

IDHH Episode Two: The Murder of Mulugeta Seraw



Mulugeta Seraw

Episode Summary: In this episode we hear from punks Chyna and Jorin telling what they remember about hearing the news of the murder of Mulugeta Seraw; tv journalist Bob Heye reporting in 1988 for KATU news; some background on Portland's racist history from Scot Nakagawa; and Ron Herndon describing the Black community support of the Ethiopian community and chronic lack of response from the city. We finish with a moving tribute by Mulugeta Seraw's uncle, Engedaw Berhanu, speaking at the Mulugeta Seraw Commemoration Conference held at Portland State University honoring the 30th anniversary of the murder and educating about the history of anti-Blackness in Portland.

Ken Death Gets Out of Jail is a 1987 2-minute film by Gus Van Sant, who recognized and wanted to capture the charisma of the young man who later would die in prison while doing time for the hate-motivated murder of Mulugeta Seraw.

The murderers of Mulugeta Seraw are Ken Mieske, aka Ken Death, age 23 in 1988; Kyle Brewster, age 19 at the time and Steve Strasser, who was 20. All three were members of the skinhead gang East Side White Pride. For a deeper look at the murder and the people involved in it, see Elinore Langer's history, [*A Hundred Little Hitlers: The Death of A Black Man, the Trial of A White Racist, and the Rise of the Neo-Nazi Movement in America*](#), (2003, Metropolitan Books, New York) available at the Multnomah County Library and Powell's books. This book covers the events on the day of the murder, offers portraits of the killers, background on Mr. Seraw and his community, and then spends a bulk of its effort examining the trial of Berhanu v. Metzger. Langer's important book, while thorough in its investigation into the lives of despicable humans acting at their worst, is somewhat dated in its liberal contextual use of the n-word without the content warning we currently use, which recognizes the violent impact of the term on the psyches of many people. Be prepared.

According to a Willamette Week article reflecting on the 30th anniversary of the murder, Mieske died unrepentant in 2011 in prison. Brewster served 14 years of a 20-year sentence for 1st degree manslaughter, was released and served 2008-2014 for assaulting a cop. In 2018 he was spotted on Facebook, claiming to support Trump. Steven Strasser quit white supremacy in prison, served around 10 years and has since eluded the public sphere. E. Herron, (2018, October 31.) [*Here's What Happened the Night Mulugeta Seraw Was Murdered—And Afterward*](#). Willamette Week

Engedaw Berhanu and the Ethiopian Diaspora Ethiopia and the land that is now Eritrea were involved in a protracted civil war that began in 1974 when the Derg



Street signs at the site of his killing in Amharic and English



Street view of SE 31st and Pine



Engedaw Berhanu (photo: Douglas Perry, *The Oregonian*)



Bundy uprising, 2016 (photo: Beth Nakamura, *The Oregonian*)



Public memorial for Mulugeta Seraw, Pioneer Square, 1988
(photo: Douglas Perry, *The Oregonian*)

overthrew Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and ended in 1991 resulting in the death of roughly 1.4 million people. One million people died of famine after an unusually severe drought in 1983. Engedaw Berhanu was part of a chain of Ethiopians pulling family members out of danger into a better life; he orchestrated Mulugeta's arrival in Portland, who in turn was working to bring his sister over when he was murdered. There is more about Mr. Bernahu's experience in Elinore Langer's aforementioned book.

East Side White Pride (ESWP) was a skinhead gang with an informally organized, leaderless configuration that arose in mid-80s Portland alongside the more rigidly structured Preservation of the White American Race (POWAR.)

Posse Comitatus According to [an article](#) by hate group watchdog historian the late Dr. Eckard V. Toy, the Posse Comitatus was an organization started by a retired Portland businessman and former 'Silver Shirt' (an anti-Semitic/fascist organization from the 1920s-30s) inspired by the now-familiar assortment of conspiracy theories, anti-government and anti-tax ideas. 'Posse Comitatus' is a Latin term that is sometimes understood to mean that the county is the highest government body. Basically, the Posse was a group of loosely organized anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic racists in the rural West who wanted to make their own laws and arrest anyone who didn't agree with them or do what they wanted. While they claimed to be active in 16 of Oregon's 36 counties, fewer than 100 members showed up at their first statewide convention in 1976. They were active as the Posse until around 1985. Sound familiar?

