program demonstrates how much Black Portlanders took advantage of the opportunities enabled by Model Cities to suit their social, economic, and political needs. Furthermore, Oregon governor Tom McCall gave the rally's headline speech, expressing his personal concern for Portland's Albina district and the state's Black population, and pledging his support to realize the goals of Model Cities. Reflecting a general sense of optimism about the community engagement in the program, he told the crowd: "Never before have so many people been so willing to help improve conditions." One can imagine the spirit of hope fostered by this event, a vastly different feeling than those evoked exactly a year prior in that space.³⁴

The selection of Irving Park as the site to promote the Model Cities initiatives was intentional. It represented a conscious effort to rededicate the green space away from the associations of the rebellion, and instead use the park as a symbol of the cooperation and partnership that Model Cities promised. Residents and city leaders understood how a communal gathering space and the feelings associated with it could be shaped by any number of external forces. In deciding to use Irving Park for this purpose, Model Cities leaders hoped to signal their commitment to moving forward together and addressing the needs of the greater Albina neighborhood.

A few years into the program, however, many Albina residents felt that Model Cities was not doing enough to address their grievances, and frustrations about Irving Park continued to pile up. By 1971, the general sense was that the city government had all but abandoned Irving Park and Albina residents. Disinvestment was keenly felt during the summer months, as the streets of

³⁴ "Model Cities Rally Hears Aid Pledge from McCall," *The Oregonian*, July 29, 1968.

Northeast Portland filled with Black teenagers whose parents worked and did not have the “economic or social clout” to help their “bored and restless sons” find summer jobs.³⁵

Restlessness was a trait to be avoided at all costs to prevent another outburst like the 1967 uprising. And Black Portlanders felt the park was underutilized when it could host programs to help keep underprivileged youth off the streets.

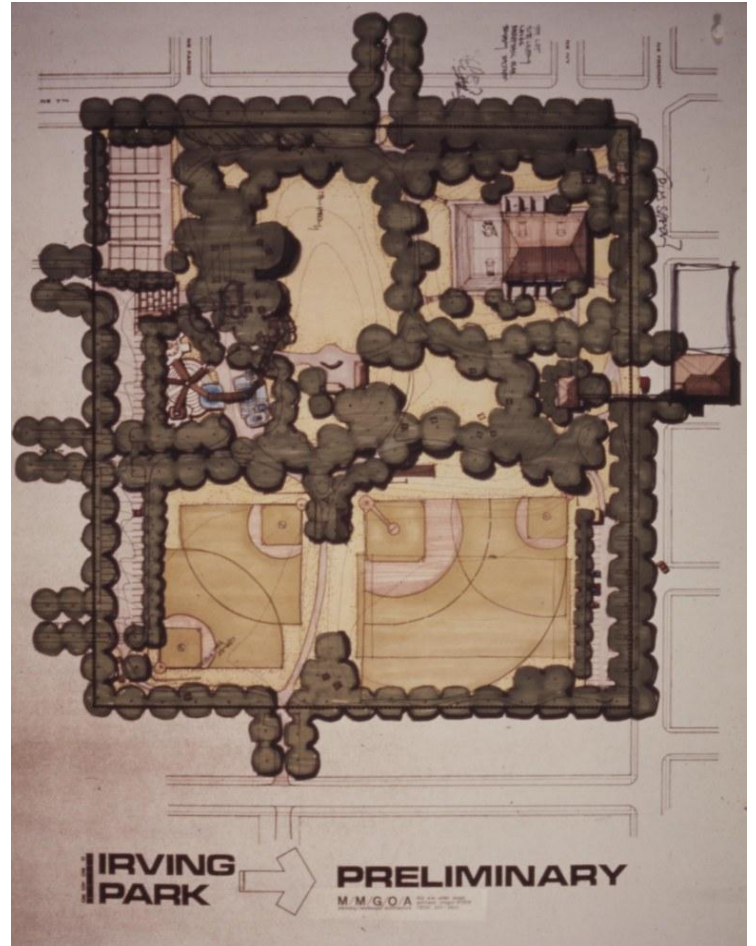
Others complained that the park had fallen into a state of disrepair, sometimes implicitly or explicitly blaming the park’s main constituency—Black Portlanders—for the neglect. One Northeast woman wrote to *The Oregonian* about shards of broken glass in the wading pool which had left a young boy with a deep gash on his foot. “It could have been prevented,” she wrote, “by good park maintenance and responsible park visitors....it’s a complete disaster area.”³⁶ While this woman placed the responsibility for park upkeep on both the City and the users, other complaints overtly blamed the neighborhood demographic for the declining state of the park. Describing a visit to Irving Park after having been away for over three decades, one man told *The Oregonian* he was “sickened by the filthy mess of it,” with “papers all over the grounds, sidewalks and benches, bottles, napkins, cans, and no one to care.” Having grown up in that area when it had been known to some as “Russian Town,” he expressed disgust at the neighborhood’s change in demographic: “Many black people but nary [a] Russian around anymore--where did they all go? And why doesn't the city or the neighborhood people clean this place up? I'm glad we moved away and wish I hadn't returned to see this decline of a once neat though poor and humble neighborhood.”³⁷

³⁵ Robert Landauer, “Book burning tied to discontent over 'forgotten' Irving Park,” *The Sunday Oregonian*, August 15, 1971, p. 24.

³⁶ Jesse Roane, “Letter to the Editor: “Glass all over,” *The Oregonian*, May 9, 1974, 34.

³⁷ Pete Miller, “Letter to the Editor: “Dirty Neighborhood,” *The Oregonian*, June 11, 1973, 21.

Fed up with the lack of progress made to improve the park, in the early 1970s, Albina residents rallied their community to push City Hall to action, resulting in a major revitalization project that transformed the park into what it is today.³⁸ Led by local resident Herb Amerson, a cohort of neighbors went door to door to gain support for the renovation of the park, ultimately persuading the City to use Model Cities funds to complete much needed repairs. Central to this effort was the desire to provide a productive recreational outlet for adolescents. As the Superintendent of Parks stated in a 1973



letter, the installation of more basketball hoops was justified “in the fact that it could and would occupy a greater number of teenagers, who otherwise might be left idle to roam the streets.”³⁹

And these improvements did attract crowds. By 1978, Black Portlanders made Irving one of the most-used parks per acre in all of Portland.

