

KATU.com - Portland, Oregon

[Print this article](#)

'My dad was very proud and honored to have the park named after him'

Originally printed at <http://www.katu.com/outdoors/destinations/124324869.html>

By Shannon L. Cheesman, KATU.com Web Producer/Reporter June 24, 2011

PORTLAND, Ore. - A popular inner-city park with a rich history was recently rededicated to honor its namesake, a man who stood for civil liberties at a time when Portland's racial tensions were high.

"Portland in 1940 and 1950 was very different from what we see today," [Multnomah County Commissioner Loretta Smith](#) said at a June 17 ceremony to recognize the late [Dr. DeNorval Unthank](#) and rededicate the park in his name.

[Unthank Park](#), a 4.50-acre greenspace at 510 N. Shaver Street, is the focus for this week's installment of our [Portland parks series](#). We attended the rededication ceremony to learn more about Dr. Unthank (1899-1977) and his legacy to the city. You can view pictures from the event in the photo gallery.

If you don't know the Unthank name, you really should.

Dr. Unthank came to Portland with his family in 1929. He fought hard to serve as a doctor here even though he was shunned by the city's medical community because of his color. He also stood his ground when he and his family moved into a white neighborhood and became the target of threats.

"At the time there existed a clear division between white Oregonians and people of color," Smith told a crowd that had gathered at Unthank Park for the rededication. "African-Americans, for instance, were kept out of certain neighborhoods, kept out of certain schools and denied access to jobs, professional organizations and social establishments. But Dr. Unthank was not discouraged. He saw these as hurdles and opportunities to overcome, not barriers."

Dr. Unthank's son, the late DeNorval Unthank, also experienced racial tensions during his college days in Eugene in the 1950s. Our sister station in Eugene, KVAL News, [recently sat down with Deb Mohr](#), DeNorval's widow, to talk about those times.

Mohr said when she and 'De,' as she likes to call him, began dating it was frowned upon because she was white and he was black. Her story takes us back to a time when interracial relationships were shocking and often prompted hatred. The two even had to go to

Washington state to get married because it was illegal for whites to marry blacks in Oregon at that time. They ended up having three children and Unthank became an architect. He designed some of Eugene's best-known buildings.

As for Dr. Unthank, during his lifetime he co-founded the [Urban League of Portland](#), served as president of the local chapter of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) (NAACP) and became the first African-American member of Portland's [City Club](#). He was the recipient of numerous awards and eight years before he died a Portland park was renamed to recognize his positive impact on the community.

"Thank you to the community for sharing my dad all these years and being there to have a living memorial for him, a living memory," his daughter, Lesley Unthank, said at the rededication of the park named after her father. "I know when the city renamed Kerby Park back in 1969 my dad was very proud and very honored to have the park named after him."

[City Commissioner Nick Fish](#), who oversees [Portland Parks & Recreation](#), was at the ceremony as well and addressed the crowd with a message about continuing down the same path that Dr. Unthank did all those years ago.



"We are here to rededicate something more than a park," he said. "We are here to recommit to an ideal of equal justice under law for all, to what our President calls a more perfect union. It would be a hollow act if all we did was rededicate this park without rededicating ourselves to a larger cause - and that is the cause of justice and equality."

Also in attendance at the rededication ceremony were [Portland Police Chief Michael Reese](#) and former state [Sen. Avel Gordly](#) (who was delivered by Dr. Unthank when she was born), among other local dignitaries.

The rededication was also the official kickoff of summer activities that are planned at Unthank Park and other parks throughout the city as Portland Parks & Recreation's [Summer Free for All](#).