"Bundy Uprising": When Scot Nakagawa mentions the 'Bundy Uprising,' he is referring to a [terrorist occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge](#) that began on January 2, 2016 in Harney County, Oregon, led by Mormon right-wing anti government crusader Ammon Bundy, who claimed to be receiving divine guidance. Basically, a bunch of white rural right wingers felt that they should have access to federal lands whenever they wanted and did not want to be hemmed in by federal governance when it came to their affairs and took over the federal property in protest. The 40-day standoff ended mostly peacefully, though expensively; one man was fatally shot while reaching for a loaded weapon.

The ideologies of the Bundy leadership resemble the beliefs put forth by the hate group Posse Comitatus described above. Notable in this story is how gently the armed violent terrorist occupiers were treated by government officials, when we compare this direct confrontation the hundreds of unarmed Black people murdered by police while merely existing.

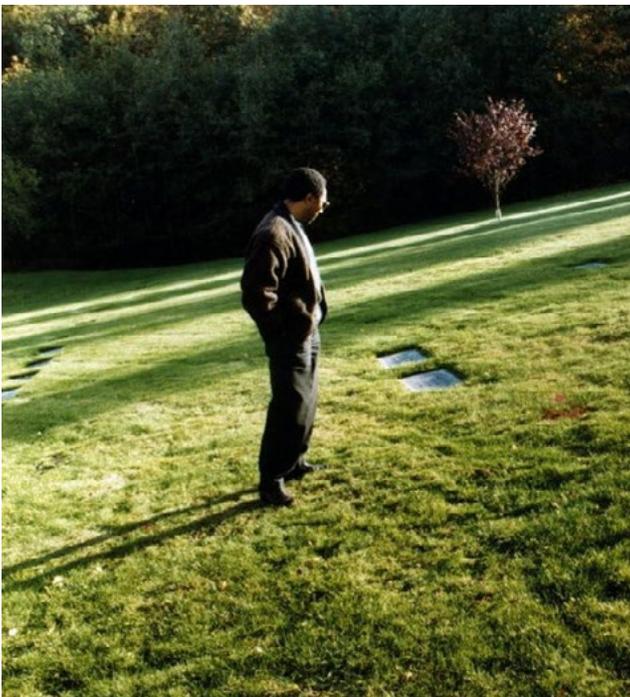
ACTUP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was founded in 1987 in New York City to vocally protest the



Public memorial for Mulugeta Seraw, Pioneer Square, 1988
(photo: Douglas Perry, *The Oregonian*)



Funeral of Mulugeta Seraw, (photo: Douglas Perry, *The Oregonian*)



Mulugeta Seraw's gravesite (photo: Douglas Perry, *The Oregonian*)

lack of action and support around the AIDS epidemic and disrupt business as usual with effective, in-your-face demonstrations. It was a very active grassroots organization committed to focusing the world's attention on the AIDS crisis; the Portland chapter was co-founded by activist and early AIDS survivor Michael Petrelis who also participated in the early organizing in New York; the local group grabbed Portland headlines by February 1989. For more about ACTUP, you can do a deep dive into the [ACTUP Oral History Project](#).

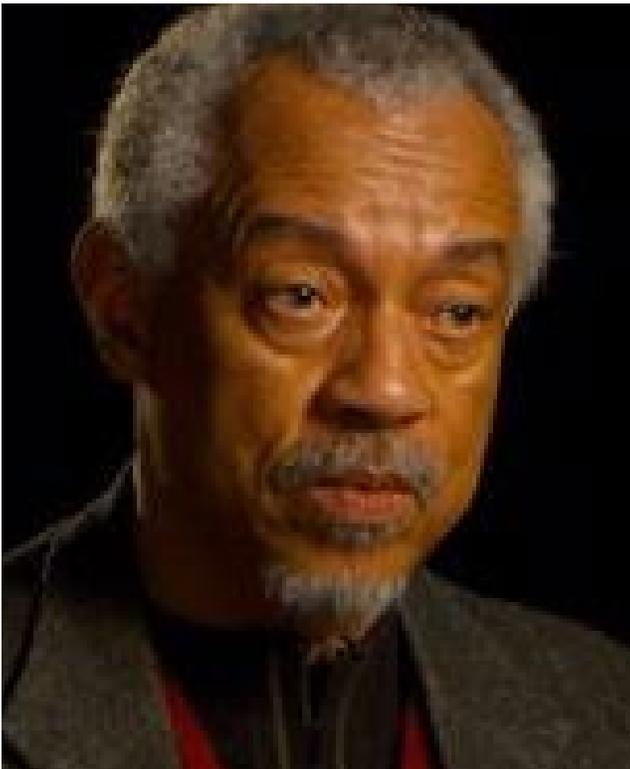
The Order was an extremely dangerous white fascist anti-tax organization founded in the Pacific Northwest and active from 1983-1986. For three years the group committed crimes to finance their operations, including robberies of armored vehicles and counterfeiting, and also murdered both their own people who became security risks as well as Jewish talk show host and critic of white supremacy Alan Berg. The group had ties to Tom Metzger and Aryan Nation. You can learn more [here](#).

