

Patrons of Progress

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When historian and academic Carter G. Woodson started what is now Black History Month as a single week called Negro History Week in 1926, he wanted to preserve and document the history of black life, educating people of all cultures about the vast contributions blacks had made throughout American history. Woodson, who was born in Virginia, earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and was founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Associated Publishers and the Negro Bulletin. He chose February for the observance because both Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln were born in the month. Today, the monthlong commemoration serves as a reminder that blacks significantly reshaped our culture while overcoming massive social barriers. It also shows that Americans with great vision continue to triumph. The responses of various Southwest Florida residents regarding black visionaries' impact, shared here today, demonstrates the depth of black history and its profound impact on people of all races and cultures. We asked community activists, a public defender, religious leaders, a longtime statesman and a health-care leader -- all of various creeds and cultures -- to reflect on figures from the past and the present whom they admire. They had this to say.

PAST "Muhammad Ali because he was famous and then became infamous for his resolve. He refused to not go (to Vietnam) on moral grounds, because he didn't believe he should go 10,000 miles away to fight when he didn't have rights in America. He started to shape the whole issue of civil rights; he was ahead of his time."

PRESENT

"Colin Powell is truly a statesman and will shape our global policy. And he has also shaped our concept and strategy of how we fight (wars). He's an average person, but very astute. Not many people are joint chiefs of staff more than once, and he has done that twice and declined a third time. Now he's our secretary of state."

PAST

"There was a great religious sister, Sr. Thea Bowman, who is well-known in Catholic circles and encouraged peace and for people to do their best and to do things for all people. She was a real charismatic leader and was in a wheelchair before she died (as a result of cancer). But she still went to a convention and pledged with leaders to care for all people. She was a bridge between cultures, races and religions. She accepted who she was and whose she was."

PRESENT

"Bishop Wilton Gregory, first black president of the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. I knew him as a young priest in Chicago. He was very well spoken, and I used to tease him and say his star was rising. (I'd note) not only his Christian leadership, but he sees the importance of focusing on the dignity of every person. And he encourages everyone to look upon everyone as a masterpiece for God."

PAST

"I respect and learn more everyday from Madame C.J. Walker (and her achievements). She had to battle with a society that had confined her to doing their laundry, yet she rose to the occasion and became a millionaire, and a premier black person of the century. We only know about her as she relates to her hair products, but she also did a lot for philanthropy, she stood her own ground."

PRESENT

"I believe it will be Oprah Winfrey. She has taken philanthropy to a totally different level. She has used the most significant medium to communicate a basic but profound message: To give, and that we are called to be angels. She thinks outside the box, and she started her own business. If we are to rise to the occasion as African-American people we must take control of our business."

PAST

"At the local level, Louise Rogers Johnson. She was the daughter of a pioneer black family (G.D. and Minnie Rogers) -- activists. She was the first black appointed to the Manatee School Board, re-elected several times. She received the Distinguished Citizen of the Year from the Manatee County Fair Association. She had to leave Manatee County after sixth grade because there were no schools for black children."

PRESENT

"We've got Gladys Branich, county health officer. She has about three degrees, has come from a poor family and (was the) first black in Manatee to serve in this capacity. (But) there are lots of people that are doing great things and doing an excellent job."

PAST

"My hero, teacher and role model of what the real human spirit is supposed to be is my mother (Ruby Sims). I was raised in a color-blind household. That's not to say that adversity never showed itself to me, but I was always able to put the right name to it. People are rude, mean, ignorant, uneducated, disrespectful, selfish, and some are even vile. Their particular journey through life made them that way. "My hero allowed me to see the inner beauty in people -- to see right through that outer covering that stops a lot of people. She most of all helped me to understand that I must treat people the way I want to be treated."

PRESENT

"The group of people making black history now are the black people who are not bigots and don't mind letting other black people know it. There are people out there who understand that prejudice and racism are not exclusive to white people. Never let anyone define who you are by the way they treat you."

PAST

"Fredrick Douglass, because he was an escaped slave, and, as a free man, he became a great speaker, orator and publisher at a very difficult time in history. At that period of time, he did something that was very difficult in a time when blacks were held back."

PRESENT

"Colin Powell. No. 1, he was (chairman of) the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War, a difficult time for our country; and now he's secretary of state during another difficult time for our country. He's hard working and conscientious. He's a hero."

Caption: Mickey Presha, president and chief executive officer of Manatee County Rural Health Services Inc., Bradenton

Bishop John J. Nevins of the Southwest Florida Catholic Diocese, Venice

Cynthia Newell, president and founder of Neighborhood Leadership Initiative, Bradenton

Ed Price, former state senator and early Manatee County champion for civil rights, Bradenton

Sandra Terry, director of the Laurel Civic Association, Laurel

Elliott Metcalfe, public defender of the 12th Judicial Circuit, Sarasota