

# Teaching Black History Beyond Slavery and Black History Month

FEBRUARY 22, 2019

**Wakanda Forever!** If that phrase rings a bell, you are probably among the millions of Americans who have seen the Marvel superhero movie of a lifetime. The debut of the mega blockbuster hit, *The Black Panther*, was on February 16th, 2018. It only took the film 26 days to break records and gross over 1 billion dollars worldwide. The mesmerizing and unbelievably tech savvy fictional country of Wakanda sparked the imagination of millions of kids and adults alike. From it's out of this world stealth mode capabilities allowing it to stay safely hidden in the heart of Africa, to it's larger than life unified tribal system and rituals, Wakanda, along with King T'Challa, brought an undeniable sense of royalty, respect, and unity, unlike anything anyone has ever seen.

## **Fiction or Reality?**

But what if, the core of what Wakanda and the Black Panther stood for wasn't all fictional? Is it possible that African history, which is widely communicated from Western perspectives as primitive and less than, actually began very similarly to the principles and ideologies that were present in the movie, *The Black Panther*?

In mainstream K-12 curriculum across the United States, U.S. History courses usually begin with the introduction of pilgrims, giving way to the establishment of the original thirteen colonies, which then transition to the development of an independent United States of America by way of the American Revolution. Then, there is this awkward and half-hazardous unit on the Civil War, where students around the country are provided with just an overview of the underlying messages that exist within our approach to sprinkling in the African

American experience. Students are left subconsciously memorizing that Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president whose most noteworthy contribution was that he “freed” the slaves.

## **Presenting a Bigger Picture of the African American Experience and History**

And just as quick as you can say “apple pie,” African history and the heritage of an entire group of people is commonly yet mistakenly introduced with “slavery” as its initial point of reference. Names like, Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman are respectfully followed up by the likes of Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson and of course, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Unfortunately, in our school systems, the conversations and discourse of the history of an entire group of people begins with learning about extreme violent conditions, unimaginable oppression and the stripping of millions of people from their homeland.

Is it possible that teaching our students from this narrow point of view may have drastically harmed the psyche of multiple generations of African American children and families? What damage have we done to the spirit of students of color in the United States by emphasizing that “their people” were the property of slave owners, forced to work on plantations, denied all of the inalienable rights that are characterized in the very constitution that governs this land that they call home?

Better yet, by somehow limiting our educational practices and historical ideologies, have we also prevented generations of non-African American students and families from developing a healthy concept of “blackness”?

## **Rich and Noteworthy Contributions**

Routing back to just 65 years ago, our country was in its initial phases of declaring that the concept of separate schools for children of color, mainly for African American children and their white counterparts, was unconstitutional. As the struggle to peacefully and willingly remove racial barriers within education persisted, the dialogue for who Black people or in this specific case, African Americans even were, was being taught from the vantage point of the lowest position a society can offer another group of humans. Limiting the

approach to teaching the entire country about who and what being an African American was all about, denied opportunities for all Americans to learn about the rich and noteworthy attributes of early African American culture.

So to place a band-aid over a broken leg, it became widely acceptable to cram all of the cool stuff about African Americans into not only one month out of the year, but also into the shortest month of the year, which happens to also be widely overshadowed by Valentine's Day. No one will know for sure how Black History Month came about entirely. But as educators and parents in the year 2019, we have an opportunity. When teaching about African American culture and beginning with slavery, we should reconsider why such a sensitive subject became so widely and commonly accepted as the norm in mainstream education in the first place.

### **Teaching the Teachers**

Some may say that although highly qualified to teach pedagogies and best teaching practices, that regardless of race or ethnicity, most teachers in our schools may consider themselves to have a "treat others the way you want to be treated" mentality. Therefore, my argument is not to suggest that teachers, both of color and of non-African American descent, intentionally begin the narrative of an entire group of people with the idea of slavery and oppression. Instead, I suggest that the dialogue centered around Black History and African American culture begins with slavery simply because we educators do not know and were never taught to approach the discourse with any other vantage point. It wouldn't be fair to hold anyone accountable for what they are simply unaware of.

However, it is our duty as the crafters of minds and the point of contact for developing lifelong readers, mathematicians and successful scholars to challenge thought processes and to positively push our society and communities forward.

### **Progress Made, More Strides to Go**

In the end, we all suffer from receiving such a minimal dose of the richness of African history. If Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were alive today, I'd be willing to argue that although the country has made incredible strides in ensuring equal

opportunities in education for American children along with making a conscious effort to improve equity in our education system, that even with all of the improvements we may see...Dr. King would probably still be dreaming of a better tomorrow. Black History Month is OUR History month as an entire people of American citizens. And only through unity as a country will we ever see the strength in numbers. America, Forever.



## **GLEN MOURNING**

4th Grade ELA Teacher at Friendship Public Charter school in Washington, D.C.

Twitter: @Mourningknows

Glen Leroy Mourning was born on March 26th, 1987 in Danbury Connecticut. As the oldest of his mother's five children, Glen was blessed with the opportunity to lead by example where he would become the first of two generations to not only graduate from high school, but to complete a master's degree.

In 2005 Glen earned a Full- Athletic Scholarship to attend the University of Connecticut where he would make the "All Big East Conference Academic Honor roll for two years in a row before graduating and attending Grad School at the University of Bridgeport.

In 2010 Glen finished his master's degree in Elementary Ed. and was named the Student teacher of the year at the University of Bridgeport. Since then, Glen worked alongside of the nationally renowned Educational contributor Dr. Steve Perry, Star of the CNN Special "Black in America II" and the host of TV One's "Save our Sons".

As an elementary reading teacher Glen managed to brilliantly inspire the lives of hundreds of students in his tenure as an educator. With the publication of The Crunchy Life kid's series chapter books, Glen has motivated and encouraged minority youth to fall in love with reading and develop social and emotional skills to improve their lives.

For the past several years, Glen has worked in Washington D.C as a 4th grade ELA teacher and community leader. His greatest accomplishments are not those that have occurred on the playing fields across America but rather with his promise to his family which was to become the motivation for his students that have come from similar circumstances.

*Taken from <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/teaching-black-history-beyond-slavery-and-black-history-month>*