

PUBLICATION

Diversity Matters: Note from the Editor - Black History Month

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In 1976, as part of the United States Bicentennial celebrations, the informal expansion of what had been Negro History Week to Black History Month was officially recognized by the United States. President Gerald Ford urged Americans to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history." There continues, however, to be a debate about whether Black History Month remains useful and fair, given that it dedicates one full month to the history of a single race, and that black history is included in American history.

Which side of the debate you land on likely will be a result of your personal perspectives and opinions, developed from your unique experiences and propensities. As Editor of the Firm's Diversity Newsletter, I have been given the opportunity to express my opinion and perspectives in this Note, but I remind everyone that such should not be attributed to the Firm.

As we just concluded Black History Month, my own personal black history can be revealing of at least some of my perspectives. I was born in Ohio, spent my childhood in Ft. Lauderdale and spent my adolescence and teenage years in Nashville. My father was a 1955 Michigan Law School graduate, whose more than 50-year legal career in Nashville included representing the underprivileged, from Tennessee State University students who were protesting exclusion from local restaurants to documented and undocumented workers who were seeking their share of justice before courts sitting in Nashville. Before her untimely death in 1973, my mother, in addition to her nurse anesthetist profession, was a Broward County Republican Committeewoman and vice-chair of the Florida Women's Political Caucus for a time, serving when Janet Reno was chair.

Even though the history of blacks in America technically may be a part of American history, my history books and lessons decades ago during grade school in Ft. Lauderdale and middle and high school in Nashville were devoid of any substantive lecture involving blacks, including details about slavery or the accomplishments of black people. My husband, Mark A. Baugh, who is a shareholder in the Firm, grew up in Kingston, Jamaica, and his history curriculums included details of important people and events in the history of the communities throughout the world that are descended from the historic movement of peoples from Africa. I have learned a lot of my black history from him.

A focus on black history assigns value to the accomplishments of black people, and to the people themselves. It also serves to educate everyone, including blacks like me, about details involving important black people in America. Each year during Black History Month, I always am surprised at what I learn. For example, as a high-schooler, from the autobiography of Malcolm X and news reports, I developed the impression that Muhammad Ali became a follower of Malcolm X, who allegedly stood for violence. As part of the Firm's Black History Month programming this year, on February 25, 2014, I attended a pre-screening of "The Trials of Muhammad Ali" held in our Nashville office. This program revealed an intellect by Ali and Malcolm X that was not evident in news reports, that their conversion to Islam helped them develop a majority perspective to overcome the oppressive outlook and stature of American blacks.

For these reasons, I believe it remains useful and fair to dedicate one month in each year to study and celebrate people who have contributed to our society.