Berhanu v. Metzger, Tom Metzger, Tom Metzger, 1938-2020, was a national political neo-nazi head of the hate group white aryan resistance and high-ranking leader of the California chapter of the terrorist group the Ku Klux Klan. After the skinheads pled guilty without trial, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), represented by Morris Dees, sued Tom Metzger for his support and influence over the killers in a civil suit brought by Mulugeta's uncle Engedaw Berhanu.

Elinore Langer writes, "An idealist, a man of principle, Engedaw Berhanu was not interested in money, but he did want to honor Mulugeta. The world should know his true story. In time Engedaw contacted a California office of the NAACP and began exploring the possibility of a civil lawsuit." (Langer, 279) The NAACP and an Ethiopian lawyer also suggested Berhanu contact the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a national civil rights advocacy organization and he put in a call to attorney Morris Dees. "We're already investigating that case, Morris told him immediately. We're interested." (ibid.) [From the SPLC website](#):

"In 1988, Tom and John Metzger sent their best White Aryan Resistance (WAR) recruiter to organize a Portland skinhead gang. After being trained in WAR's methods, the gang killed an Ethiopian student. Tom Metzger praised the skinheads for doing their "civic duty." [Southern Poverty Law] Center attorneys filed a civil suit, *Berhanu v. Metzger*, asserting the Metzgers and WAR were as responsible for the killing as the Portland skinheads. In October 1990, a jury agreed and awarded \$12.5 million in damages to the family of the victim, Mulugeta Seraw." *Berhanu V. Metzger* n.d.

After he lost the trial, Metzger was infamously quoted as saying "The movement will not be stopped in the puny town of Portland. We're too deep. We're embedded now. Don't you understand?" Metzger said. "We're in your colleges. We're in your armies. We're in your police forces.



Ron Herndon, interviewed for OPB series *Oregon Experience*, 2015



Ron Herndon (in white sweater) at school board protest, 1982
(photo: Brent Wojahn, *The Oregonian*)

We're in your technical areas. Where do you think a lot of the skinheads disappeared to? They grew their hair out, went to college....

"I just did my little bit along the way, like your great salmon. I got up there and laid the eggs and now, if I die, no problem."

The trial was certainly responsible for the ruin of Metzger's organization, which could not recover from the financial devastation brought by the judgement. Many local activists were of the opinion that the trial of Metzger enforced the false belief that the Portland nazi problem was caused by Metzger and his outside agitator minions, and that the courtroom defeat of Metzger created an atmosphere that the nazi problem had been solved.

An idea persists that the SPLC used Portland as a stage which they quickly abandoned once the organization gained a big victory against a national leader in white hate; they did not stick around to support the continued fight against the nazi presence Metzger referenced in his statement. The fantasy that with the trial, Portland had won a victory and defeated hate crime directly undermined the work of the organizers who struggled with the city's reluctance and refusal to confront its ugliest self.

No one begrudges the financial award the trial granted to the family of Mulugeta Seraw; there is no dollar amount to heal the loss of a beloved son, nephew and father. The principal beneficiary of the award—which in the end was far less than the mandated 12.5 million—was Mulugeta's son Henock Seraw.

Ron Herndon: From the Civil Rights History Project of the Library of Congress: "For over four decades, Ron Herndon has successfully promoted minority rights and educational opportunities in Portland. Born in Kansas, Herndon arrived in Portland in 1968 to attend Reed College, where he graduated with a degree in history in 1970. Herndon has always sought to illuminate the educational disparities and the disadvantages faced by African Americans.

