

# Why Race Matters in Portland Parks



We only commit to programs for a season; we must create a plan, knowing we will not be able to finish it; we must create the right plan to pass on to the next generations, for they are the ones who can.

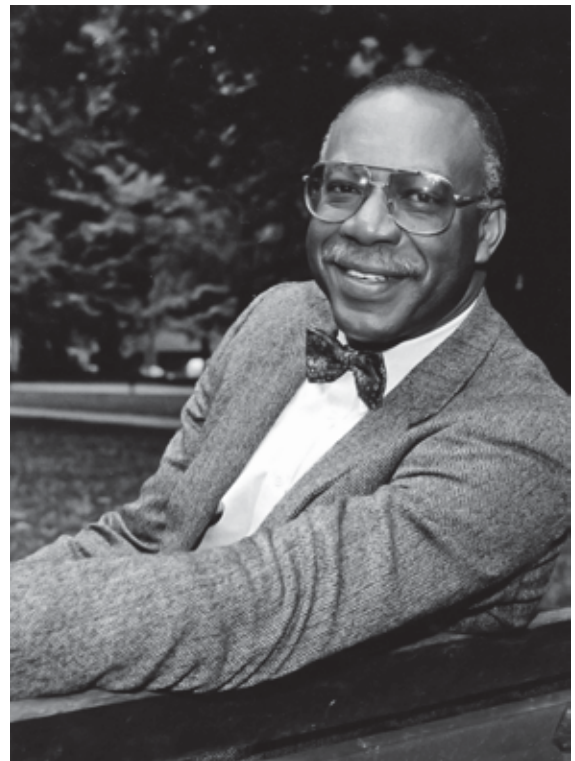
*City Commissioner and Parks Director  
Charles Jordan (Jordan & Favara, 2014)*

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Portland, Oregon, is an amazing city, noted internationally as a place of dynamic urban living, a model for planning and sustainability, an innovator in multi-modal transportation, and an exemplar of an urban parks and recreation system. Yet “Stumptown,” “The City of Roses” or “Portlandia” has a darker side. It has been a place of racial prejudice, discrimination and inequity.

Both the noble and the negative aspects of cities play themselves out in public spaces, particularly a city’s parks, natural areas, pools and community centers. Today, Portland Parks & Recreation is a complex and dynamic organization that maintains nearly 12,000 acres of public land. Over 7,900 acres are natural areas, with 3,500 acres consisting of developed parks, golf courses, community centers, and the Portland International Raceway. We provide community gardens, play areas, miles of regional and local trails, picnic areas and sports fields, all with the purpose of providing opportunities for all Portlanders to play, relax and enjoy the natural beauty of the city.

Portland Parks & Recreation aspires to be a national leader in providing inclusive and equitable parks, natural areas, programs, public facilities and an urban forest that welcome all Portlanders. We desire to be a place that invites all our diverse communities into the facilities we steward, into our ranks as park employees (“Parkies”) and into contracts for supplying the construction and other services needed to deliver our facilities and programs.



*Parks Director Charles Jordan, 1993*

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In order to do this more effectively, Portland Parks & Recreation has created this Racial Equity Plan to ensure equitable access for all Portlanders to our park spaces and services and to identify and eliminate racial disparities in our park system, to close the “play gap,” and to make sure that every Portland household is within a half-mile walking distance from a park or natural area. This Plan will help guide and direct our present and future priorities.

As background for this Racial Equity Plan, it is important to briefly discuss the national, state and local context of racial equality. We need to have a basic understanding of the influence that race and racism has had on Portland, and to develop specific things the bureau can do to help remedy those inequities (OEHR, 2016a).

### **National Context**

Historically, the importance of recreation and leisure activity has been influenced by cultural values, class, religion and politics. Games, play, dance, song, storytelling and sports are derived from ancient rituals and religious, cultural and social practices across a broad spectrum of racial, ethnic and cultural communities. All types of “play” form a vital and central aspect in the spiritual, physical, emotional and social health for all people.

The public recreation movement began in earnest around the mid-nineteenth century. This movement was largely influenced by the adult education movement; the playground movement; the efforts of public, volunteer and non-profit organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA on positive youth development; and the development of national, state and municipal parks (Jones & Barlett, 2014).

Fredrick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect of New York City’s Central Park, had deeply held views about the virtues of public parks being open to all (Hawkins, 2014). He, along with his Central Park collaborator Calvert Vaux, had principled ideals that parks could foster “democratic inclusiveness” between the classes and be a place where family, nature and social bonds could exist (Byrne & Wolch, 2009). It is important to note that in 1903, Olmsted’s nephew, John Charles Olmsted, was instrumental in establishing the vision for the parks system in Portland (Olmsted, 1903).

