

Luis G. Pedraja: The magnitude and significance of Black History Month

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Black History Month, which we celebrate every February, is an annual celebration of achievements by African Americans and a time for recognizing their central role in U.S. history. The brainchild of historian, author and journalist Carter G. Woodson, who today is known as the father of Black History Month, wanted to honor the often-neglected accomplishments of members of Black communities. Originally started in 1926 as a week in February, it was later expanded to the full month in 1976.

In a recent conversation with members of QCC's Black Student Union, they shared what Black History Month meant to them. They shared the sense of

empowerment they felt in seeing the achievements of others that look like them, the sense that they too can make history one day. The pride they felt and the opportunity it gives them to share with others about their culture. It is essential for our students to see people who look like them in the classroom, in leadership positions and in history. It inspires them to dream of what they can be, of their potential. I look at our students and wonder how many of them will one day change the world, change history.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we also need to remember that the burden of raising awareness about the significant accomplishments of our Black community should not rest solely on the Black community. Yes, we want to empower Black voices. However, we can easily leave it to our Black community to speak about their accomplishments, to share with us about the significance of the celebrations, to educate us. Often, we feel uncomfortable and unqualified to speak about it. But we shouldn't turn to those who shoulder the burden of discrimination to speak about it, to make the argument about the importance and significance of celebrating Black history, accomplishments, and the struggles faced.

We should all be willing to celebrate and recognize the accomplishments of our Black community. We should be the ones honoring them - not them speaking about it to us. We should be the ones taking the initiative to educate ourselves about Black history and to educate others. Memphis should be something that we speak up about, not simply leave it to the Black community to be the ones who speak up, who call our attention to the injustices committed. So often the burden falls on Blacks, Latines, Asian American Pacific Islanders and other historically marginalized groups to speak up, to educate others about it, to push us to celebrate their accomplishments. Yes, we should magnify the voices of those who are continually challenged/suppressed and not presume that we speak on their behalf, but we should not put the burden on them.

So, the question is not about what Black history means for Black men, Black women and the Black LGBTQIA+ community, but what it should mean for us; not what the atrocities we witness in Memphis mean for the Black community, but what it should mean to us.

Black history is our history.

According to the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, history is like a searchlight, shining on a few - usually those in power - and rendering everything and everyone else into the shadows. History is told by the winners, by the rulers, by the privileged. Seldom do we hear the stories of those who are in the margins, the oppressed, the enslaved, the persecuted. As a college, we need to light the way, to shine our light not just on the few, but upon the accomplishments of all who contribute to our society. We should celebrate Black history not just one month a year, but every single day.

Many years ago, I sat at a breakfast with the daughter of Charles Drew, at an event in a medical school that bore his name. Yet, I was surprised to hear how few knew about this African American surgeon and researcher, who organized the first large-scale blood bank and made significant advances in blood transfusion that benefit all of us. Most of us are familiar with the book and movie "Hidden Figures," that chronicled the contributions to the space program of three Black women: Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson. As I watched the movie, one of my favorites, I wondered why I never learned about them in my history classes? Or why did I not learn about the bravery of the Tuskegee Airmen in all my years in school and college? As I read the writings of Frederick Douglass, I wondered why I was never required to read them in school or even college? How many of you know about Robert Smalls? He was born into slavery in South Carolina, orchestrated a daring escape during the Civil War, served in the Union Army and eventually became a congressman representing South Carolina. How many learned about the Tulsa race massacre/Black Wall Street massacre in 1921? Or the many other

centers of Black wealth and power that were eradicated through oppressive practices and violence? The list goes on.

The truth is that history often hides the many contributions of Black men, Black women and the Black LGBTQIA+ community, as well as that of many others marginalized in society. History also hides the atrocities committed against them. Even today we see efforts by some politicians and states to erase aspects of our history they might find unsavory, and silence those who seek to speak the truth. As educators, as a nation, we need to stand firm against those who seek to sanitize history or obscure the many contributions to Blacks have made to our society. We must celebrate history and we must learn from it.

As we celebrate the accomplishment of Black men, Black women and the Black LGBTQIA+ community during this month, we cannot shy away from their pain either. We cannot ignore the fact that our country was built upon the backs of slaves on lands stolen from Indigenous people. We cannot forget George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Tyre Nichols, who are recent names added to a long history of violence against Blacks, which dates back to the founding of our country. We cannot forget that the first Jim Crow laws were enacted in Massachusetts, later to be copied in the South. We cannot ignore Tulsa or the Rosewood massacre in 1923. We need to celebrate the accomplishments of so many in our Black communities, but we also need to acknowledge the pain. In the context of the pain, suffering and violence, the accomplishments we celebrate during Black History Month becomes even more significant - great feats accomplished in the most difficult of times and circumstances. So many obstacles overcome. And yet, so many more that still must be overcome.

Our society was built upon a history of oppressive practices that privileged some at the expense of many others. We all are complicit in this system, which we have failed to change for far too long. The brutal attack on Tyre Nichols in Memphis should anger us, should lead us to bring change, which has been far too slow. But we must also be outraged that we as a society have done so little; that we've allowed for lynching, violence and oppression to continue.

Too many times I find myself making statements, calling for reform, over and over again. We talk the talk, but do we walk the walk? Change must come now. As educators, our role is helping students understand the history of our nation, of Blacks in our country, of systems of oppression, of the critical tools to question what we are told and provide them with the necessary tools to effect change.

History will judge our silence and our inaction.

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