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How African American History Can Empower Everyone! The Bronx Experience

Mark Naison

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One of the most destructive myths being propagated by those seeking to limit the teaching of African American History in public schools to a few carefully sanitized subjects is that a full exploration of that subject will "make white students feel guilty." The underlying assumption is that highlighting Black voices will smother White ones.

As someone who has studied and taught African American History for over 50 years, that has been directly contrary to my experience. The white students who have taken my courses have not only immersed themselves in black history and culture in ways they had not done previously, it has inspired to explore their own history and family background more intensively.

If you do not believe me, you need to examine the evolution of the great oral history projects we have been doing at Fordham. In the spring of 2003, at the urging of many community leaders, as well as the archivist for the Bronx County Historical Society, we started the Bronx African American History Project which over time became one of the largest community based oral history projects in the nation. In conducting these interviews, we very quickly realized that because of the multicultural character of Bronx neighborhoods, we had to interview some white and Latino people, along with Black people from the Caribbean and Africa as well as the American South.

But something else happened as well. The interviews we did were so powerful and so transformative, not only for the people being interviewed, but for those doing the interviewing, that people at Fordham decided to use this model to explore the experience of other groups using the same methodology. Six years ago, Professor's Kathleen LaPenta and Jackie Reich started a Bronx Italian American History Initiative, which has been phenomenally successful, and this year, faculty and students at Fordham have started Bronx Irish Oral History Project and a Bronx Jewish History Project, both of which are attracting tremendous community support.

None of these projects would have been created without the example of an African American History Project, and technical assistance from the faculty and students running the BAAHP.

The lesson here is that when you unleash Black voices, everyone's voice becomes louder! Throughout US History, African Americans have been the most powerful force pushing for true democracy in this country. Sanitizing or erasing African American History moves us on the path towards authoritarianism and dictatorship.