



BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Honoring the Arms
that Lift Us

Southern Stories from
Our Black Staff

Children First
IDRA
— Transforming Education





BLACK HISTORY MONTH

This month, some of IDRA's Black staff members will share their experiences of how family, teachers and community, particularly Black women, have impacted their lives and sent them on a trajectory in working for justice and student opportunity in education.

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The Value of a Culturally-Sustaining Home

*by Terrence Wilson, J.D.
IDRA Regional Policy and Community Engagement Director*

Growing up in the former capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia, I was always distinctly aware of the complex history that defines my home. Stories of resilience and ingenuity intermingle with stories of exploitation and subjugation to build the foundation of the educational system where I was raised. It was a city, like many others, that was dealing with the ramifications of historically segregated and underfunded public schools. I attended a school with far superior resources but with far less diversity than the demographics of my city and then, as now, the debate about history and its current impact was discussed and debated constantly in my educational environment. As I've grown older, I've learned the value of not only the home where we were born but the home that was created for me as a student.

My upbringing in this environment taught me the value of having a culturally-sustaining home. My culturally-sustaining home was comprised of family, friends and teachers who understood struggles of being a Black male student, and that provided me the resources and support for me to thrive. My culturally-sustaining home had parents who were willing to go beyond the curriculum and teach me about the contributions of Black people across history and in every field of contemporary endeavor. My culturally-sustaining home had Black peers with whom I could discuss the challenges of feeling othered and singled out on account of my race. My culturally-sustaining home included educators who could provide spaces where I could exist in my Blackness and feel celebrated. My culturally-sustaining home included school administrators who allowed me to create supportive clubs and experiences for other Black students.

As Black history month moves toward its conclusion, I hope that we all can continue to create culturally-sustaining homes and schools for our Black students; not only out of a sense of solemn respect for the past, but also out of boundless hope for the future.



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Reflections on my Grandparents

by Morgan Craven, J.D.
IDRA National Director of Policy

I feel lucky to have known my four grandparents for a good portion of my life. Three were educators, and the fourth constantly asked my sisters, cousins, and I questions, like “What have you done to help Black people today?” As I reflect on why I believe what I believe and why I do the work I do now, I realize what an impact it had on me to grow up in a family in which both being deeply involved in education and helping Black people were basic assumptions about the way we should live.

My paternal grandmother, Ruth Craven, taught home economics in the now-infamous Loudon County, Virginia school system for much of her career. Whenever I visited her, we could not go anywhere without a former student walking up to say hello and letting her know how much they appreciated her as a teacher. I got to talk to my grandma and get her perspective about the work I do now, especially around school discipline policies. In true grandmother fashion, she thought everything I was doing was right (she also thought suspending little kids is useless and gave me a “What the devil?!” when I told her corporal punishment still happens in schools).

My paternal grandfather, Adam Craven, first began teaching at Page-Jackson High School – a school in West Virginia named after his grandfather, Littleton Lorton Page, who was also an educator and was born enslaved in the 1850s. My grandpa went on to have an incredible career as a teacher, school administrator, counselor and coach.

My maternal grandfather, Alfonso Carlton, sold life insurance. After he died, I began hearing stories about his work to make sure Black families, in particular, had access to resources they could pass on to their children, allowing them to build intergenerational stability that had been intentionally denied to them for generations.

My maternal grandmother, Mildred Carlton, taught second and third grade and was a reading specialist. I have clear memories of her helping me learn to read as a child. She opened magazines and had me circle all the “and,” “but,” and “the” words I could find. I often think how lucky her students were to have a kind and patient teacher who loved them the way she did.

I am so grateful for my grandparents and the way their choices, personalities and beliefs shaped my own. While I love the many famous events, movements and people highlighted during Black History Month, I really love reflecting on the people, like my grandparents, who were well known and loved within their families and communities, and whose work, struggles and talents continue to have impact.



BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Growing Up HBCU For the Culture

*by Dr. Paula Johnson
Senior Education Associate & Director, IDRA EAC-South*

Dear Prairie View, our song to thee we raise
In gratitude, we sing our hymn of praise
For mem'ries dear, for friends and recollections
For lessons learned while here we've lived with thee.

The words of my alma mater ring as true today as the day I graduated in 1993. I was born in San Diego, California, but I was raised on “The Hill.” My college career began at seventeen, 1,600 miles away from my mother and home. Landing at PV made me feel as though I had stepped onto the set of School Daze or landed a guest appearance on A Different World. For the first time on my educational journey, I saw people that could have been related to me everywhere I looked.