A 1978 *Oregonian* article titled “People revive once-dilapidated Irving Park, make it special” outlines this transformation and the community organizing that made it happen.⁴⁰

³⁸ The illustration on the right is a slide from the 1972 Preliminary Redesign Plan for Irving Park, via Portland Parks and Recreation Urban Forestry’s interactive [“Trees of Irving Park”](#) map.

³⁹ Edward Erickson, administrative assistant to the superintendent of parks, to W.A. Tunstall, March 1, 1973, Parks & Recreation (Archival) - Subject Files - Irving Park, City of Portland Archives, AD/15297

⁴⁰ Photo to the left: “Irving Park dedication event - Irving Park news conference marking the beginning of park improvements held at the covered shelter near the new Tot Play Area,” Friday, August 4, 1972, Public Works



Noting the underused park had fallen into disrepair just a few years earlier, leaving kids with “no room to breathe,” the reporter describes the now lively activity one sees on an average summer weekday as children

and teenagers swarm to the park from all over East Portland. “The facelift dramatically improved the park’s appearance, but even more remarkable was the response of community members,” the reporter asserts. “They made Irving their park. As much as any park in the city, Irving has become the hub and pride of a neighborhood.”⁴¹

This article highlights how Black Portlanders made Irving a place for themselves, a space of belonging. It depicts Irving as a kind of haven from the urban ills beyond its grassy limits.

The problems of the surrounding Northeast Portland community—the abandoned houses, the drunks on Union Avenue four blocks away, the gaping vacant lots and long lists of unemployed black youth—seem to fade. **There is hope in Irving Park on a sunny day.**

The reporter interviewed several Black community members who took pride in Irving Park and were defensive about its less than wholesome reputation. One longtime resident and daily park user, sixty-nine-year-old Otis Cain, told *The Oregonian* that Irving Park had been unfairly

Administration (Archival) - Public Works Administrator – Photographs, City of Portland Archives, A2012-005, AP/6522.

⁴¹ Alan Ota, “People revive once-dilapidated Irving Park, make it special,” *The Oregonian*, August 7, 1978.

stigmatized as a site of criminal activity in the past. Indeed, the reporter notes that Irving Park experienced notably lower rates of crime than other parks such as Laurelhurst in Southeast Portland.⁴² Another community member, John Warren, thought one was safer in Irving than in other parks, stating that ““Everybody around here lets their kids come up here alone. I send my kids up here, too. I trust the park to be safe.””⁴³

As many Black Portlanders became involved in Model Cities programs through its Citizens Planning Board and its working committees, other community activists, including the Portland branch of the Black Panther Party, organized to improve Albina outside of the City’s purview. These community organizers also used Irving Park for mutual aid, as with the July 1-2, 1972 “Black Survival Conference.” Sponsored by the Fred Hampton Memorial People’s Free Health Clinic, the conference was a massive free screening clinic for sickle cell anemia. Led by Dr. William Davis and Kent Ford, the Clinic tested more than 3,500



⁴² Photo to the right of boys using the newly improved splash pad comes from a poster by Mitchell Associates Planning, the landscape architect hired by the city to execute the redesign. Parks & Recreation (Archival) - Subject Files - Irving Park, City of Portland Archives, AD/15297

⁴³ Alan Ota, “People revive once-dilapidated Irving Park, make it special,” *The Oregonian*, August 7, 1978.

Black Portlanders over the course of the weekend.⁴⁴ However the Black Survival Conference was more than a sickle cell testing clinic. As with virtually every Black Power event, political organizing was entwined with community building through recreation. Those attending the conference enjoyed a barbeque, an array of lively musical performances, including the Albina Art Center Band, and speeches from local leaders on topics such as Black politics, welfare rights, prison reform, and more. Among the list were Civil Rights activist and future Black United Front co-founder Ron Herndon, Reverend Sam Johnson of the Albina Ministerial Alliance, and local music producer and editor of the *Clarion Defender*, Jimmy “Bang Bang” Walker.⁴⁵ The weekend transformed the park into a vibrant hub of Black joy and community care, demonstrating how public space functioned as an integral part of Black resistance in Portland. At a time when Black Portlanders controlled little else in their neighborhood, Black activists leaders claimed ownership of Irving Park and used it to provide for their community outside of the city’s purview.

⁴⁴ Burke and Jeffries, *The Portland Black Panthers*, 161.

⁴⁵ “Black Community’s Survival - 1,000 Free Sickle Cell Tests - Organize Black Political Power,” *The Clarion Defender*, June 29, 1972, 1, 12, PSU Special Collections, Rutherford Family Collection Historic Black Newspapers of Portland

IRVING PARK JULY 1 & 2
BLACK COMMUNITY'S SURVIVAL CONFERENCE

IRVING PARK - 7th & FREMONT SAT. and SUN., JULY 1 & 2 10 AM till 10 PM


BARBEQUE **1,000 FREE SICKLE CELL TESTS**

PEOPLE'S ENTERTAINMENT

Albina Art Center Band

'Uhuru'

Billy Larkin Trio




BILLY LARKIN

Shades of Brown

Heaven

...AND MORE!

BLACK EDUCATIONAL CENTER



RONNIE HERNDON


DR. BILL DAVIS

ALBINA MINISTERIAL ALLIANCE

GENOCIDE OF SICKLE CELL ANEMIA

REV. SAM JOHNSON

SPEAKERS




KENT FORD

Survival of Black People

RAY EAGLIN

African Liberation Support Movement

SPEAKER FROM



ANGELA DAVIS

DEFENSE COMMITTEE

ELMER DIXON

ALBERT WILLIAMS


POLITICAL PRISONERS' MOVEMENT

REGISTER TO VOTE FOR SURVIVAL!

