

# Why Black History?

## ME AND TUSKEGEE

*They try to strangle you  
But you stood your ground  
Flyin' those planes  
Round and round*

*The enemy had their plan  
But you fought like a man  
You're black and you say,  
I'm American. I do give a damn!*

Black History is American history. It is rich, extensive, and powerful but it is confined to the shortest month of the year. Each February, teachers go into their rehearsed routine. They bring out the books from a year ago, dust them and stack them on their desks. Since it is February they will teach 'Black History.' Why this has to be a yearly event is not clear since Black History is all around us. We breathe it and live it all the time. The reality is that everyday is Black History day and no month or specific days should be set aside for teaching it. Recently, a number of prominent Blacks have argued that the setting aside of a month for black studies is unnecessary. They say it is un-American.

Morgan Freeman is an actor that has won an Academy Award. He argued in a CBS interview that having a month set aside for Black History is 'ridiculous' and that no other culture has a month allocated for studying it. When Freeman appeared on CNN he said that race should not be considered a factor in the distribution of income in the United States. According to Freeman, 'why would race have anything to do with it? Put your mind to what you want to do and go for that. It's kind of like a religion to me.'

If anyone needs a lesson in hard work and perseverance then he or she should look no further than the life of Ralph Bunche. This scholar and diplomat was born in Detroit in Michigan in 1904. His childhood was traumatic and after his parents died at an early age Bunche went to live with his grandmother, Mrs. Lucy Taylor Johnson.

One of the many les-

sons that his grandmother taught the young man was that he was inferior to one and he should not see race as an impediment to his progress. If he worked hard and be honest doors will open. As the world knows Bunche went on to study at some of the best universities in the world, including Howard University, Harvard and the London School of Economics. His career took a stellar turn when he brokered a peace agreement in the Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948. Bunche was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 and according to the United Nations, 'he championed the principle of equal rights for

There are a number of reasons why this is the case. The Civil Rights Movement is historic. It created changes in the United States that ushered in reforms and its impact was felt across the world. One would think then that students would be acquainted with the landmark decision to desegregate schools in the United States. In a nationally standardized test the opposite was found to be the case.

In 2010 the National Assessment of Educational Progress asked students to identify the following quote on US history exam: 'Separate education facilities are inherently unequal.' What was alarming is that only

movement. He argues that it is in education that 'we shape, almost unconsciously, the shared sense of identity that makes us all citizens of a common republic.'

A survey of the curriculum in a number of States shows the extent to which black studies are promoted. In 2012 only 19 States were required to teach lessons on Dr. Martin Luther King while 12 States were mandated to teach about the contributions of Rosa Parks. What this means is that in the majority of States African-American history is relegated to a second-class status. The conclusion is that it would be difficult to have a conversation about race or the Black contribution

contributions that Blacks have made to the world of inventions. Many of the appliances that we take for granted are as a result of Blacks burning the midnight oil. They struggled while others slept and often with limited resources.

Whenever you enjoy a bag of potato chips cast your mind to 1853. It was in that year that a diner complained to chef George Crum that the fries were too thick. Crum prepared several batches until the diner was happy with the thinnest of the fries. Potato chips were born! The next time you are trying to cross a busy Manhattan intersection spare a thought for Garrett Morgan. He was granted



Dr. Dhanpaul Narine

join the millionaire club. Dr. Charles Drew was a pioneer in medicine. He set up a blood bank that saved many lives. At a time when there was racial prejudice Dr. Drew found that 'there is absolutely no scientific basis to indicate any difference in human blood from race to race.'

What about the cellular or cell phone? Henry T. Sampson and Jesse Eugene Russell have played major roles to bring the cell phone in our hands and they are both African-Americans. Sampson was one of the first African-American to earn a PhD in nuclear engineering in the US while Russell was honored by the Clinton Administration for his work in cell phones and wireless 4G communication systems.

Frederick M. Jones invented another device that we can't do without and that is the refrigerator. The first African-American woman to hold a doctorate from MIT is Shirley Ann Jackson and she is credited with contributing to the development of touch tone phones, Caller ID and Call Waiting. The next time you hear beautiful music from a guitar you should thank Robert Fleming. He invented it in 1885 and music has never been the same. There are other wonderful inventions by the Black community and students would do well to research them but the point is that Black History is alive and should be taught on a regular basis.

The teaching of Black, as well as the histories of other communities, will show that America has the capacity to absorb, tolerate and treat others with mutual respect.



**The Tuskegee Airmen were a group of African-American military pilots (fighter and bomber) who fought in World War II. They were the first African-American military aviators in the United States Armed Forces.**

2 per cent of the 12,000 students that took the test came up with the correct answer. The correct answer is 'Brown versus Board of Education' and any reference to segregation or schools or Thurgood Marshall would have sufficed. However, 73 per cent of students skipped the question.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, 'The American School system is inexcusably treating the civil rights movement, essentially, as if it never happened, part of a collective, general amnesia about African-American history as a whole. And we cannot allow this to continue.' Henry Louis Gates is of the view that schools have to do more to educate all Americans about the importance of the civil rights

to society if such studies are not part of the school system.

There is also a national lack of understanding of American history. The Intercollegiate Institute found that in a test on American history, politics and the Constitution only 21 percent of Americans knew that the expression 'government of the people, by the people and for the people' came from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. But what was most revealing was that the study found "nearly one third of our elected officials did not know that 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' are the inalienable rights referred to in the Declaration of Independence."

These are compelling reasons then for a national curriculum on Black History. One of the areas that should be part of this study is the wonderful

the first traffic signal and it was patented in 1923, a device that was sold to the General Electric Company. Morgan also developed the gas mask.

Then there is Lewis Latimer. He was a member of Thomas Edison's laboratory and it was Latimer that invented the carbon filament for the light bulb and the threaded socket for the bulbs. These were done in 1882. George Washington Carver is one of the most famous inventors in America. He revolutionized the South with a variety of crops that included peanuts, sweet potatoes, pecans and soybeans. This former slave taught at Tuskegee for over fifty years.

Madam C.J. Walker developed a number of beauty products such as Glossine that softened the hair and she was perhaps the first Black to

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of THE WEST INDIAN.