I am the product of one Sweetwater Union School District's gifted and talented education programs. During my schooling from second grade through graduation I only encountered one teacher that looked like me. Mr. Foster taught me computer science all four years of high school. Without him, I'm not sure I would have made the journey to Prairie View or decided to continue my studies in computer science. He made sure to teach me all about Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn and Mary Jackson while I learned about Basic and Cobol programming languages. He convinced me that I could do anything I set my mind to, no matter who might try to convince me otherwise.

The Mr. Fosters of this world stand in stark contrast to the teachers in the same space who have good intentions but screw the pooch more times than not. I wish I could forget the day my English teacher asked me to read a passage from Huckleberry Finn that uses the N-word. Once I finished the recitation, she knelt down beside my desk and asked me to share with the class how it made me feel. I had four other Black GT classmates my entire school age life. And we were usually not in the same classes. So, imagine my shock when asked to express my feelings on the subject at hand.

At Prairie View, we learned under legendary Black professors like Dr. Frank T. Hawkins, founder of the Research Association of Minority Professors. As a student in the Benjamin Banneker Honors College, named for the Black astronomer and mathematician, we learned from noted educators in classes that included Modes of Thought, Colloquium, and a History of Mathematics. We discovered that it was the Egyptians that established the base 10 number system. All of our classes taught us about Black excellence, pride, perseverance and culture.

“Prairie View Produces Productive People” is PV's motto, and as a proud Panther, I strive to uphold that responsibility in every facet of my life. My HBCU experience gifted me with a strong sense of identity and prepared me to withstand adversity. Now more than ever, we need our HBCUs to continue the tradition of passing on the rich history of our people. Students and families deserve to know their history and see themselves represented in the world around them. I want my children's education to explore contributions by people of all cultures and identities and leave room for difficult conversations about the same. We owe it to them to tell the truth about our past so they are informed for the future.



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You Can't Erase Herstory

Reflections on Rubye Holliman's Legacy

*by Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D.
IDRA Chief Legal Analyst*

My Great Aunt Darcy passed away from COVID-19 last year. She was the matriarch of our family, the keeper of our history, the source of our deepest and most steadfast values. She was a civil rights activist and worked on the front lines of advocating for equal and integrated education in her community. A trailblazer, she was the first Black female member of her local school board. She served lovingly and faithfully as a minister's wife. Her home – an educator's home filled to the brim with books and knick knacks in every nook and cranny – was always open to our ragamuffin family, and the best memories of my youth were spent discovering her treasures.

She brought together our family, which had been decimated by a racist criminal justice system, a broken and inaccessible healthcare system, and crushing economic inequality. Though our family tree sprawled and twisted and grew in unexpected and unconventional ways, she loved and cherished every one of us and taught us to be proud of our heritage. Regardless of our status as a grandchild, great-niece or nephew, step-child, ex-step-child or (official or unofficial) foster child, she committed to knowing and celebrating each of our accomplishments and always made sure we knew we had a place in her home and heart.

Her legacy serves as a constant reminder of the tremendous progress we have made as a nation and as a society, as well as a clarion call that we can and must do more. She would have zero tolerance for efforts to censor or minimize in any way her history – our history. Her stories of fighting, of losing, and of occasionally winning – of getting up again and again in the face of explicit and implicit bias and discrimination – remind me that we must remain committed to the long game – and believe in the long arc bending toward Justice. I will not forget the lessons she taught me. And I will honor her and her legacy every day by working to fulfill her ideals of equal educational opportunity.



BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Doing the Work of Love A Letter to the Community who Raised Me

*by Thomas Marshall III (he/him/his)
IDRA Policy Communications Strategist*

Growing up Black in the South is my story and my song. Being involved in the policymaking space in Texas and the broader U.S. South has given me a unique lens into how I view education, and I constantly see myself within this work. I see a little Black boy who doesn't know it yet, but he is the product of Title I public schools and will grow up to advocate for students just like himself.

My educational journey began at Pine Grove Elementary school in Columbia, South Carolina, a small but growing city. My first teacher in kindergarten was Ms. Wilson. She was a Black woman who taught me more than just identifying months on a calendar or time on a clock. She instilled in me the value of hard work and service that I take with me today.

I come from a family of educators. Aunts, cousins and countless Black women within my family have taught in classrooms across the South. Though never living out her dreams of being a teacher, my mother taught me such valuable lessons about respect, faith and kindness.

When I think of the current attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion within our schools, I can't help but remember my first Black male teacher Mr. Gause showing us a documentary on Emmet Till in seventh-grade history class. It was the first time I heard about this horrific tragedy, yet his boldness in introducing this topic led me to think we must listen to these stories.

We cannot erase our history. We owe it to our brothers and sisters who stood before us to tell these stories authentically and equip the next Black generation with the truth. Our power comes from the truth we learn from our ancestors. The lessons that I have learned have allowed me to "do the work of love" for Black students, and I am the person I am today because of a generation of Black teachers, family members and the community who raised me.





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