

Let's celebrate the histories of all people — all year long



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BY SHARON GARY-SMITH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The number of calls and emails I've received this month to write, to speak, to present on Black History Month has been, at times, overwhelming. I struggle to be reasonable and considerate as I answer requests to share my history, to cram all things African American into the confine of one tiny month.

How can anyone possibly capture the breadth and depth of the African American experience — as if it were even a single experience? How can I convey the richness of my own family's history of overcoming and striving in Oregon? How can I talk about the collective memories of all who came before us, risking their lives and their livelihoods to build a powerful — an unstoppable — movement for civil rights?

And how can I do this for groups that only feature black faces and black voices one month out of the year, before returning to white programming as usual? I can't.

What I can do is help my colleagues understand the history and reason and context of Black History Month itself. Understand the gaps it filled in American history and public education, which were — and in many ways still are — lacking in the black experience beyond slavery.

Black History Month began with the creation of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) by Harvard-trained historian Carter G. Woodson and prominent minister Jesse E. Moorland in 1915, exactly half a century after the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in the United States. ASNLH was an

organization dedicated to researching and promoting achievements by black Americans and other peoples of African descent.

In 1926, ASNLH sponsored a national Negro History Week, choosing the second week of February to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass and the celebrations that had already been occurring on their birthdays for decades. But Woodson believed that history was created not just by great men, but by people and movements, and that there was power in celebrating the history, culture, and achievements of all black people.

Over the decades, Negro History Week grew and morphed, was adopted by the U.S. Department of Education and proclaimed by mayors across the country. In 1976, 50 years after the first Negro History Week, Black History Month was institutionalized and recognized by then-President Gerald Ford.

Throughout this history and evolution, Dr. Woodson, the Rev. Moorland and other black leaders were always cautious, always critical of efforts to limit black history to a single month and they were quick to challenge "instant experts," publishers and others who would seek to profit from Black History Month.

Don't get me wrong. I'm a real supporter of Black and Latino and Asian and Native American and European history. I know that a more inclusive history that better represents each of us is critical to building powerful, multiracial movements. I believe in hosted lectures and performances that showcase the breadth and diversity of our American experiences. And, I'm sure that

had it not been for Dr. Woodson and the Rev. Moorland, much of the history and richness of African-American life, our struggles, challenges, and significant history would not have gotten their due.

But, I'm concerned when someone who hasn't known about or seemed interested in this history before or beyond slavery, who appears to have few factual representations about my people, now seems compelled, or ordered, to cram as much as possible onto the February calendar. Too many people, cultures, and identities continue to be

relegated to a few days or a month — for those of us who get any days at all — and with few exceptions I choose not to participate.

But I believe we can change this dynamic. We can celebrate the unique and intertwining histories of all people all year long. I hope my colleagues and allies will take the time to learn about black history and make inquiries before February. We're lucky here in Portland to have a newspaper like Street Roots that elevates the voices and honors the histories of a broad range of people year-round, and other organizations can take a cue from them.

As I've taken to telling people, feel free to call me March through January — I'll be black all year long!

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