Herndon helped lobby Reed college administrators to establish a Black Studies program in 1968. He founded a bookstore and the now-defunct Black Education Center, an independent school, in 1970. He later organized the Portland chapter of the Black United Front (BUF) to advocate the improvement of substandard Northeast Portland schools. Working with the BUF, Herndon led a protest in 1982 at a Portland School Board meeting demanding that predominantly African American Tubman Middle School remain open. Herndon's group felt the closure would adversely affect education by forcing students to commute long distances to other schools. He organized a one-day walkout by over 4,000 African American children and was successful in preventing the closure. In 1983 he worked with Nike to bring the brand's first outlet store to an economically depressed neighborhood in North Portland. In 1984, Herndon was arrested for trespassing on the consulate of South Africa



African Liberation Day poster, 1986

as he led a protest against that country's policy of apartheid. Despite the peaceful nature of Herndon's advocacy, he was closely scrutinized by local police and federal agents.

As reported in 2002 by the Portland Tribune, the police intelligence unit illegally created and maintained files on the political activities and personal life of activists during the 1970s and 1980s, including that of Herndon.

After nearly three decades of activism and experience in the field of education, Herndon became the director of Albina Head Start School in Northeast Portland. He later became chairman of the board of the National Head Start Association, an early education advocacy group."

For more information on Mr. Herndon, visit the [Civil Rights History Project: Survey of Collections and Repositories](#), part of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. There you can access oral history interviews with Mr. Herndon, and learn more about his important work in Portland in his own words.

African Liberation Day

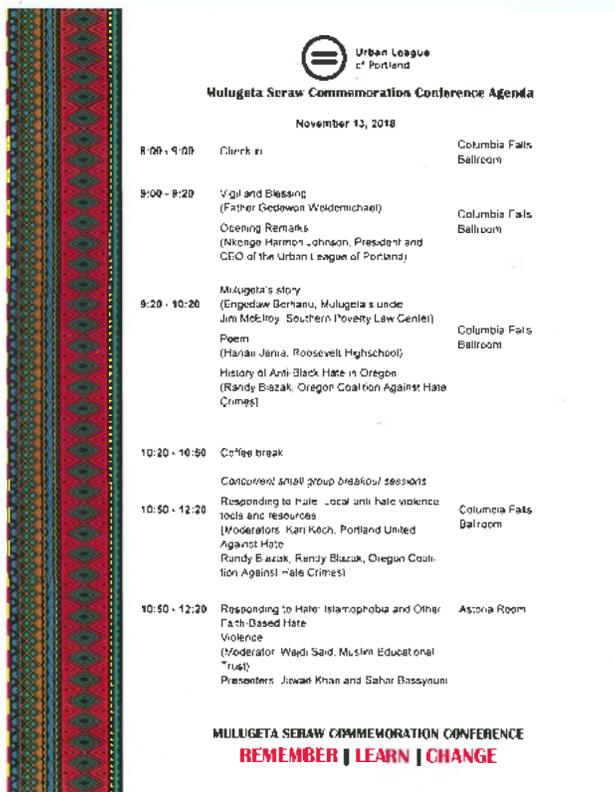
[ALD](#) was founded in 1958 when Kwame Nkrumah convened the First Conference of Independent States held in Accra, Ghana and attended by eight independent African states. The 15th of April was declared "Africa Freedom Day," to mark each year the onward progress of the liberation movement, and to symbolize the determination of the people of Africa to free themselves from foreign domination and exploitation." May 25, 2021 marks the next African Liberation Day.

The Portland Urban League: Municipal racism was the hidden impetus to the 1945 founding of one of Portland's oldest civil rights and service organizations. During World War II, the Kaiser shipyards needed bodies to continue turning out war vessels and were not above hiring Black and women workers; Black workers relocated to the area from the South in what has become known as the Second Great Migration. At war's end, Portland city officials contacted the National Urban League in New York for assistance in relocating what white residents clearly hoped would be 'temporary residents'—those same Black workers who had bailed out the factories in their frantic push to get steel ships on the seas.

The New York representative and Urban League legend Reginald Johnson, then Secretary for the National Urban League, visited Portland and observed the racially hostile environment. Encouraged by local citizens, the League established a local chapter of the non-profit organization.

[The Urban League](#) continues to operate its mission: to empower African-Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security and quality of life.

The National Black United Front The broad-based, grassroots coalition organization for which Ron Herndon opened a Portland chapter was founded in Brooklyn in 1980. On a national level BUF continues to organize for positive change. To learn more go to their [website](#).



Mulugeta Seraw Commemoration, 2018