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Black history month in America's palest state

February's cross-cultural celebration will include lectures, film; variety of groups will participate

By Rhiannon Sawtelle

In a state that recently took the title of the "whitest state" in America away from Vermont, Maine is kicking off its celebration of Black History Month. Nationwide, February has been dedicated to celebrating the history of blacks in the U.S. since the mid '70s.

The Black Student Union (BSU), backed by the African, Latino, Asian and Native American (ALANA) center, is making sure that the celebration continues throughout the month. Events kicked off early this month with a karaoke night at the Bear's Den in the Memorial Union.

Five other events are planned throughout February including two lectures, a panel, a film and a dinner. All events are hosted by the BSU, but other groups are working hard to be a part of the celebration.

"We try to support each other," Karina Fernandez, graduate assistant of Multicultural Programs, commented of the many groups associated with ALANA.

ALANA houses seven multicultural student groups in Hannibal Hamlin Hall. The Peace Studies department, Maine Peace Action Committee and Women in the Curriculum all contribute to the month's events.

"I think Black History Month is extremely important for all races because it gives UMaine a chance to learn about other races and traditions that they might not otherwise have a chance to study," BSU President Laila Sholtz-Ames said.

The black population is one percent of Maine's population according to the U.S. Census-Bureau.

"One of our objectives is to recruit people to join the BSU. We really welcome everyone. In addition, our goal is to destroy a lot of negative stereotypes that

are often linked to African-Americans and I think we do a good job in presenting a positive view of African-Americans," Sholtz-Ames said. The group is open to students of all races.

"There is a misconception we are only open to students of color," Fernandez said of the ALANA center.

Children in the U.S. are taught throughout school about Black History Month and the civil rights movement. "A lot of times I believe students think they don't have a reason to learn about Black History Month, but the truth is that everyone can benefit from this," Sholtz-Ames said.

With this in mind, ALANA and the BSU are updating this teaching for a modern culture. "We collaborate with many offices to reach different audiences," Fernandez said.

One event planned for Feb. 21 is a film titled "Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes". As part of the Peace and Justice Film Series, the documentary addresses issues such as homophobia, violence, sexism and masculinity in hip-hop today.

Fernandez noted this was a way of reaching out to modern culture and holding the interest in learning about blacks and their culture. "It [the film] really has a hold on a new generation," Fernandez said.

"People are pretty open to listening to other cultures. The key is to reach people in different ways," she added.

"Our goal is to educate the public and university about African-American events and culture. Our organization is open to all races as we want to provide a welcome environment for all students," Sholtz-Ames said.

More information about ALANA and BSU can be found at <http://www.umaine.edu/multicultural/default.asp>.