CAROL BLAKELY JONES


SONJA ARMSBURY

WELFARE RIGHTS ORGANIZATION



TOM WILSON

CANDIDATE FOR STATE REPRESENTATIVE



BLACK STUDENT ALLIANCE
LEWIS & CLARK COLLEGE

LENA BEMBERY

FLOYD CRUSE

PORTLAND COMMUNITY COLLEGE
BLACK STUDENT UNION

Prison Support Group

ALAN NEAL PATRICK

TO ORGANIZE BLACK POLITICAL POWER

for information call:
288 7279 *People's Free Health Clinic*

City of Portland (OR) Archives, AD/14895

City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, Intelligence: Black Community Survival Committee – 2/2, July 2, 1972.

This public display of Black cultural pride in a space that had been associated with racial disturbance, violence, and civil unrest constituted a radical act of resistance and reclamation. In many ways the event epitomized the Black Power movement, championing Black pride, self-determination, and community activism. Put together by grassroots social action groups, it combined direct action that would meet Albina residents' immediate needs while also organizing Black political power for longevity. By hosting this display of racial pride and mutual aid in a public setting, the Panthers signaled their ability to be self-reliant beyond government institutions.

Some city residents and city leaders, however, felt threatened by the organization of Black political power through joy. After receiving a slew of phone calls from "irate residents" complaining of "loud music and vandalism" during the Black Survival Conference, City

Commissioner Francis Ivancie proposed a series of ordinances to tighten restrictions on public park use, particularly to curb noise level. In an article published in *The Oregon Journal*, Ivancie used coded language to blame the organizers and participants of the event, saying that “those who receive permits for park activities ‘have neither the inclination nor the ability’ to control the crowds they attract.” Ivancie went on to accuse “youthful troublemakers” of making the police’s job more difficult and placing the police under unfair scrutiny: “if a police officer looks crosswise at someone these days, he ends up in federal court.”⁴⁶ For their part, the police had vigilantly monitored the progress of the conference in the weeks leading up to it, surveilling the homes of Kent Ford and other planners where organizers met. Police reports reveal the anxiety Portland Police Bureau felt about what they feared was a new, “radical” political philosophy taking shape at the rally.⁴⁷

With this effort to redefine people’s associations of Irving Park, the Model Cities era involved an unspoken shift in authority over the public land that had become a central community gathering space for Black Albina residents. Irving Park served a disenfranchised community that used it for community-sustaining recreation. Therefore, the attempt to incorporate the park into urban renewal programs complicated its fundamental purpose as a democratic space. At stake was who could decide what counted as acceptable behavior in a public space.

Whether through Model Cities groups or the Portland Black Panther Party, Albina residents used Irving Park to organize to improve their community. Although these groups may have represented different facets of the Black community, it is highly likely that the community members who attended the Model Cities rally and became involved in its working committees

⁴⁶ Joe Berger, “Neighbors Irate: Park Noise Curbs Sought,” *The Oregon Journal*, July 7, 1972.

⁴⁷ See Burke and Jeffries, *The Portland Black Panthers*, 163.

also benefited from the Panthers' free sickle cell clinic. Folks from across Portland's Black community were all invested in Irving Park and Albina's future, and their efforts to accomplish their goals had positive effects that reverberated throughout the Albina community.

A SPACE OF BLACK CULTURAL CELEBRATION

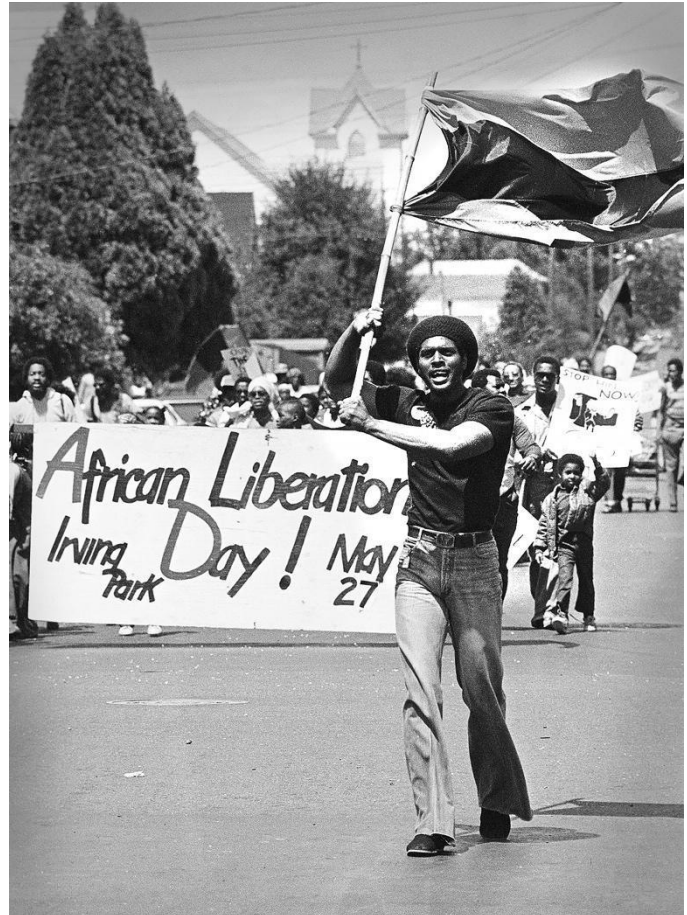
“Demonstrate to Educate, Educate to Liberate, Liberate to Live” - slogan for the 1973 African Liberation Day Demonstration, flyer from the Black Education Center Bookstore⁴⁸

On May 26, 1973, approximately one thousand Portlanders gathered in Irving Park to celebrate Black pride and African heritage for African Liberation Day (ALD). About 100 demonstrators, most of them children and teens, paraded throughout Northeast Portland from Dawson Park to Irving, carrying the large African Liberation Day banner. The smell of barbeque smoke filled the air as live bands sent rhythm and blues pulsing through the PA system. Over the course of the day, various groups put on African cultural performances on the main stage, while others led cultural display booths throughout the park. Among the sea of people, early-1970s clothing trends were accented with the bright colors and patterns of traditional African garb inspired by the cultural revolution ushered in by the Black Arts Movement.⁴⁹ Between entertainment sets, speakers drove home the message that the struggle for liberation in Africa extended to Black people all over the world who faced exploitation and oppression under the white capitalist system. Spirited cries of “Power to the people!” “We are African people!” and “Africa for Africans!” filled every corner of the park and could be heard up to five blocks away.

