

African Heritage Month: Five voices, one celebration

BY SHELLEY ROBINSON

Five girls — Terri, Natasha, Grace, Natalie and Marissa — are sitting around the Black Student Advising Centre. They describe themselves as all different shades, and from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds.

But African Heritage Month is supposed to represent all of them.

Judging from the room's swirling conversation, one month is just the tip of the iceberg.

African Heritage Month is about recognizing the culture and the contributions people of African descent have made, and continue to make, every day. And it's all crammed into the shortest month of the year.

Back in the room, there's talk about almost everything, but no one disagrees that the month is important. The only question is if it's enough.

Terri thinks the month is a

up during the other 11 months of the year.

"It's important for everyone to see the good things that black people are doing...that people see

"You don't see black people donning kilts, doing highland dancing. And that's because we respect those cultures"

we're not just criminals and thugs like the media portrays," she says. "It shows you there's more to us than a black face."

Grace knows recognizing the contributions of people of African descent shouldn't need a special month, but it's a start.

"It should be all year round, but let's be honest and realistic — it's not and it hasn't been, so this is the attempt to make it at least somewhat out there."

But just what history and heritage should be out there is another tricky question.

"Black history affects everybody. Slavery might have been abolished, but those people

who owned slaves, however long ago, had children. And those children had children — and so ideas have still been passed down and those ideas are what needs to be abolished. Fine, slavery's been abolished, but connotations from slavery are still there."

Marissa says she is sick of slavery being the only part of African history most people know anything about.

"Every time somebody mentions something in a history book about blacks, it's about slavery. We should acknowledge the history that was there before, and after, and not concentrate on slavery."

Slavery's not here anymore. The injustice of it lingers, but it's not here anymore. It doesn't define us, and we shouldn't let other people define us by it.

"There's so many other wonderful things that have been accomplished and done in the black community worldwide."

The month's renaming — from Black History Month to African Heritage Month — also sparks a discussion of what it means to be black, African, or both.

"There's a stereotype that all blacks are the same," Grace says. "Not everyone from Africa is black and not everyone who's black is from Africa."

Marissa agrees. "There's [black people] in Africa, there's [black people] in Europe, there's black people in Canada — all over North America and South America — we come from everywhere, so how is it possible that black people can all be the same if we come from all over the world?"

But Natasha says labels are irrelevant.

"Not everybody is always going to be pleased with whatever it's called. I think that's very trivial — whether it's African Heritage Month or Black History Month or whatever, the point is that we celebrate our culture. I don't even think the name is important, it's just something so that people recognize that people of colour, black people, African people, whatever — we're celebrating our diversity and heritage."

Cecil Wright is co-chair of the Black History Month Association, as well as head coach of the Dalhousie men's baseball team. He says the month's name change was meant to acknowledge the common roots of all blacks, and to be more inclusive.

"People of African descent have been called many things throughout the years — starting with the 'n-word', to coloured, to black. [African Heritage Month] is associated with the motherland. We're trying to show respect for what our ancestors had to endure."

By any name, the idea of a month celebrating black culture and achievements grew out of

Negro History Week. It was started in 1926 by Carter Woodson, a black historian, educator and publisher from Virginia. Intended mostly for schools, the week was meant to

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other cultures, but I have run into white people who resent it because they say 'why is there no White History Month?'" Marissa says.

But they all hold out hope that the type of education and information provided by the events during the month will help.

Because African Heritage Month is also about making it normal and okay to be black — at a time when people still ask Marissa if



the black freedom struggle. February was chosen because the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln, who signed the Emancipation Proclamation, and Frederick Douglas, an emancipator and orator, fell within the month.

Negro History Week became known as Black History Week, and in 1976 the entire month of February became known as Black History Month. In 1995 the Canadian House of Commons unanimously passed a motion designating every

her braided hair "grows that way", or a stranger feels comfortable walking up to Natalie and asking if her eyes and hair are "really that colour".

But Natasha warns about going too far in trying to embrace other cultures.

