

Celebrating our own Black history

By Steven McGaritty, executive director

This is not your average, obligatory Black History Month article.

I'm not going to pontificate on Martin Luther King Jr. or share some quote or meme from social media about the importance of diversity.

Black History Month far too often focuses on things that have already happened and names we already know. Those people and events are, of course, important. But to limit our observance in that way disregards too much.

History is something that's happening right around us. Black History Month is an opportunity for all of us to look around at the people who have helped make a difference in our own communities who are still with us, and some who aren't, and acknowledge their important contributions and celebrate them.

Here at Community Legal Aid, we have extraordinarily accomplished attorneys and advocates who deserve all the kudos we can throw on them for the work they've done. We wanted to take this opportunity to celebrate the people whose expertise and insights have made our organization better.

So, in honor of Black History Month this year, we decided to take a step inward and ask ourselves: How can we celebrate the contributions of these amazing people?

And our Amplifying Black Voices Project was born.

All throughout this month, we'll be sharing stories from our own staff, board members, and volunteers -- both past and present. These stories, told from their own perspectives, highlight both the unique and collective experiences these members of our team have had in their lives.

[Their stories demonstrate the real and ongoing struggles of Black people in this country](#), which comes out of a difficult history. We have to acknowledge that history

in order to move forward in any meaningful way.

Their stories also offer the flipside -- that despite all of that, the accomplishments and contributions that Black Americans have made to this country are incalculable. They deserve to be recognized and celebrated.

I want to personally recognize and thank each person who agreed to share their story for this project:

- **Kimberly Adams**, Advocate and Law School Graduate
- **Andrea Burton**, Managing Attorney
- **Ayesha Cotton**, Managing Attorney
- **Dionne Dowdy**, Board President and Executive Director of United Returning Citizens
- **Jonathan Thomas**, Paralegal
- **Cherie Howard**, Volunteer Attorney and former Managing Attorney
- **Ereka Langford**, Office Manager
- **Shatiqua Lyons**, Paralegal
- **Vera McNair**, retired Receptionist
- **L. Mialon Morris**, Volunteer Attorney and former Staff Attorney
- **Marquita Thatcher**, Volunteer Attorney
- **James Toliver**, Former Staff Attorney
- **Alicia Williamson**, Director of Training and Program Services for ODVN and former Paralegal

My hope is that this project serves as a starting point for all of us -- that we here at Legal Aid continue to collect these stories and honor our Black and Brown colleagues. And that you, our readers, find ways in your own circles to create spaces that are safe and respectful. That we all accept the discomfort of sitting with others in their pain, of opening ourselves up to learn something new about ourselves and each other, of engaging in meaningful conversations. What could be more human?

Welcome to [Amplifying Black Voices: A Community Legal Aid Black History Project](#).

This article is part of Legal Aid's ["Big Ideas" series](#).

Last updated on February 02, 2022.

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