⁴⁸ “African Liberation Day Flyer,” City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

⁴⁹ For more on the influence of the Black Arts Movement on Black culture and political activism, see James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, New edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005). For west-coast facets of Black Arts Movement, see Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010); and Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2017).

That day, Portlanders joined with demonstrators in major cities across the United States to show support and raise funds for liberation movements in Africa.⁵⁰ With sponsorship from the New York African Liberation Day Coordinating Committee and support from Portland State’s Black Cultural Affairs Board and the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, the event was put together by a coalition of various student and Albina citizen groups.⁵¹ This grassroots effort embodied a spirit of solidarity against a common struggle, unified by pride and joy in a shared ancestry. This unabashed demonstration of Black beauty and strength in Irving Park was likely the largest Portland had seen in its history, yet *The Oregonian*, the largest-circulating newspaper in the metro area and the entire Pacific Northwest, was virtually silent on the event. The only *Oregonian* coverage—a photo of the parade with a two-sentence caption buried on page 21—drastically underplayed the scale of the



⁵⁰ Photo on the right courtesy of *Oregonian* correspondent and photographer Geoff Parks, originally printed in “Event-filled day focuses attention on blacks’ heritage,” *The Oregonian*, May 29, 1979.

⁵¹ Letter from O.B. Hill, Ways and Means Chairman of Black Cultural Affairs Board, on behalf of the African Liberation Day Committee, to Vern Summers, director of the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, April 20, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005; Letter from traffic division captain James Harvey to police deputy approving African Liberation Day parade route, April 25, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03.

day's event, only reporting on the one hundred marchers and omitting the thousand Portlanders participating in the rally at the park.⁵²

The media's near silence becomes all the more glaring against the backdrop of the *extensive*, incredibly meticulous police reports in their archival investigative files. Anxious about any potential disturbances—at times explicitly citing the 1967 outburst—the Portland Police Bureau assigned intelligence officers to closely monitor the preparation of the event, and dispatched over 50 officers as patrolling surveillance throughout the East and North precincts on the day of the event along with a number of “sources” (likely plainclothes officers or civilians).⁵³ Dozens of pages of intelligence reports from several leading officers reveal such a level of hypervigilance that something as innocuous as a soda delivery seemed noteworthy.⁵⁴ Officers compiled intricate play-by-plays of the whole day, tracking the number and race of people in precise locations at Dawson and Irving Park with timestamps, many merely minutes apart.⁵⁵ Due to the overtly biased tone of police reports and limited number of other primary sources, a close reading against the grain reveals the motivations and frustrations of ALD organizers.

⁵² The full caption read: “Black Solidarity: nearly 100 persons trooped some 15 blocks through North and Northeast Portland in support of black rebels in the Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola in Africa and to proclaim solidarity with black citizens on all the world's continents. A picnic with speeches followed at the marchers' destination, Irving Park, along with a rock concert.” May 27, 1973, *The Sunday Oregonian*. Boykoff and Gies study this erasure of dissent in their study, “We're going to defend ourselves”.

⁵³ C.F. Trimble, Portland PD intelligence division, to Deputy Chief Robert Steele on May 22, 1973, referred to the 1967 uprising: “There has [sic] been exaggerated rumors as to possible violence during these activities which are unfounded at this time. The African Liberation Day activities as called for on May 26th will possibly draw a great number of persons to the area and it is a situation where possibly some of the dissident elements will attempt to use the majority who are in attendance. It might be recalled that A Day in the Park Activities which occurred in 1967 did not reveal any planned violence, but, as time went on and people using intoxicants and other stimulants eventually a confrontation developed with the police.” For the police bureau's surveillance of African Liberation Day planning, see ALD Interoffice Memorandums and Special Reports to Capt. Sullivan and Lt. Haven from Sgt. Scoumperdis, officers Braaten, Zahler, Freshour, and Hermanson detailing their observations from patrolling Dawson and Irving Parks on African Liberation Day, May 26, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

⁵⁴ Lt. Hulett, in a report to Deputy Chief Robert Steele, describes cases of 7-up being taken into the Irving Park caretaker building the day before the event. Intelligence Report re African Liberation Day, May 25, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

⁵⁵ Trimble to Steele, Intelligence Report re meeting to plan African Liberation Day, May 10, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

In the weeks leading up to African Liberation Day, organizers spread the word by disseminating flyers explaining the intentions of the event.⁵⁶ The Black Education Center's poster provides a compelling example.⁵⁷ Under the bold slogan, "Demonstrate to Educate, Educate to Liberate, Liberate to Live," the graphic compares two photos of Black families, one in Africa and one in America, with the caption "Homeless at Home." This eye-catching visual would have deeply affected passersby in public areas around Northeast, reminding them that their impoverished conditions were not unsimilar to those of their fellow Black people around the world. Whereas most organizers (and eventual attendees) of ALD were Black and geared their publicity towards other Black people in Northeast, some white allies also promoted the event such as the Portland Young Socialist Alliance, headquartered in Southwest Portland. In their flyer, the Portland YSA argued that the U.S. government was "deeply involved in the maintenance of oppression in Africa" through its financial and military aid to Portugal, arguing that it was "critical to the continuance of colonial rule" in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. The YSA geared their message towards young white radicals and other anti-war advocates, highlighting the similar injustices wrought by U.S. military intervention in Vietnam and the U.S. government's hundreds of millions of dollars spent against African liberation movements.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Trimble issued Kent Ford a citation for pasting up ALD posters on North Williams Avenue in violation of a city ordinance against advertising on the street. Trimble to Steele, Intelligence Report re advertising African Liberation Day, May 14, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

⁵⁷ The Black Education Center was co-founded by Joyce Braden Harris, Ron Herndon and Frank Wilson in 1970 as a summer program to supplement Black youth's education. With the help of various local individuals and businesses, the team renovated a condemned building on 63 Northeast Morris Street into what became a thriving cultural institution. After Harris received her teaching credentials the Center became a full-time private school emphasizing Black history and culture in the curriculum. The BEC was an important part of the history of Black community organizing in Portland and deserves further study. For more, see "[Interview with Joyce Braden Harris](#)" by Heather Oriana Petrocelli and Parvaneh Abbaspour (March 10, 2010) as part of the Portland State University Special Collections: Black United Front Oral History Project.

