

OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to news@portlandobserver.com.

Black History Month and the Pursuit of Justice

A time to educate and inspire

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history.

— Carter G. Woodson

Carter G. Woodson was born in Virginia, 10 years after the fall of the Confederacy. Working as a sharecropper and a miner, he rarely had time to attend school



until the age of 20. He would devote the rest of his life to study, becoming known as “The Father of African-American History.”

Through his studies, Woodson found that African-American contributions to history “were overlooked, ignored, and even suppressed by the writers of history textbooks and the teachers who use them.” He concluded that racial prejudice “is merely the

logical result of tradition, the inevitable outcome of thorough instruction to the effect that the Negro has never contributed anything to the progress of mankind.”

Black History Month, which Woodson founded as Negro History Week in 1926, was his effort to combat that tradition. Chosen to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, considered heroes by most black Americans, the second week in February was set aside to celebrate black history.

The first year, education officials of only three states and two cities recognized the event, but by 1929 it was being promoted in nearly every state in the nation. In 1970, black students at Kent State University celebrated the first unofficial Black History Month and in 1976, President Gerald Ford officially

recognized the event as an opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.

In the intervening 40 years, we’ve seen remarkable progress in racial justice, and also heartbreaking setbacks. There are some in our own community who feel Black History Month is unnecessary — as there were in Woodson’s own day. And their essential point is valid: Black history is American History, and its teaching should not be relegated to one month per year. But that isn’t the point of Black History Month.

The American Dream remains

perilously out of reach for many people of color. The National Urban League Equality Index, a comprehensive comparison of Black America’s status in the areas of economics, health, education, social justice and civic engagement, stands at 72.2 percent.

Racial disparity won’t disappear if we simply ignore it. Justice will not be achieved unless we actively seek it out. Black History Month not only serves as a reminder of what our forebears have achieved, but as an inspiration for the journey that remains before us.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Healing Racial Wounds and Creating Opportunity

This nation needs to transform

BY GAIL C. CHRISTOPHER

Fifty years ago, the Civil Rights Movement led to a series of laws banning public discrimination. African Americans were no longer barred from certain restaurants, some schools were integrated and fair housing laws created more living options.

But today, it’s clear that court rulings and legislation didn’t change the root cause of conscious and unconscious bias — the widespread belief in racial hierarchy still exists.

As a nation, we didn’t understand the power of this belief, this misguided notion that some people are either superior or inferior because of the color of their skin.

This bias manifests in many ways. Unarmed men and women are killed by police and civilians, the justice system seems tilted toward whites, and there remains unequal treatment for children and adults when it comes to health, education, housing and employment. David R. Williams, a sociology professor at Harvard University, cites studies showing that when whites, blacks and Hispanics visited hospi-

tal emergency rooms with the same ailment, white patients received pain medication more frequently than people of color.

Does that make the physicians racist?

That may not be the case. With the advancements in neuroscience, we now know much more about the power of the mind. We understand that unconscious beliefs are deeply held, that centuries of this belief system have unconsciously shaped how some of us respond. But now, 21st century technology — YouTube, cell phones, dashboard cameras, body cameras — are leveraged to shape new beliefs about our humanity. They are capturing and exposing vivid samples of people of color abused and dehumanized. We must move beyond the absurd notion that some people have more value than others.

What’s promising is that recent polling data demonstrates a palpable desire for a positive change in how we view one another and how we shape our society to reflect the inherent value of all people. We have carried the burden and the weight of this mythology of a hierarchy of human value, allowing it to weigh our country down for centuries. We must jettison that belief and move forward with the truth of our

equal values as a human family.

It’s significant that a polling analysis conducted by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in conjunction the Northeastern University School of Journalism has found that a majority of whites now acknowledge that racism still exists, and that it creates bias in structures such as the criminal justice system. Furthermore, a majority of Americans believe more

process. This broad coalition seeks to move the nation beyond dialogues about race and ethnicity to unearthing historic and contemporary patterns that are barriers to success, healing those wounds and creating opportunities for all children.

Specifically, the effort will prioritize inclusive, community-based healing activities and policy design that seek to change collective community narratives and broaden the

ity. They create physical harm, they create mental and emotional harm, and when there’s harm, healing is needed.

When an unarmed black person is killed, I have a bodily reaction to that tragedy. I relive losses of my own, such as when I was a teenager in Cleveland. My first cousin was shot and killed by a white thrill-seeker in our segregated neighborhood. I recall that we buried her that week, while he enlisted in the Navy and left the city. It was the first funeral I ever attended. Despite all the joyful moments my cousin and I shared growing up together, my only lasting recollection is of her body lying in that casket.

All of us must become more cognizant of the cost of violence and the harm. We must be willing to invest in the processes that help to bring about healing.

Other truth and reconciliation efforts around the world aim to reconcile. But America’s genesis is this hierarchy. And so we don’t have to come back, we don’t need to reconcile, this nation needs to transform. The Truth Racial Healing and Transformation process will lead this transformation and chart that course.

Gail C. Christopher is vice president of the Truth Racial Healing and Transformation process and a senior advisor at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

“What’s promising is that recent polling data demonstrates a palpable desire for a positive change in how we view one another and how we shape our society to reflect the inherent value of all people.”

needs to be done to eliminate racism. In a poll last year, 53 percent of whites said more changes needed to be made to give blacks equal rights with whites, up from just 39 percent a year earlier.

Those findings underscore that now is the time for the Truth Racial Healing and Transformation process, which the Kellogg Foundation launched on Jan. 28. More than 70 diverse organizations and individuals ranging from the National Civic League to the YWCA to the NAACP are partners in the

understanding that Americans have for their diverse experiences. Participants in the process will assemble national and local commissions that will hold public forums on the consequences of racial inequity and work toward mobilizing systems and structures to create more equitable opportunities. In the forums, we will also discuss racial hierarchy and how best to dismantle it.

Clearly, there must be broader knowledge of the harm that comes from the devaluation and from the structures of unequal