

To the Honorable District 1 Commissioner James E. Ball, Honorable District 2 Commissioner Joe Davis III, Honorable District 3 Commissioner Billie Jo Underwood, Honorable District 4 Commissioner Charles E. Gruber, Commission Administrative Staff and Appointed Boards, and all gathered today be it physically or virtually, "Good Morning."

I am thankful to stand before you on this second day of February, by way of Grace and Mercy, to bestow upon you an excerpt of an incredible journey in the ledger of the importance, value, and treasure of celebrating Black History Month. "Thank you" Archives Director Mrs. Felisha Anderson for extending the invitation to do so.

I am certain that many of you are aware of Dr. Carter G. Woodson's initiative, originally known as "Negro History Week," thus nationally deemed, in February, by former President Gerald Ford in 1976 as "Black History Month." Although February is the shortest of months, her voice rings of liberty and life for a people whose journey was a path of trials and triumphs from the onset of their first steps upon a floating state of despair, through tumultuous winds and storms of survival of the Atlantic, onto a land unknown to their native being and tongue, and into an institution of destitution, but they trod the path of hope. They heralded the song of humanity that proclaims unto this day, "And Still I Rise." However, in 2021, the question, for some, is the essence of the subject in these chambers, "Why is it important that we celebrate Black History Month?"

Upon receiving the topic of discussion for this moment, I channeled some former colleagues' minds of diversity concerning this idea. One that particularly intrigued my intellect commented in this manner. "Black History, let alone Black History Month, is important because failure to understand another person's struggles and celebrate their successes only perpetuates division. You can't effectively love your neighbor if you don't understand your neighbor's plight." Another colleague asserted these words, "Representation matters. Children form their hopes, dreams, plans, and goals from the world they see around them. They garner confidence and form a sense of identity from experience and exposure." Hence, to celebrate Black History Month is to live the plot of a people whose thread is intricately woven into the American quilt.

While the patterned pieces may differ, the outcome is wondrous, for the basting, while it may be harsh, yet delicate to the heart of America, captures every essence of the American story. Our job is to “hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.”

For me, Black History Month's celebration is the ultimate reminder that someone somewhere dared to dream, dared to envision, dared to hope. I wear the lens of a varied perspective often misrepresented but prescribed to assert a perspective of admiration. I close my eyes, and I sink into the abyss of the voyages of the Middle Passage. I pause to notice the hundreds of thousands of cargos locked in anguish, longing for sanctity and sanity and lamenting over a life never to behold again. Yet, in the midst of this canvas, I see hands. I see hands that withheld the treasures of the impossible. These beautiful but battered vessels held an uncanny hope unimaginable at that moment but birthing its way through a four-hundred-year canal of change. These hands would turn the pages of time through descendants whose creativity, innovation, and boldness would rock the foundation of the halls of humanity. These hands would remember the "sixty million and more" lost to the waves of the Atlantic, the ones whose original names were lost, whose native tongues were null, and whose natural climate would shift their adaptation to survive. These hands that I see visualized a once, forsaken brotherhood but ushered, into the cathedral of justice, the assembly of other hands from diverse hues and resounded the epitome of the American hymn, “This land was made for you and me.” These gracious hands, these mighty hands, these wondrous hands rocked the cradle of millions yet unseen and sang the lullaby of “Don’t give up. Don’t quit, for your best is yet to come.”

I embrace these hands, and I caress them with care. I seal their grasp with my whole heart because, as I lift my head, I see myself in their eyes. I see my colleagues in their eyes. I see an America whose stories of her children, be it a genre of poetry, prose, or plays, rests upon the epilogue of “Lift every voice and sing til earth and heaven ring. Ring with the harmonies of liberty. Let our rejoicing rise High as the listening skies. Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.” That harmony must have clarity, character, and compassion. That harmony

recognizes every component of the chord of the American truth. That harmony celebrates when others celebrate, rejoices when others rejoice, and even mourns when others mourn. Dr. Woodson sought to provide America with a prescription of inclusivity she desperately needed to ensure that someone would read the story scripted by hands who sheltered the “facing of the rising sun of a new day begun; let you, me, us march on til victory is won.” To celebrate Black History Month is to not only commemorate the trials and triumphs of Black Americans, but it is to also journey through the revolving door of acceptance, aspiration, and accountability of the words of America’s forefathers, “We the People,” hence joining brothers and sisters of this land in a picnic on the lawn of integrity, reconciling on that beautiful quilt and acknowledging the hands that helped to create it. I am a product of those hands, and I am proud to be Black, and I am proud to be an American for our best is yet to come.