⁵⁸ "Socialism '73 Position Paper on African Liberation Day," Young Socialist Alliance, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

ALD organizers also staged public demonstrations in the days before the event to stir up support for the cause. On May 24, 1973, Kent Ford led a sidewalk demonstration outside the Lloyd building on Northeast Multnomah Street in protest of the Hyster Corporation's plants in South Africa. About a dozen picketers spoke out against the Portland company's complicity in the exploitation of cheap Black labor. In the protestor's informational sheet, they denounce South Africa's legal and economic oppression of Black people, noting that "South African Blacks are not allowed any political rights, and are imprisoned if they even speak of organizations of unions," and that the average monthly salary for white South Africans was five times that of Black South Africans in the manufacturing industry. Not only were Black Portlanders fighting for equality for Black Africans; they saw themselves as victims of the same struggle at the hands of racist corporations.⁵⁹ This message of commonality beat at the heart of African Liberation Day. Community leaders organized to raise awareness of the interconnectedness of the problems facing the global Black population and to urge unity to overcome them.

A long roster of local and out-of-state radical leaders were slated to speak at African Liberation Day, which proved to be a major source of anxiety for the police. Handwritten annotations on intelligence reports, such as names underlined in red pen and then check-marked in a different colored pen, suggest that these reports went through multiple hands and various stages of inspection in the police department. Some of the cross-checked names included 1972 Socialist Workers Party presidential candidate Andrew Pulley, three Oregon State Prison inmates on a special pass to speak, and president of the Alabama Black Liberation Front, Ronald Agate

⁵⁹ Special Report from PPD officers Hermanson and Hope to Lt. Haven, "'African Liberation Day Committee' Pickets at the Offices of the Hyster Corp.," May 24, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

Williams, sponsored by the U.S. Communist Party. An intelligence report warned that Williams was “very violent” as a convicted felon for his past activities in Birmingham’s radical Black self-defense movement. The local Muslim community also coordinated three Black Muslims to come from out of town to speak at African Liberation Day and offered transportation to the park from their mosque on North Mississippi Avenue and Shaver Street. Other speakers and attendees included an unnamed “white radical” from Lewis and Clark College and various others labeled “revolutionaries” or “active in dissident movements” in intelligence reports. To the police force at the time, this combination of community and resistance groups represented a significant challenge to their authority, and they felt threatened. This event, as it was “possibl[y] backed by elements of the Arab and Communist world,” had the potential to empower further actions against the social order.⁶⁰

Whereas police communication bristled with anxiety in preparation for the event, officers described the actual day as uneventful and weak in message. According to C.F. Trimble, one of the main intelligence officers monitoring African Liberation Day in 1973: “The speakers involved preached nothing but racist, white hate and undoubtedly some of the spectators in attendance were influenced.”⁶¹ Trimble and the Portland Police Bureau at large were only looking for an escalation of violence—and missed the irony that their intensely heightened presence no doubt contributed to feelings of unease and unsafety. To them, this demonstration had “no common cause,” but nonetheless “these elements” represented potential threat if there

⁶⁰ Trimble to Steele, Intelligence Report re “African Liberation Day Activities,” May 22, 1973, Trimble to Steele; Intelligence Report re “African Liberation Day Activities Information,” May 24, 1973, and A.F. Zornado to Steele; Intelligence Report re “Afro-Liberation Day Demonstration at Irving Park,” May 25, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

⁶¹ Because the bulk of written evidence about ALD comes from biased police sources, unfortunately I could not find what speakers said exactly, but the police’s reaction suggests the liberatory ideas speakers preached.

were some inciting incident and thus should be “watched very closely for any future concern.”⁶² Missing entirely the mass expression of joy, celebration, and solidarity that Irving Park hosted, police saw the space and its users as a hostile environment.



Geoff Parks, “Event-filled day focuses attention on blacks’ heritage,” *The Oregonian*, May 29, 1979. Original caption read: “DANCING IN THE PARK – Dancing and music were just a part of Saturday’s African Liberation Day celebration in Portland, with most events held in Irving Park. Speakers also helped focus attention on black heritage, and “how blacks share the same ideas, goals and thoughts.” See the covered basketball area in the background—a feature of the 1972-74 revitalization project.

The juxtaposition of what African Liberation Day symbolized to Black organizers versus the police spotlights Irving Park, and public spaces in general, as contested. That the event took place in a visible public setting was central to its message of being boldly proud of Black identity. Yet the fact that it was in a public place made it possible for police surveillance and

⁶² Trimble and Zornado to Steele, Intelligence Report re “African Liberation Day Parade and Rally,” May 26, 1973; N.J. Rosenbloom and L.A. Ferreira to Steele, Intelligence Report re “African Liberation Day demonstration, Irving Park,” May 26, 1973, R.C. Cosby and C.A. Rilling to Steele, Intelligence Report re “Activities for Afro Liberation Day at Irving Park,” May 26, 1973, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005.

intimidation, hurting the democratic function of the space. Ignoring the display of cultural pride and heritage, the police chose only to hear white hatred in the speakers' impassioned cries for justice. Throughout the 1970s and into the late 80s, Black Portlanders continued to observe African Liberation Day by taking up public space to show pride in their African heritage and solidarity with Black freedom movements around the globe.⁶³

A SPACE OF BLACK EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY UPLIFT

“Our program is for lifting childrens’ spirits and giving them self confidence.” - Lilian Herzog, retired teacher on the Reading Tree board of directors⁶⁴

