

THE Skanner

Challenging People to Shape
a Better Future Now

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Opinion

Setting the Record Straight on an Important Piece of Black History

With the start of Black History Month, I brace myself for the mis-telling of Black History yet again.

In schoolhouses and everywhere the stories are told, a persistent myth shows its ugly head: the ridiculous notion that great Black leaders are not just exceptional but exceptions.

It is an idea rooted in the ahistorical and unnatural misperception that the most notable Black Americans were superhumans that sprung forth from collective misery. It discounts the many, many Black leaders who were – and are – the children and grandchildren of courageous leaders in their own right.

Paul Robeson was a phenomenal actor, orator, singer, athlete, and activist. The family that produced him might be even more impressive. His father escaped enslavement to earn two college degrees and become a prominent minister. His mother was part of the Bustill family, who were famous abolitionists and included Grace Bustill Douglass, the crusading abolitionist and feminist.

Kamala Harris's path to the vice presidency began as a transformative district attorney. She refused to pursue the death penalty, and shifted her department's punitive focus away from sex workers and squarely onto sex buyers and traffickers. She both provided a model for the movement to elect more Black and progressive district attorneys and spawned the national training institute for female candidates known as Emerge America. Vice President



Ben Jealous

Guest Columnist

Harris would readily admit there is no explaining her uncommon courage without accounting for her civil rights activist parents and her education at the very university that produced Thurgood Marshall.

Martin Luther King is perhaps Black America's best-known leader. His grandfather was himself a crusading Black Baptist preacher and the first president of the Atlanta branch of the NAACP.

Whitney Houston became an iconic star of radio and the silver screen. Her first cousin was Dionne Warwick. Through Warwick, Houston had close, life-shaping relationships with other celebrated female singers and actors like her "honorary aunt" Aretha Franklin, godmother Darlene Love, and close friend Cicely Tyson.

Malcolm X is America's most famous Black nationalist. Before him, his father Earl Little was a Black nationalist Baptist preacher who organized for Marcus Garvey. Harassment by the Ku Klux Klan forced the Littles to relocate from Omaha, Nebraska to Lansing, Michigan, where Earl was murdered by a Klan-like white supremacist group.

Stacey Abrams rose to become the first woman leader of a party in Georgia's legislature and the most impactful voting rights activist of

the 21st century. Her parents were courageous civil rights activists and her father was among the youngest leaders of the Hattiesburg boycott in Mississippi.

Middle Tennessee claims a famous political father-son pair in former Congressman and Senator Albert Gore, Sr. and former Senator and Vice President Al Gore. But western Tennessee saw its own confrontational and crusad-

“It discounts the many, many Black leaders who were – and are – the children and grandchildren of courageous leaders

ing former Congressman Harold Ford, Sr. followed by the diplomatic, incisive, and consensus-building former Congressman Harold Ford, Jr.

From the time he started preaching at the age of four, Reverend Al Sharpton's early years were shaped by the mentorship of Black leaders like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., James Brown, and the incomparable Jesse Jackson. But it was his mother Ada Sharpton's work that inspired her son's founding of the National Action Network. Mrs. Sharpton rose from poverty to power as a prominent civil rights activist in New York City's outer boroughs and became president of Mothers in Action.

Fifteen years ago, I was named the youngest national president in the history of the NAACP. My grandmother Mamie Bland Todd trained future US Senator Barbara Mikulski as a social worker early in her career. In researching my latest book, I followed my own ancestry back to my grandmother's grandfather. In the late 1800s, Edward David Bland led Black Republicans into coalition with former white Confederate soldiers to form a third party that took over the Virginia state government. Known as the Readjusters, the bipartisan political movement won all statewide elected offices and controlled the Commonwealth of Virginia from 1881-85.

In that time, they abolished the poll tax and the whipping post; radically expanded Virginia Tech and created Virginia State University; and readjusted the terms of the Civil War debt to save the free public schools and take the state from a financial deficit into a surplus.

Parentage and family connection are not and never should be a prerequisite for leadership in our country. But we can still recognize that one of the greatest traditions in Black leadership is Black leaders who raise Black leaders.

Some of those leaders inspire with their art; others with their activism; many with both. The historical arc they help form – which sometimes wavers but ultimately bends towards justice – would not be possible without that tradition.

So, if it occurs to you that you do not know enough about how your ancestors might have led, get curious and do some research. You might just find an interesting and inspiring piece of family history.

February is American Heart Month

My name is Priya Helweg, and I am the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services deputy regional director for Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington and 272 federally recognized tribes. February is American Heart Month, a time to recognize that heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, especially in the African American community. African Americans are 30% more likely to die from heart disease than non-Hispanic whites. However, African Americans can successfully prevent and beat these diseases by understanding the risks and taking steps to address them. Being physically active, eating healthy, not smoking and finding healthy ways to deal with stress are all ways we can improve our heart health now and in the future.



Priya Helweg

US Dept of Health & Human Services

For me, that means hiking in the mountains or walking my dogs around Green Lake in Seattle.

As the deputy regional director for HHS, I know many Oregonians rely on life-saving medicines to keep their hearts healthy and improve their quality of life. For patients with cardiovascular disease, prescription drugs can be expensive. Many patients with heart disease may also have other chronic conditions that come with high costs, such as diabetes.

As HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra often says, medica-

tion is only effective if you can afford it.

Under a new law, the Inflation Reduction Act, the Medicare program, can, for the first time, negotiate a fair price for certain prescription drugs taken by millions of

“Medication is only effective if you can afford it

beneficiaries. This year the secretary selected the first 10 high-cost medicines for negotiation, including 5 that treat cardiovascular disease or prevent complications that impact the heart. Drugs selected for negotiation include Xarelto and Eliquis, drugs taken to prevent blood clots that can lead to a heart attack or stroke, which together are

taken by more than 60,000 Oregonians with Medicare.

Oregonians don't have to wait for the drug price negotiations to see lower costs, they can get relief right now thanks to additional benefits in the law that lower prescription drug costs for Medicare Part D beneficiaries, including a policy that caps out-of-pocket prescription drug costs for Medicare Part D beneficiaries. Learn about these new benefits at lowerdrugcosts.gov.

So, if you can, make time for that hike, play with your dog a little longer, or eat those extra vegetables. And for those of you who pair those healthy habits with medication, learn how the Inflation Reduction Act makes prescription drugs less expensive and more accessible. During American Heart Month, add an extra step towards a healthy heart.