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Wannabe novelist seeks benefactors

• *Mitchell Jackson looks to creative financing for a degree and a dream*

BY JANINE ROBBEN

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Mitchell Jackson is Ñ by his own description Ñ confident, very ambitious and driven by a desire to be rich. He's also young and black.

"All the youth today want to play professional sports or be rappers," he says of kids in the North and Northeast Portland neighborhoods where he spent much of his childhood.

Jackson, 26, might have pursued either of those routes himself. In 1993, he was honorable mention all-Portland Interscholastic League as a basketball player at Jefferson High School. And he's model handsome Ñ who cares if he could actually perform onstage?

But Jackson, who received a master's degree in writing from Portland State University on Sunday, has decided to succeed at something else: writing novels.

He's pursuing his dream of attending New York University's prestigious master's program in creative writing this fall by promoting himself as would an athlete or musician.

"I tell myself I'll go (to NYU) if I have \$50 in my pocket and I have to hitchhike; that's how bad I want to go," Jackson says. "But the reality is that New York is an expensive place, and I question whether I want to have \$125,000 worth of loans. A first book can flop, or you can do really well."

Jackson has been taking his biography and PSU transcript to business owners and professional basketball players, hoping that someone with deep pockets will see him as he sees himself: a successful black writer who will give younger, black, would-be writers the mentorship that he struggled to find personally.

Growing up fast

Born in Portland to unmarried parents, Jackson lived, at various times, with his mother, father, uncle, grandfather and great-grandmother, changing schools as he changed homes and sometimes even moving between Portland and Vancouver, Wash.

He got through the tough times, he says, by being good at both sports and school. "Sometimes I just liked going to school 'cause it wasn't home," he says. "No matter what else was going on at home, I could hold onto this."

Although he played basketball for both Clark and Portland community colleges, Jackson says he realized early on that he wasn't going to make money playing professionally.

Jackson earned a bachelor's degree from PSU in speech communications and then took low-level jobs at two Portland television stations, one of which included some writing.

While working at the stations he began to realize the extent to which race affects both white newscasters' view of blacks and the way stories about them are reported.

For example, Jackson quotes a white newscaster, who had not been briefed on his background, as

saying to him, in part: "I know where you're coming from. We were poor, too; I had lots of brothers."

"He just naturally assumed I was poor and from a broken home," Jackson says now. "Which was true É but, hey, how'd he know?"

Another time, he says, the same newscaster asked him to drive down Southwest Macadam Avenue for a "sweeps week" story to see if he'd get pulled over because he was black. Jackson says that he declined to put himself in the position of being harassed or arrested for another person's story.

"There was a certain amount of ignorance," he says of the exchange. "Like he was so used to his \$300,000 paychecks that he forgot the real world."

Jackson says he saw stories about blacks handled differently from stories about whites. For example, the murder of his cousin, Henry J. Johnson Jr., in March 2000, received little coverage compared to the murder in August 2000 of Wayne Olson, who was white.

Johnson, a convicted felon who was, according to his family, turning his life around, was shot on the street in Northeast Portland. His murder remains unsolved. Olson, senior vice president of Bank of America, was killed in his Southwest Portland home in an execution-style killing later linked to his association with a female employee of a private escort service.

To Johnson, the difference in the way that local television covered the homicides said more about the victims' race than the differences in their circumstances or those of their deaths.

"Those were two lives; those lives were equal," he argues. "Why was one the lead story for two days and the other after the kicker? I began thinking, 'I'm too small to change this; I don't want to be in this.'"

Encouragement shapes career

Looking for another career path, Jackson says he noticed on the Internet one day that PSU had just started a creative writing program. Although he had never written a short story, he got a book from the library on how to write fiction, hammered out 10 or 15 pages of the program's required 25-page submission and sent it in.

"I don't know whether they were hard up for another student or needed another minority in the program," he says. "When I look at that piece of writing now, I'd say it was terrible. I'd read some James Baldwin; I sounded like a 10-year-old knockoff, wannabe James Baldwin."

Nonetheless, Jackson says his writing was well received by his colleagues at PSU and by his instructors at the Hurston/Wright Foundation's summer workshop for writers of African descent in Washington, D.C.

"They were so encouraging about my writing; they were telling me I was so good," he says of the workshop. "That's where I got the encouragement to think I could actually do this for a career."

His workshop project is being included in an anthology scheduled for publication by Harlem Moon, an imprint of Doubleday, in August.

Jackson says the project, which evolved into his PSU master's thesis, is about a 21-year-old man coming of age, dealing with his troubled boyhood. "It's not nonfiction, but it's close," he says.

The thesis, which Jackson hopes to use as the basis for a book, fits with his creative vision.

"The subjects or themes that I would like to explore are stories about African-Americans, the stories often trivialized and exploited by the media. I want to write stories about people who are sometimes the victims of circumstance. Basically, I'll write stories close to my experience, and the experiences of the people close to me, until I run out.

"I've never been a person who lacks confidence in myself, even if I couldn't do it," he says of his

decision to become a writer. “My first two, three quarters at PSU I was like, ‘Can I do this?’

“I can do this,” he says. “I can do this.”

An account for Jackson’s college expenses has been set up at Albina Community Bank, 2002 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

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