By the late 1970s, come any summer day and you would see Irving Park alive with the playful activity of Black youth. While young children climbed the play structures and teenagers filled the basketball courts, dozens of kids gathered under the shade of the giant fir trees to read and be read to.⁶⁵ Aptly called the Reading Tree, this free learning program was designed to help Black students maintain their reading skills while on summer break. Over the course of its roughly fifteen-year lifespan, the Reading Tree served hundreds if not thousands of Black youths under the direction of Bea Anderson, a Northeast public school teacher who worked first at King Elementary School then Harriet Tubman Middle School—both of which served predominantly Black students. Keenly aware of the poverty-stricken conditions her students and their families faced, Anderson’s mission in and outside of the classroom was to involve parents in school and

⁶³ See Robert Olmos, “‘Black rage’ just ember, school chief [Ron Herndon] believes,” *The Oregonian*, December 16, 1976; African Liberation Day pamphlet, May 26, 1979, PSU Special Collections Rutherford Family Collection Historic Black Newspapers of Portland - Community box; Commemoration” photo by Randy Wood, *The Oregonian*, May 24, 1981, p. 58; “Annual African Liberation Day celebration nears,” *The Skanner*, May 19, 1982, PSU Special Collections Rutherford Family Collection Historic Black Newspapers of Portland; “La Luta Continua (the struggle continues)” flyer for Afrikan Liberation Day 1982, ALD Planning Committee, May 29, 1982, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, Black United Front, A2004-005, 8090-093; “African Liberation Day” photo by Ross Hamilton, *The Oregonian*, May 26, 1985, p. 49; “50 join march for freedom in S. Africa,” *The Oregonian*, May 25, 1986, p. 52; Sarah B. Ames, “Portland marchers call for freedom in S. Africa,” *The Oregonian*, May 24, 1987, p. 82.

⁶⁴ “World expands under ‘Tree,’” *The Oregonian*, July 7, 1983.

⁶⁵ Ota, “People revive once-dilapidated Irving Park, make it special,” *The Oregonian*, August 7, 1978.

“make children feel worthwhile” in an education system that systematically disenfranchised them.⁶⁶



Denise Gladney, a Roosevelt High School student and volunteer, reads a story to preschool children at The Reading Tree in Irving

Park, where youngsters each summer get help with their reading. The program was started by neighborhood residents.

DAVID FALCONER

Children grow in Reading Tree's shade

Clipping from “Children grow in Reading Tree's Shade,” by Suzanne Richards, *The Oregonian*, July 12, 1987.

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, the Reading Tree offered Black children of all ages fun and engaging opportunities to improve their reading during the summer.⁶⁷ While Anderson or other volunteer teachers read aloud to a circle of preschoolers, middle and high schoolers tutored elementary school-aged children with flashcards and reading workbooks. One such tutor was fourteen-year-old Kenny Dembo, who had flunked out of school twice, until he found direction helping first, second, and third graders learn to read, inspiring him to want to become a

⁶⁶ Huntly Collins, “Teacher tries to involve parents,” *The Oregonian*, December 28, 1980; Kathy Durbin, “Teacher honored for expanding students' horizons,” *The Oregonian*, February 17, 1983.

⁶⁷ While it first began in 1970, archival evidence suggests the Reading Tree was most active during the late 1970s to the late 1980s.

teacher.⁶⁸ Adolescents like Dembo were paid through the City of Portland's Summer Youth Employment Program with funds from the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. Many teenage instructors worked at the Reading Tree year after year, offering them consistent work experience in a period of growing joblessness.

The significance of city and community involvement in the Reading Tree cannot be overstated. The program was jointly funded by the Portland School District and the Portland chapter of the Urban League. Not only were older youth provided paid opportunities to teach younger children, but local church groups and individuals also donated boxes of books for children to take home and read.

In the early 1980s, Black city leaders promoted programs such as the Reading Tree to combat continued tensions caused by unemployment, inflation, and cuts in federal social services. Herb Cawthorne, a member of the Portland Public School Board who was instrumental in pushing for the Black United Front's school desegregation plan in 1980, felt particularly concerned that high rates of Black unemployment could result in tensions of "explosive proportions" during the summer. Police were also wary of "racial problems in the Albina area" in the summer of 1981, explicitly naming Irving Park as a probable site of a "large scale riot" if one were to break out.⁶⁹ Thus in 1981, Cawthorne, along with the Urban League's executive director Freddy Petett and Portland's first Black Commissioner Charles Jordan, devised the "Community Action for Summer Learning," a program aimed at "keeping youngsters

⁶⁸ Huntly Collins, "Reading Tree spreads knowledge at park site," *The Oregonian*, July 28, 1980.

⁶⁹ For more on the Black United Front's efforts for educational equity, see Ethan Johnson and Felicia Williams, "Desegregation and Multiculturalism in Portland Public Schools," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (2002). Police reports reveal clear bias and ignorance of the realities of anti-Black racism. In an intelligence report from Officer Falk to Lt. Dimick on May 12, 1982, Falk writes of: "Both political figures attempting to gather votes in the Albina area, and social activists working within the press," as "continuously haranguing black citizens into the belief that they are being oppressed by the white citizens..." City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, Black United Front 2/3, A2004-005, 8090-03.

occupied.”⁷⁰ CASL was specifically designed to give young Black Portlanders something productive and educational to do in the hopes of keeping any potential agitation at bay. Indeed, the language used to publicize the program reflected the call to “keep cool” voiced fourteen years earlier.⁷¹ Seeing the success of the Reading Tree, Cawthorne, Petett, and Jordan promoted it as a central feature of the summer learning program.

Summer after summer, *The Oregonian* reported higher numbers of children attending the Reading Tree every day.⁷² *Oregonian* articles and advertisements emphasized how Reading Tree instructors cultivated a joyful, inviting environment. The program claimed the picnic area in the southwest corner of the park and transformed it into a reading wonderland: “Make-believe faces adorn the trees, easels stand on the grass to display children’s stories and brightly colored banners proclaim ‘Professor Phonics Gives Sound Advice.’”⁷³ Using the public space available to them, dedicated community members fostered excitement and a love of learning in so many Albina schoolchildren.⁷⁴

The Reading Tree offered more than something fun to do, however. Many children ended up there because they had nowhere else to go while their parents were at work, and crucially, the Reading Tree provided free lunch. As Petett pointed out, some of the children stayed in the program all day. Federal financing cutbacks in 1981 threatened the Reading Tree’s ability to provide this vital resource to local youth, making it all the more imperative for the larger community to raise funds for the Reading Tree as part of the Community Action for Summer

⁷⁰ “Cutbacks cited in racial tension,” *The Oregonian*, May 31, 1981.

