

## From the Ending Racism Task Force

### **Black History Is American History**

By Sylvia Metzler

February is Black History Month. The “Black Lives Matter” sign in Leader Hugh’s office window will be replaced by a sign that reads “Black History Is American History.” On March 1, our BLM sign will resume its place.

But if Black history is American history, then why do we only observe it one month a year? (If women’s history is American history—same question.)

Before I share some of my research about Black History Month, I want to share a little background about our BLM sign. We put it up in 2016 as an expression of our ongoing commitment to racial justice. The sign acknowledges the continued existence of white supremacy, which marginalizes communities of Black and brown people. “When we at the Ethical Society say Black Lives Matter, we have done more than just display a banner,” Hugh wrote in a **statement** about the Society’s racial justice work. He goes on to list 17 actions we have taken to help our nation transform into a racially just society.

The Black Lives Matter movement goes back a decade. Black History Month is much older. I just learned that the first effort to recognize Black history was in 1926, when Carter G. Woodson, a historian who studied the history of the African diaspora, created Negro History Week to celebrate the achievements of

people largely ignored by the white historical establishment. Woodson chose the second week of February, which included the birthdays of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass.

Black History Month was conceived by Black educators and the Black United Students organization at Kent State University. The first celebration took place in 1970. In 1976, Black History Month was officially recognized to pay tribute to the generations of African Americans who struggled with adversity to achieve full citizenship.

In a blog post, Terri E. Givens, author of the book *Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Racial Divides*, listed eight ways to honor Black History Month:

1. Support Black-owned businesses.
2. Learn about noteworthy **Black figures** and their contributions.
3. Donate to charities that support anti-racism efforts, equity, and equality. (Among those she cited: the **Black Youth Project** and **Amistad Law Project**.)
4. Purchase, read, and share books by Black authors. Fight book banning in public and school libraries.
5. Support and learn about Black women.
6. Listen to or read *The New York Times*' "**The 1619 Project**."
7. Participate in relevant online events, such as those offered by the National Museum of African American History and Culture.
8. Attend events or view content related to Black history.  
(Givens mentioned Questlove's new Disney+ animated series, *Rise Up, Sing Out*.)

Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by on-duty police officers, there has been a swelling of interest in learning more about Black history throughout the United States. But just as has occurred in the past when we make progress against racism, a backlash occurred. Now is not the time to limit our pursuit of knowledge to one month, let alone ban books like *Beloved* and *The 1619 Project*!

So, the members of the Ending Racism Task Force at the Philadelphia Ethical Society are pledging to observe Black History Month and to be faithful to the goals of our Mission Statement, which include “understanding and admitting to white privilege and ending racism, be it individual, group, and/or systemic, by motivating ourselves and our congregation to unlearn our personal biases and work to undo institutional racism throughout society.”

We will do this in February and throughout the year. Because Black history *is* American history.

*Sylvia Metzler is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force of the Philadelphia Ethical Society.*

Links

**Statement:** <https://phillyethics.org/wpsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2021-More-Than-a-Banner.pdf>

**Black figures:** BLACKPAST.ORG

**Black Youth Project:** <http://blackyouthproject.com/>

**Amistad Law Project:** <https://amistadlaw.org/>

**1619 Project:**

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>