

# FORUM

## Passing on our history to the next generation



Illustration by Ron Rogers for the Chronicle

**James B. Ewers Jr.**  
Guest Columnist

It has been so long, that I don't actually remember when I started celebrating black history. I do recall that it started out as Black

History Week. Upon quiet reflection and over time, I have come to realize that black folks created and invented a lot of things. For example, Alexander Mills invented the elevator and Albert R. Robinson invented the electric trolley. In addition, John Love invented the pencil sharpener and John Burr invented the lawn mower. As I grew older, a week of black history turned into an entire month. I am sure that Carter G. Woodson, in 1926, didn't really think about this turn of events. Yet, I suspect the contributions were so enormous that one week simply would not do.

There are some compelling questions to be asked regarding Black History Month as we know it now. First, there are those who are calling for an end to Black History Month. They argue that there ought to be a seamless transition from black history to American history. Proponents also say that Black History Month further separates and segregates our society. It is my thinking that as long as many of the learning tools and dispensers of information give out little or partial information, then Black History Month must continue. I agree that our history should be interwoven into American history; however, at this point the rhetoric and the practice of the rhetoric don't match. I have often mused whether talk-

ing intentionally about the contributions of black people make some people uncomfortable. I am sensitive to this comfort issue, however sometimes folks have to feel uneasy in order to appreciate the facts. Will the information tools tell us that Sarah Boone invented the ironing board; that Alice Parker invented the heating furnace; and that George T. Samon invented the clothes dryer? We probably have to go to

some extremes to acquire this information. The celebration of Black History Month during this time has special significance, especially for young students. If you are my age or a little younger, you are a product of segregated schools. You either went to an all-black school or an all-white school. This wasn't a reflection on us as much as it was the times. Many of us lived in places where our contact with each other was quite limited. As a result, it may have been easier to celebrate the accomplishments of black folks because there wasn't the peer pressure or the resistance. And because we had black teachers for the most part, these purveyors of the information affirmed our pride. Obviously, we now live in different places and during a different time in our history. Students now learn in integrated classes and their class-

mates are of different ethnicities. With all of these groups together, you have a real melting pot of ideas and learning styles. The questions then boil up, "How do black students feel about celebrating Black History Month?" Are they embarrassed by it? Are they afraid of being rejected? And finally, do they believe there is any correlation between their success and the success of their ancestors?

more with young students is that they mix well together. Seeing black students and white students together is not the aberration that it once was. So it would stand to reason that white students would also appreciate Black History Month. It has always been my view that we can all learn things from each other. I do hope that black students celebrate with great pride this month the many achievements that have been made through the years.

February will be gone before you know it. While I think we still need to celebrate in February, we need to do more throughout the year. There are too many highlights to keep them confined to one month. I encourage parents, grandparents and other love providers to keep this spirit of information-sharing alive and well. Use the library and the Internet as wonderful sources for information. We have an opportunity to provide our children with a platform made up of respect, admiration and caring. We can love and care about each other every day. Let our children, friends and neighbors see us as the torch-bearers of kindness, civility and good will. February should be a month of inclusion, not exclusion. We grow more when we learn more. Celebrate black history because it is American history.

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Recently, in a few public settings, I have shared a few analogies. For instance, there could be no Condoleezza Rice without there first being a Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American to run for President of the United States; there could be no Barack Obama without there first being an Edward Brooke, an African-American Senator from Massachusetts; and finally, there could be no Usher without there first being a Sammy Davis, Jr. The analogies are endless, yet the point is that we all stand on the mighty shoulders of those who came before us. They were role models for us before the term became chic and fashionable. The proposition has to be made to young people that their own success is inextricably tied to the success of their ancestors.

One of the things that I have observed

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1999. We have had two representatives during this time: Democrats Mel Watt and the current Congresswoman, Dr. Alma Adams.

Our current discussion in North Carolina is a fine example of the problem with unconstitutional districts based strictly upon race. When black voters are stacked in one district, their broader political influence is drastically diminished. The facts on the ground are clear: black voters are heavily over-represented in the 12th District, but under-represented everywhere else across the State (except for the also litigated 1st Congressional District). Republican congressional districts have mushroomed under this plan. Candidates outside the 12th and 1st Districts are free to disregard the concerns of black voters completely. Republicans have found that they can exploit this reality to their advantage and have done so with great success.

Things are changing. We've now seen a handful of lawsuits from national and state Democratic parties to get majority-minority districts overturned. These circumstances can sometimes create tension within minority communities and between the Democrats we predomi-



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nantly vote for. Black incumbents want to ensure safe districts for reelection, while party leaders want minority voters more dispersed to increase the party's chances of winning more races. This is an inescapable tension.

So far that hasn't been the case in North Carolina. Democratic Legislators in Raleigh voted on Tuesday 15 to 1 to redraw the 12th District in a way that is not "serpentine" in nature and instead, promotes compactness and fair representation. Congresswoman Alma Adams and Congressman G.K. Butterfield have both issued even-handed state-

ments saying they support the creation of fair and constitutional districts in line with what was requested by the courts.

Our Congresswoman Adams has taken this appropriate stance even as she finds herself in a very unfair position. She lives in Greensboro, serves the district, and did not have input into the maps previously drawn, as did the two Congressmen who previously served Districts 1 and 12.

In considering new maps a pragmatic approach must take place.

There needs to be greater geographic balance between Charlotte and the

Triad while honoring the idea of compactness. The lines should be drawn under the 2010 Census. The district needs to return to fewer than 50% African-American (as was the case when Mel Watt first won the seat). Forsyth County should remain in a district with one Republican Congressperson (Virginia Foxx) and one Democratic Congressperson (Alma Adams). Our city deserves the same bipartisan representation as the other major urban centers in Wake and Mecklenburg Counties. This can be accomplished quite easily by placing the western liberal precinct's in the city into the 12th

District. That would ensure bipartisan representation in Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Raleigh, Durham, and Greensboro.

The questions boil down to this: Are people in a given district similar to each other on any given demographic measure? Is the political process free, fair and democratic? The courts have determined that as the maps are currently drawn, the answer to those questions by way of constitutionality is no. Minority groups have been stacked and, thereby, removed from the broader political process. This cannot stand.

Black people are, in fact, people and should be counted in the whole! Our lives, our voices, and our votes matter from Murphy to Manteo. We are part of the fabric of North Carolina and have earned our right to representation through constitutionally consistent districts in every corner of this state. We paid for that right by whip, through blood, by protest, and eventual freedom.

It is never the wrong time to do the right thing!

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