"When you see [black people] having events, and we're discussing our culture, and our history and our heritage — you don't have to actively be a part of it and dance the way we do, and dress the way we do, and talk the way you think we talk. Just understand 'okay, they have their own culture and I should respect that.'

"You don't see black people donning kilts, doing highland dancing. And that's because we respect those cultures. But we don't have to be a part of them in order to do that," Natasha says.

"You have your own culture. You don't have to change in order to respect mine."

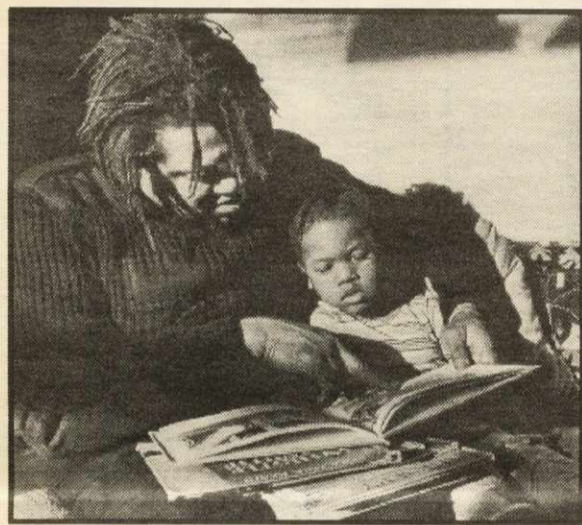
Marissa agrees. "No one's culture should be a fad."

Ultimately though, African Heritage Month is both a reminder of inequality, and a hope to address that inequality.

"It reminds me how sad it is that we're not reflected 365 days of the year," Marissa says.

But Terri remains positive.

"If [African Heritage Month] can touch just one mind to look at us not as our colour, and not as just a face — as people — then it's done what we set out to do."



good time for the black community to get together and focus on its common culture, heritage and history. But Natasha says the month is also about righting the misconceptions built

up during the other 11 months of the year.

"Black history affects everybody. Slavery might have been abolished, but those people

In the tradition of Dalhousie's earliest benefactor, George Munro we are pleased to announce the

Frederick S. Fountain Scholarship Fund

for undergraduate students.

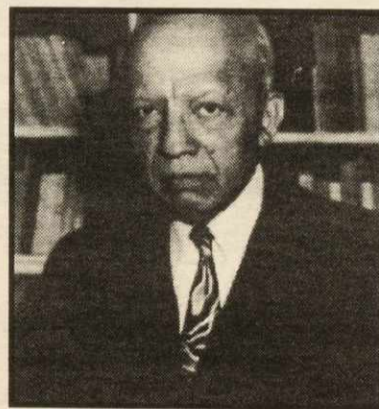
The new scholarships are valued at \$6000 and will be available to students in Arts and Science, who are residents of the Atlantic Provinces. Applicants must demonstrate all around distinction, and a high level of achievement in both academic and extra curricular activities, as judged by the Undergraduate Scholarship Committee.

Dalhousie alumnus Frederick Fountain earned his law degree in 1974. He is the Chief Executive of the Great Eastern Corporation Limited and is a

lawyer with Franklin Burke. In addition to many community activities, he serves on Dalhousie's Board of Governors, and is Chair of the Board for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.



This gift to the Capital Ideas Campaign continues a family tradition begun 40 years ago by his grandfather, Fred C. Manning, whose estate supports the F.C. Manning Chair in Economics and Business at Dalhousie.



Carter Woodson, the founder of what is now African Heritage Month.

February as Black History Month.

Wright says the month is exhilarating, exhausting, tight for space, and sometimes a bit of a cop out.

"I believe it's so terribly important it shouldn't be just one month."

"We pick a special time of the year and place a halo around it. It's like 'phew, I'm glad we don't have to worry about that anymore,'" he says. "We've got 28 days to throw all this stuff together. There's great demand, but there's so much stuff we can't do it all in a month."

But if African heritage is so important for everyone, not just the black community, how is the month accepted?

"I think Black History Month is well received by people of