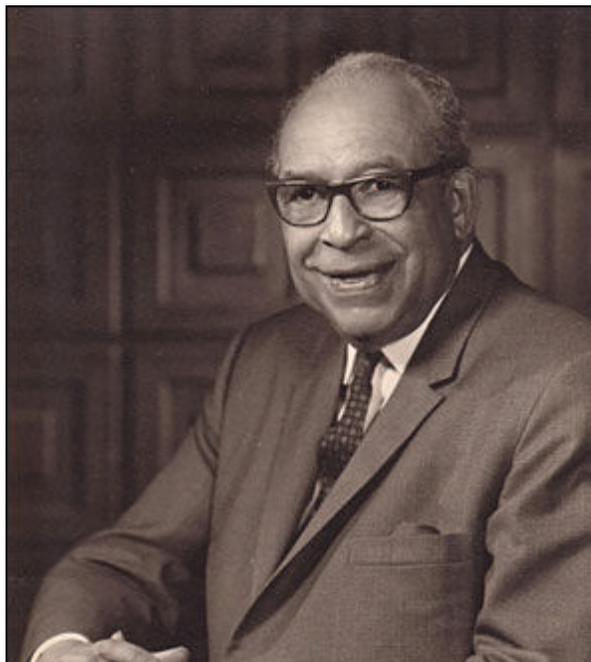
The Life of DeNorval Unthank, M.D.

The following account of Dr. Unthank's life was written by his daughter, Lesley Unthank, and provided to the media by Portland Parks & Recreation (Lesley Unthank is a former longtime Portland Parks & Recreation employee).

Dr. DeNorval Unthank was a dedicated doctor and civil rights activist. He is considered to be a landmark figure in the early civil rights movement in Portland.

Unthank was born on December 14, 1899, in Allentown, Pennsylvania. His mother died when he was nine, leaving eight children. Unthank's father, a chef, sent the five youngest children to his brother in Kansas City, Missouri.

After completing high school at the age of 16, Unthank first attended the University of Michigan, and then transferred to the University of Kansas where he attained his undergrad degree. Unthank then earned his medical degree in 1926 from Howard University in Washington, D.C.



He moved to Portland in 1929 with his wife Thelma Shipman and their infant son. Unthank arrived in the Rose City just 3 years after the Oregon Constitution had stopped prohibiting African-Americans from living in the state.



Dr. DeNorval Unthank (photo courtesy of Portland Parks & Recreation).

When he began his medical practice in Oregon, he was initially barred from practicing at local hospitals and excluded from the medical community. However, by the late 1940 and 50s, he was on the staff of Good Samaritan, Providence, St Vincent, and Emanuel hospitals. Dr. Unthank was Portland's only African-American medical doctor until the 1940's. To serve underrepresented populations, made himself available day and night for house calls, serving African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Gypsies (and many whites as well) during his years in Portland.

His family says there was a strong contingent of the Ku Klux Klan in Portland at the time. Even so, Unthank chose to move his family to the predominantly white neighborhood of Westmoreland in 1930. His family says that neighborhood representatives were less than thrilled, and even offered him \$1500.00 to move out of the area. Unthank refused, and he and his family were the targets of broken windows, harassment, and threatening phone calls. They had to move several times before they were able to settle in SE Portland.

In 1952, breaking unwritten color barrier east of NE 15th Ave, the Unthank family moved to the Irvington neighborhood. Dr. Unthank continued to build up his private practice and received recognition for his civil rights efforts. He served as a medical consultant for the State of Oregon workmen's compensation board from 1970-1976. Dr. Unthank died on September 20, 1977.

Dr. Unthank's achievements are numerous. He became the first black member of Portland's City Club in 1943, encouraging the club to publish a significant 1945 study called "The Negro in Portland," which opened the eyes of many citizens to ongoing discriminatory practices. Over the years he won several awards for his work against racial discrimination as well as for his public service work. In 1958, the Oregon Medical Society named him Doctor of the Year.

For his role in bringing down racial barriers, in 1969 the City of Portland renamed Kerby Park as DeNorval Unthank Park in his honor. Unthank received recognition such as the B'nai B'rith Citizenship award, the distinguished Citizenship Award from the University of Oregon in 1971, and the Citizenship Award from Concordia College in 1975. Unthank was president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and cofounder of the Portland Urban League which was chartered in 1945.