⁷¹ “Portland can keep cool this summer by having something constructive to offer when young people are looking for something to do,” from “Summer tinderbox,” *The Oregonian*, June 11, 1981.

⁷² By 1987, it was estimated the number of children reached over 100 a day, many coming multiple days a week (it ran Monday through Friday, 9:30am-2pm). “Reading Tree breakfast aids youngsters,” *The Oregonian*, June 18, 1987.

⁷³ “Reading Tree spreads knowledge at park site,” *The Oregonian*, July 28, 1980.

⁷⁴ “World expands under ‘Tree,’” *The Oregonian*, July 7, 1983.

Learning.⁷⁵ By 1987, Reading Tree kids joined other young park goers for the Portland Public Schools' free lunch program.⁷⁶ Therefore, the Reading Tree aided parents by providing their children with learning opportunities and nourishment. This would have been especially important for parents who could not afford or otherwise did not have the availability to be with their children during the day in the summer.

At its core, the Reading Tree offered a sense of community to children in the Albina district. The consistency of gathering every weekday alongside other kids who looked like them, and moreover being taught by older youth and teachers who looked like them, gave the children a feeling of belonging that was sorely lacking during the school year in the 1970s "when many black inner Northeast Portland children were bused to schools in distant parts of the city."⁷⁷ Being "the Black people's park," as Colden Brown called it, Irving Park acted as the perfect setting for the Black community to uplift one another through efforts like the Reading Tree; it was geographically and socially the heart of the community.⁷⁸

The Reading Tree in Irving Park made up one branch of a larger movement for educational equity in Northeast Portland. When examined in the context of the Black United Front's campaign to desegregate Portland Public Schools in the early 1980s, Ron Herndon's Albina Head Start Program, and the Black Education Center, it is clear that the Black community organized through multiple intersecting veins to prioritize children's academic success and

⁷⁵ "Cutbacks cited in racial tension," *The Oregonian*, May 31, 1981.

⁷⁶ "Children grow in Reading Tree's Shade," *The Oregonian*, July 12, 1987.

⁷⁷ "World expands under 'Tree,'" *The Oregonian*, July 7, 1983.

⁷⁸ Brown, "Rapping About Albina."

overall wellbeing.⁷⁹ Albina's investment in children despite the city's continued neglect epitomizes the goal of Black liberation to forge a self-reliant community.

CONCLUSION

Public parks embody the intersection between environmental and social history, and thus provide fertile ground for studying local community histories. From everyday park use to special events and programs, examining how ordinary people come together in public settings highlights how communities cultivate belonging at the most basic level. For groups facing systemic oppression, claiming public spaces represents resistance and resilience. Histories of people using what is available to them to sustain their communal ties and take care of one another are some of the most valuable stories to remember and preserve.

Irving Park is a vital setting in Albina's history. At Irving Park, Black Portlanders built and reinforced communal ties, protested injustice, and envisioned liberated futures. The 1967 rebellion is a key feature of this rich history, but certainly not the only one. In the late twentieth century, Irving Park was the backdrop for numerous events like the 1968 Model Cities rally, the 1972 Black Community Survival Conference, and annual African Liberation Days. In addition to these large special events at Irving Park, Albina residents created ongoing daily programs in the park, most notably the Reading Tree. These events and programs provided essential resources to Black Portlanders, while simultaneously raising the community spirit through music and cultural celebration. In addition to using Irving Park as a platform to uplift their community, Black Portlanders rallied to invest in the physical space itself. It was, after all, Black community

⁷⁹ See Johnson and Williams, "Desegregation and Multiculturalism in Portland Public Schools," and Evan Smiley, "[The Harriet Tubman Middle School Protests: Black United Front vs. The Portland School Board.](#)" Public History PDX: A Project of the Department of History at Portland State University (2017).

members who successfully persuaded the city to use Model Cities funds for the park's facelift in the early 1970s.

In the face of anti-Black racism manifesting in public spaces, Albina residents utilized public settings to *openly* express racial pride. This spatial dimension is crucial—through this analytical lens, we see reclamation of identity through the reclamation of space. In response to spatialized discrimination, Black Portlanders utilized public space to resist racial injustice and assert their communal strength. They used Irving Park to establish a network of care.

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Appendix A:

“Special Picture Page of Irving Park Incidents,” *The Clarion Defender*, August 3, 1967, published by L.D. Walters, edited by Jimmy “Bang Bang” Walker, 2742 N. Williams Ave. Courtesy of Portland State University Special Collections, Rutherford Family Collection Historic Black Newspapers of Portland, <http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/20490>.



Here we go 'round the Mulberry Bush.

CLARION DEFENDER



BEVERLY WILLIAMS



Thousands of Negro kids seek jobs. How about it Mayor Schreck.



Do you think it'll win '68?

Mayor Terry Schreck in the eyes of young Negroes of Portland's Albina district "has missed the real reasons" of disturbances Sunday and Monday night.

Beverly Williams, a 20 year old, who was one of about 20 Negro youth who met with Schreck at City Hall late Tuesday said "The reason should be clear by now that the Portland Negroes are not content."

The delegation asked that the Mayor help them to get 100 jobs and improve various conditions.

Before meeting with Schreck the delegation had already met with several Negro Clergy men. Schreck told them that he couldn't promise anything but he'd do his best to influence and help. According to Miss Williams the group left him feeling more frustrated and bitter.



The race is on.



Resting during the rally.

Several members of the delegation were interviewed at the "Separation Center" center at 3628 N. Williams. The center helps provide jobs.

