

Celebrating African American Contributions To American History

I am excited and looking forward to a special event entitled, *The Whiting Collection – African American Artifacts*, taking place at CSLO, on Saturday, February 21st, from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Our guest for an intimate discussion will be Jerry Whiting, a Seattleite and art collector of original photographs, posters, legal documents, music, books, magazines and newspapers relating to the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow Laws, and the Black Panther Party.

In 2015, Jerry donated 250 treasured artifacts to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture. All items were hand selected from Whiting's extensive inventory by William S. Pretzer, senior curator from 2009 to 2023. These artifacts will remain on permanent display. And it's important knowing this is only national museum in the U.S. devoted to African American life, history and culture.

When Neomosha Nelson and Christi Johnson approached me with the idea, I thought it would be good exposure for our almost entirely Caucasian Center. There is a general unawareness of African American History. I believe having a safe forum for conversation would be healthy for everyone.

I am hoping the CSLO community and Interfaith community will come away with a greater awareness of the local history and current state of a culture which many of us are only marginally aware of, and steps to support greater DEIB practices within our own sphere of influence.

As you know, I grew up in Portland, OR., attending a Catholic school. I can remember my Mother's upset when a Black family moved into the parish and started attending school. I did not understand how she could feel that way. But it was the first of many personal encounters with

this thing I didn't understand. I've always been aware of racism; always wanted to stop it, shift – something.

Most of my “education” about African American history, about being part of the overall system of oppression, simply by being unaware, unawake to the subtleties of how we unconsciously participate in that, as well as really understanding African American history really came in my later adulthood, at least 15 or so years.

I grew up in the 50's and 60's. I watched the Civil Rights movement on TV, and read about it in newspapers, as well as listening to music. We discussed it in “social studies” in school. I remember being on the debate team and having a debate about the rightness/wrongness of realtors not showing houses to Black people in certain upscale neighborhood in Portland, specifically Lake Oswego.

And I dated a Black girl in my senior year in high school encountering racist comments. Yet we also had at least half a dozen Black kids in my class of 96 students, so there was awareness, tension, learning – all that going on at the same.

And I remember television's first interracial kiss. Kirk kissing Uhura on *Star Trek*, and learned it caused some upset while being pioneering. I also watched Bill Cosby as the first Black actor in a lead role on the *I Spy* TV series.

So, most of my “education” is experience and observation. It didn't really come from one “introduction” but ongoing awareness. Only more recently have I been exposed to a larger picture of the African American history that wasn't taught when I was growing up.

My interest also came from attending ministerial school in a spiritual teaching with a fair number of African American ministers. And recent events prompting deep conversations about racism.

Christi Johnson recalled way back in the day, television commercials and print ads seemed to feature the same African Americans for Black History Month throughout February. “Besides Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Booker T. Washington, I always saw Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Rosa Parks,” she said.

“Now the contributions of African Americans are represented by a wide range of categories including medical & scientific breakthroughs, pioneers & early inventors, technology & electronics, arts & culture, STEM & innovations, resilience & resistance, and historical movements & social justice.”

Watching the 2016 movie, *Hidden Figures* proved a real eye-opener for millions and was a tremendous source of pride. African-American female mathematicians Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson worked NASA in 1961 during the Space Race.

They were known as "human computers," calculating trajectories and being subjected to racial and gender discrimination while helping launch America's first astronauts into space. “In a way I felt cheated; never knowing those important African American accomplishments which happened only 65 years ago,” Christi said.

Neomosha Nelson maintains African American history is an integral part of American history. Intertwined makes separation impossible. A heightened awareness and better understanding of African American history will cause a shift towards more inclusive thinking.

She acknowledges knowing many Caucasians who feel uncomfortable discussing racial issues. “They remain silent hoping to avoid not becoming offensive. Unfortunately, confusion still exist delineating what is offensive or not.”

Neomosha calls herself, “a social engineer.” This highly desirable principle was instilled attending Howard University Law School in Washington D.C. The late Charles Hamilton Houston inspired students, including Thurgood Marshall, to become “social engineers” using the legal system to dismantle segregation and Jim Crow.

Neomosha’s goal is to help others “engage,” seeking to live in a world with more awareness and better humanitarian principles. So, it seems appropriate 2026 marks the 100th anniversary of Dr. Carter G. Woodson establishing *Negro History Week*, now *Black History Month*.

Narda Pierce, a friend of Neomosha for 50 years, and a co-partner of *The Whiting Collection-African American Artifacts*, is concerned about recent efforts suppressing education regarding the full history of our country. “The government that once promoted racial segregation and discrimination now claims presenting the history of efforts to overcome these barriers is “special treatment,” she said adding, “We need to find ways to step in and round out the factual history for ourselves and our community.”

Reverend David points out the teaching of CSLO is based on the idea of oneness – that all is one. Yet, we also all have our conditioning which gets in the way of living this fully. And our work is to clear that conditioning in a relationship to ourselves and each other.

“I am hopeful this event, *The Whiting Collection-African American Artifacts* will help support at least a little of that clearing, through awareness and a better understanding of next steps. And I would like to create an ongoing greater awareness and practice, not just a one time “experience.”

In closing, several years ago, one of our centers in Dallas created four videos about the influence of African American people in the *New Thought Movement* – our traditions. We have those videos on our website.