Despite the noble ideals and belief of Olmsted and Vaux, the reality and practice of public accommodation in the United States was one of exclusion until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. During the park movement period, many parks were racially segregated and many historians assert that “racial differences [were] more pronounced in [parks] than in any other [spaces] (Byrne & Wolch, 2009).

As an example, across the country, public accommodations like parks and public swimming pools were segregated by Jim Crow laws in the south, or by less overt means in the northern and western parts of the United States. Though Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders succeeded in the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, whereby discrimination in housing and public accommodations became illegal, those practices continued in less obvious ways. When segregated recreational facilities were ordered by the courts to be open for people of color, the integration was rarely peaceful. People of color seeking to use these facilities were met with hostile resistance, force and violence (Wolcott, 2012). Rather than embracing a spirit of advocacy, openness and inclusion, some cities shut down their public pools rather than allowing mixed-race swimming, while in other cities Whites moved to pools that were located in more racially homogeneous White neighborhoods or used private pools, where racial discrimination was still legal.

These practices have had lasting effects. For instance, somewhere between 58% and 70% of African-Americans and 60% of Latino children in the United States have low ability or no ability to swim compared to 40% of white children (USA Swimming, 2010). African-American and Latino children are three times more likely to die from drownings, and access to affordable swimming continues to be a challenge in parts of the United States.

### State and Local Context

As noted in historical documents and the State’s Constitution, Oregon was founded by, and for, the benefit of White settlers. In 1857, Oregonians voted to ban slavery, but also to enact a



*Delta Park Powwow & Encampment, 2016*

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clause that prohibited blacks from being in the state, owning property and making contracts. Oregon thus became the only free state admitted to the Union with an exclusion clause in its constitution (Nokes, 2013). Native Americans and Latinos were similarly discriminated against in a wide variety of official acts.

During World War II, Vanport City sprung up as the state's second-largest city, and was a working-class community of Blacks and Whites. When a catastrophic flood occurred in 1948, the Black community was displaced and settled in the Albina neighborhood of northeast Portland. Other displacements were to follow: Memorial Coliseum, Emanuel Hospital and Williams Avenue gentrification have impacted African-Americans significantly.

In 1970, Portland Mayor Terry Shrunck called a young African-American in Palm Springs, California, and invited him to come to Portland to head the new Model Cities Program in Portland. The Model Cities initiative provided federal funding to focus on areas of urban blight to reduce crime, create new jobs, develop access to childcare, and revitalize neighborhoods and business districts. Charles Jordan arrived in Portland to lead this effort, and unified the diverse communities of Portland in ways that had never been done before.

In 1974, Charles Jordan became Portland's first Black City Commissioner, appointed by Mayor Neil Goldschmidt. In 1981, Charles was appointed Parks Commissioner. Long an advocate for racial equity, in 1984 Jordan joined the board of the Conservation Fund, which worked to diversify the conservation movement nationally while ensuring parks were available to children of all races and economic conditions. Also in 1984, he was appointed to the national board of the National Recreation and Parks Association, where he led the effort to support the professional development of women and minorities. After a few years in Austin, Texas, in 1989, Charles returned to Portland to become the Director of the Bureau of Parks & Recreation where he worked until 2003 to connect all Portlanders, especially youth, to nature, programs, parks, pools and gardens. Charles Jordan left his imprint on

Portland Parks & Recreation in a myriad of ways, but most importantly he showed us how to value of all races, genders or economic status. This is the spirit in which we embark on this Racial Equity Plan.

### **The Role of Portland Parks & Recreation**

PP&R plays an important role in advancing racial equity. Portland residents are fortunate to have a variety of parks spaces that encourage people to participate in a myriad of life-affirming activities. Access to a park or community center, the types of programs offered, and the social connections a person forms with others and to nature have great impacts on the community as a whole. Children who have access to, participate in, and are raised going to public parks, natural areas, pools and community centers will be more likely to participate in similar activities and experiences and visit those same spaces when they grow up.

In addition to PP&R's places and programs, its people are also important. To serve all Portlanders, PP&R's staff must reflect the community. If we want children to grow up as advocates for the values of nature and parks, they must see people who look like them in the wide variety of professions and positions included in the bureau.

Best practice shows that including a racial diversity of people in the efforts to plan a program, build a park or protect a habitat provides incredibly positive effects and can reverse historic patterns of disparate outcomes.

For all these reasons and more, PP&R has created the following Racial Equity Plan. We will continue to learn and grow as our communities change, and we commit to lifting up and celebrating our differences so as to make Portland a better place to live, work and play.

As we dedicate ourselves to this effort, it is helpful to remember words of wisdom from Charles Jordan:

If change is to be, it's up to you and me.

—(Jordan & Favara, 2014)