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Housing council commemorates accomplishments, seeks more change

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After President Lyndon Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act in April 1968, cities across the country declared April Fair Housing Month. Each year, the Fair Housing Council of Oregon sponsors an event in April to commemorate that history.

On April 23, their celebration coincided with the organization's 20th anniversary. More than 250 people came to the Ambridge Event Center to recognize accomplishments and challenges, and to hear Dr. Kevin Boyle, author of "The Arc of Justice, a saga of race, civil rights and murder."

The recipient of the National Book Award and the Simon Wiesenthal Center for Tolerance Book Award, Boyle said people mistakenly view the civil rights struggle as a Southern issue. He wrote about a 1925 case in his hometown, Detroit, that involved Dr. Ossian Sweet, an African American who tried to live in a white neighborhood.

Sweet grew up in Florida. The son of a farmer and grandson of slaves, he witnessed lynchings before leaving the South for higher education. After graduating with a medical degree from Howard University, Sweet settled in Detroit.

"In 1921, it was the world's greatest boom town," Boyle said, "and a center of black migration from the South."

By the 1920s, Detroit's Ku Klux Klan numbered 35,000 official members. Still, Boyle said, real estate agencies organized racism, not the KKK. Detroit Realtors concentrated African Americans in a neighborhood called Black Bottom. Although Sweet originally settled there, after marriage and children he wanted to leave.

When Sweet and his family moved to a white neighborhood, they requested police protection. They also brought a cache of guns and invited relatives to help. Hundreds of angry whites gathered outside for two nights before fighting broke out. A shot from Sweet's window killed a man. The police charged everyone in his house with murder.

Boyle talked about the NAACP's defense and lawyer, Clarence Darrow's closing argument. "I do not believe in the law of hate," Darrow said. "I may not be true to my ideals always, but I believe in the law of love, and I believe you can do nothing with hatred. I would like to see a time when man loves his fellow man and forgets his color or his creed. We will never be civilized until that time comes."

Boyle argued that while we are more civilized today, we have much to overcome. "The Southern system of segregation was destroyed by the civil rights movement but the northern system that Sweet found is very much in place," he said.

Boyle pointed to the recent FHCO survey where black and white people posing as apartment hunters viewed the same advertised vacancies in Ashland and Beaverton. According to the Oregonian, two-thirds of the African American mystery shoppers in Ashland and 78 percent in Beaverton encountered different treatment than their white counterparts. They were quoted higher rents, told apartments were unavailable and faced other discriminatory practices.

Despite the FHCO study and others like it, Boyle remains optimistic. "We live in a better world than in the 1960s," he said. "The question is, can we push to the next level? Imagine Portland announced separate [black and white] drinking fountains. There would be massive protests around the country. But, we live with residential segregation every day."

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