

Point of View

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CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

"ROOTS" — AN ODE TO ALEX HALEY

By Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

African American History Month 1992 witnessed the passing of a great writer and historian. Alex Haley's contributions to African and American history were remarkable and the impact of his writings and research will have a long lasting imprint on the history of the United States.

Haley was born in Ithaca, New York in 1921 and was reared in the southern town of Henning, Tennessee. As the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Roots: The Saga of an American Family," Alex Haley won the admiration of millions of persons throughout the world.

This bold African American writer, with the stroke of his pen, was able to shatter the false stereotype view about the so-called impossibility of tracing African American genealogies back to Africa.

In fact, "Roots" was so successful that the book and television dramatization helped to inspire the establishment of thousands of community genealogical societies and family reunion clubs among African Americans. "Roots" also made a significant contribution to reminding all persons about the hideous and brutal nature of the American and European slave

trade.

Although there were some who argued that "Roots" romanticized the awful pain and misery of slavery in the United States, we believe that Alex Haley should be given credit, praise and respect for getting as much of the slave reality as he did on prime time television for the entire nation to see. It has been reported that more than 130 million viewers tuned in to watch the ABC television broadcast of "Roots" back in 1977.

Even before the publication of "Roots," Haley had made history with the publication of "The Autobiography of Malcolm

X," which also became a best seller. With the renewed interest in the life and struggle of Malcolm X, we are thankful that Haley was able to help document the evolution of Malcolm into an international leader.

Dr. Dorothy Height described Alex Haley as "a modern prophet." We agree. A prophet does more than foretell the future.

Haley, in the prophetic tradition of the African American liberation movement spoke and wrote about history by stressing its importance for the present. When millions of persons read and watched "Roots," a better

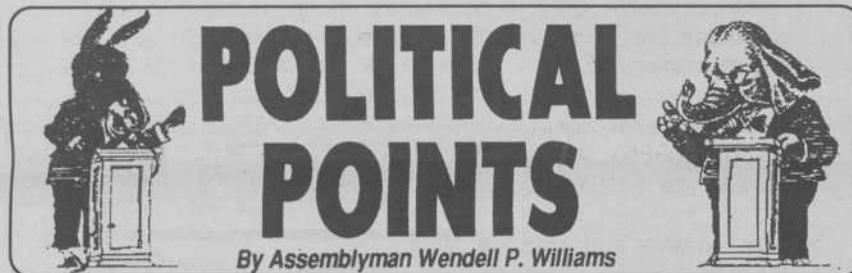
national consciousness emerged concerning the urgency of doing more in the present to challenge the lingering vestiges of slavery, segregation and all forms of racial injustice.

Just about a month before Haley's death, national cable television networks rebroadcast "Roots" to millions of other viewers. One way to pay tribute to the legacy of Alex Haley is to continue his work of researching the "truth" of the magnitude and details of the trade and slavery of African people.

As the nation observes the 500th anniversary of Columbus

discovering "that he was lost," it would be a fitting ode to Alex Haley for a national inquiry into the truth of 500 years of exploitation of the peoples of Africa, North and South America, and of the Caribbean.

Alex Haley was 70 years old and died from a heart attack while preparing to lecture in Seattle, Washington. Haley enjoyed his work and took serious his labor of historical research. We thank God for the life and gifts of Alex Haley. We all understand better, due to the labor of Haley, the common roots of all humanity.



By Assemblyman Wendell P. Williams

"WHAT HAPPENS NOW?"

In February, we officially celebrated African-American History Month, clearly one of the busiest times of the year for our community; as many of us enjoy activities ranging from exhibits to speeches to entertainment events.

But the question is, now that the month is winding down, what happens during the other 11 months of the year? Do we continue to explore, recognize and relish our roots? Or do we kind of forget about it until the next February rolls around?

African-American History of course should be celebrated 24-7 and 365 days a year. It should impact the way we think, the way we communicate and the way we live. It should inspire us and unite us. It should have a permanent place in our hearts, minds and souls.

Because of the efforts of Dr. Carter G. Woodson, African-American History Month is a reality. In 1926 he launched the observance the second week of February to coincide

with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Woodson founded this observance because he knew that far too many African-Americans continued to carry the deep emotional scars and psychological chains of their brutal slavery experience. He also knew that racist elements in white academia were determined to perpetuate myths and outright lies about Africans. However, Woodson was quick to point out, that African-American History is a lot more than the accumulation of injustices and the struggles against them. It is the story of individual and group achievements that have helped to make America what it is today.

So as this month slowly slips away as a time for pride as we reflect on how far we've come and how much we have achieved in a hostile environment, more importantly it is a time for renewed commitment, because coming far and achieving much, are just not enough.

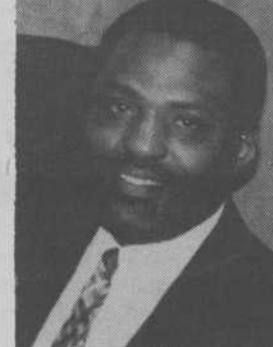
Celebrating African-American History should not be about

having young people perform in talent shows or dance contests. Instead teach them that African children are creative thinkers and that striving for excellence is the best way to celebrate their heritage.

Building their brain power is the best tribute to Dr. Woodson and their ancestors. Tell them how George Bell who in 1807 built the first public school for African-American children in Washington D.C. assisted by Nicholas Franklin and Moses Liverpool. None of these men could read or write. Makeover, if our youth really want to show people how "Black and Proud" and Def they are, then show how much knowledge they can attain, that's real Black Power.

The purpose of education is not limited to the development of mental prowess. True education should cultivate every aspect of an individual's life. Unless the education one receives develops the mind, body, and spirit, it should only be considered formal training.

The fact of the matter is, far



Assemblyman
Wendell P. Williams

too many of us hide behind "Black History Month" by eating soul food and singing like slaves; when instead the focus should be on controlling the socioeconomic storm raging in or communities by drawing examples from our continental African heritage.

Being "black" for one short month just won't cut the mustard. While during the rest of the year wishing to be someone other than oneself. Imitating the culture and values of others without understanding your own is also a form of slavery.

The most catastrophic act imposed upon African people was not just slavery and colonization of people, but the colonization of scholarship.

Now that February is almost over, what will we do the remainder of the year? What will we do to assure that not only history be made honest, but what will we do to not only celebrate history, but rather be makers of history?

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

OWED TO MY SISTER...

This is Black History Month; and keeping with the traditions of this month, I would like to pay tribute to those sometimes overlooked; the Sisters. I'm not referring to blood relatives, but to those women that never cease to amaze us with their strength and caring for others.

My story begins when I received a phone call from a woman that said she "heard about me." I'm sure you can imagine the immediate distrust I felt at hearing those words. She began by saying we hadn't met, but she knew I was no longer pursuing my career in real estate, and she wanted to know why. She obviously knew a lot for someone I had never met, but I responded anyway.

After explaining how aggravated, frustrated, and just plain tired I was, she asked if I would be interested in working with her. She was in need of a capable, competent assistant, and wanted to talk to me.

During the course of our conversation on the phone I asked her several times, "Who told you about me?" Her response was always the same, "I'll tell you that when you come in." Still, the question was killing me.

Within minutes of our meeting, and after some casual conversation she said, "I think you can do the job, if you want it, it's yours." I was very surprised, expecting the usual questions about my employment history and experience, and told her so.

Her response was calm, "There aren't that many of us here, and

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