Professors bust myths about Black History Month

Lyndsy Bradley
lyndsy.bradley@gmail.com

This is the third installment of a four-part series celebrating Black History Month.

Black History Month is an opportunity to recognize, to celebrate and to pay homage to the history of minorities largely ignored in the past.

At the dawn of the 20th century, it was common to presume black people had little history besides the suppression of slavery, but prominent journalist and historian Carter G. Woodson fought to enlighten the masses. Woodson received his doctorate in history at Harvard University — he was only the second black person to do so, explained D’Weston Haywood, Ph.D., assistant history professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

“When he tried to publish books about black history, a lot of white historians said, “This isn’t history. This history doesn’t matter,” said Haywood. “So, Carter G. Woodson, along with many other black historians who had doctorates at the time, engaged in a very political project of trying to get this history accepted and taught.” He created Negro History Week to say, ‘Well, it does, so we’re going to take a week to focus on this’.”

Haywood, who teaches a black-history survey class spanning from ancient times in Africa — where civilization began — to present day, does some myth busting of his own. He said a common misconception is that Black History Month was set in the month with the fewest days.

“It was set in February not because it was started in the 1920s,” said Haywood. “It was in the shortest month because he wanted to honor Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, both of whose birthdays are in the month of February.”

What it has evolved into now is a month that puts black history on the front line and helps other minority groups, like Latinos and women, do the same. It also developed an organization called The Association for the Study of African American Life in History and a bulletin called the “Journal of Black History.”

UL Lafayette history professor D’Weston Haywood, Ph.D., said during lectures in his black-history survey class that he likes to bust common myths and engage his students in debates.

“It’s gotten criticism and this history differently. When we think about black history, we tend to — at least in this country, and it makes sense because it’s the shortest month,” said Haywood. “I firmly believe that it is still important and it should be a month. We’re American — think of it as just black American history,” said Davis-McElligatt.

Black history sometimes focuses on the narrative of slavery to freedom only in the U.S., she said, but there is a rich history of Africans who aren’t a part of that legacy.

“There are tons of black people, not just (U.S. President Barack) Obama, who have ancestors or parents who are immigrants, and I think we ought to highlight issues of ongoing injustice, not only for black folk, but anybody who is facing racial injustice period.”

UL Lafayette assistant professor of ethnic studies Joanna Davis-McElligatt, Ph.D., said people in the U.S. see black