The delegation, apparently led by spokesman Beverly Williams had much to say about the "too efficient" police in the area started by Oliver O'Connell, 20, of 3406 E. Missouri Ave. "They hang around Irving Park on Sunday afternoons. So they hang around other city parks! They cause tension and I think they provide many of the incidents that happen!" O'Connell said.

Donald Lethen, 17, of 3272 NE 82nd Ave. said, "The City should improve the "yet infested" fire traps and eye sore buildings. Other subjects such as history books, school courses, coloring books, teenage night clubs, job training courses and the Irving Park Staff was discussed."



Does it really take this many troops



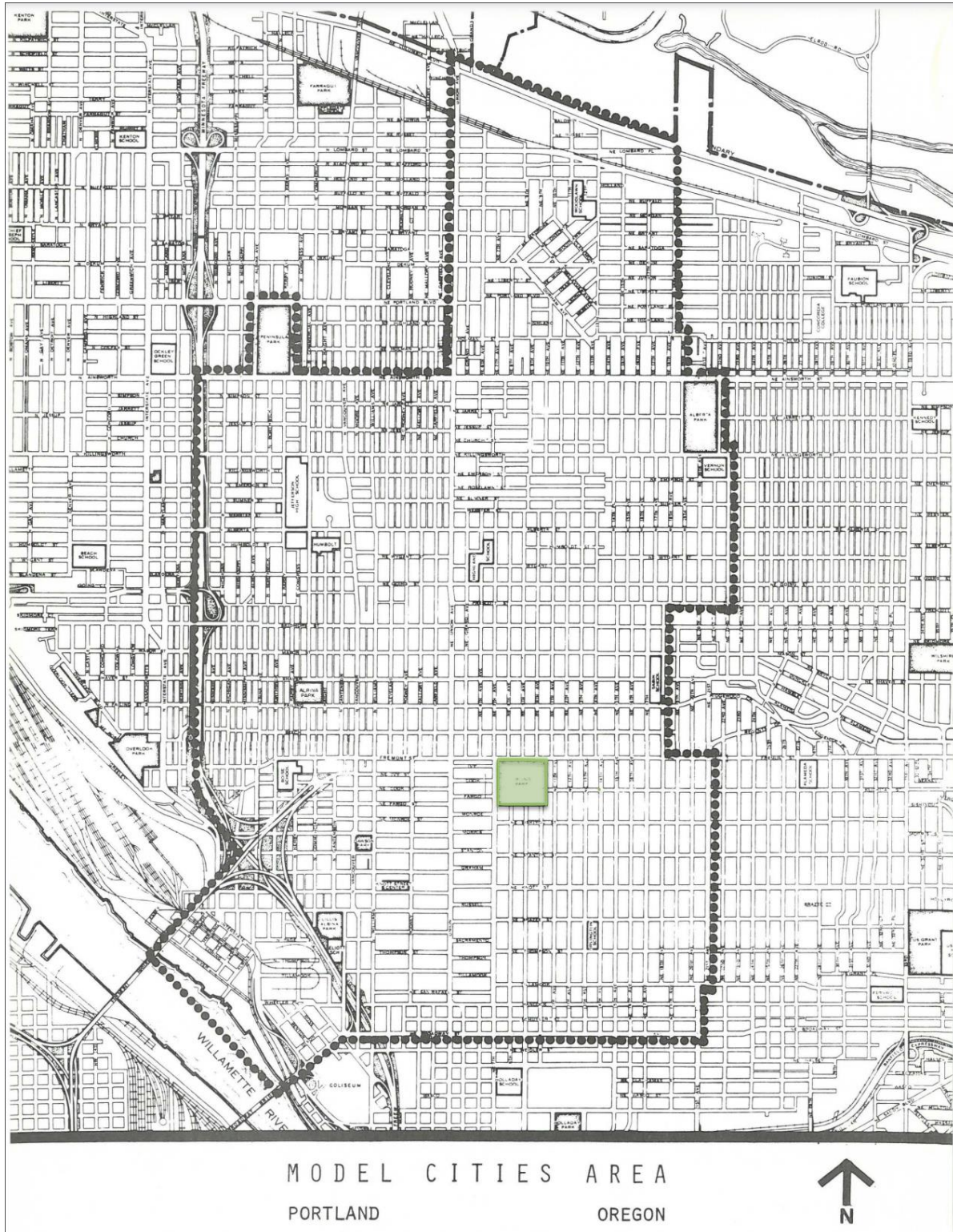
Will you give us a job?



Kids wondering what to do next.

Appendix B:

Map of Model Cities zone from a November 1968 Interim Report, City of Portland Archives, Model Cities (Archival), Model Cities Subject Files - Citizen Planning, A2001-014, AF/71471. See Irving Park highlighted in green.



Appendix C:

1982 African Liberation Day flyer, City of Portland Archives, Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files, African Liberation Day, 8090-03, A2004-005

AFRIKAN LIBERATION DAY '82

Free
Namibia



Free
Azania!

THEME

A LUTA CONTINUA

(The Struggle Continues)

ALD WORKSHOP

SUNDAY, MAY 23rd at 2 PM
1640 NE Alberta Street
Speakers and information on
Southern Afrika and the film
"A Luta Continua"



MATERIALS DRIVE

SUNDAY, MAY 23rd THRU SATURDAY, MAY 29th
Medical Supplies (bandages, gauzes, adhesive tape,
non-perishable, non-prescription
items, etc.)

School Supplies (chalk, pencils, writing paper, notebooks, etc.)
Clothing (shoes, jeans, shirts, jackets, etc.)
Supplies will benefit the liberation groups in Southern
Afrika.

Drop-off points are: The CRIB (King Facility), NE 7th & Wygant
The Talking Drum Bookstore, 1634 NE Alberta
The BEC School, 4919 NE 17th

MARCH & RALLY

SATURDAY, MAY 29, 1982

ASSEMBLE AT 11 AM

March from King Facility (NE 7th & Wygant) TO Irving Park (N.E. 7th & Fremont)

Speakers, Entertainment, Food



FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: ALD PLANNING COMMITTEE 284-9552