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• Black History Month

Students divided in perceptions of month

By Christine Thurston
Staff Writer

Although, the concept behind Black History Month is one of enlightenment, the occasion seems to have been met with ignorance and ambivalence by some students at the University of Maine.

"The purpose of Black History Month is to inform the general public of the accomplishments of blacks in history," said Ricardo Tubbs, president of the African-American Student Association. "We want to eradicate the misconception that blacks aren't intelligent."

Tubbs said that not many people realize that a black performed the first open-heart surgery and invented the plasma transplant, gas mask and stoplight. They would generally think that a white person did these things.

"White Americans have for-

gotten that a large part of their history is the black man," said Tubbs. "There is more to our history than just slaves, like doctors, nurses and being in the front lines."

There are only 64 African-Americans on this campus of 11,000, and many agree that learning more about black history is a benefit to all.

"Many people may think that the activities are for African-Americans or minorities, but they're for everyone's knowledge, appreciation and understanding," said Dwight Rideout, dean of Student Services. "The AASA deserves a lot of credit for the responsibility it has taken in putting on the series of programs."

Rideout said the activities have the greatest impact in a single month because it raises our consciousness for the rest of the year.

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"This is a great opportunity for the African-American students to get together at events that they may not have at any other time during the year," said a UMaine athlete. "Of course we also want others to get involved in creating better racial understanding in the campus community."

Chris Bragdon said that the campus is a microcosm of society and more African-American students need to organize to get their ideas across.

"We really need to have white students come out and support us at these performances and speeches," said Thomas Jones. "Otherwise we end up still being segregated into black and white groups."

Many agreed the concept that drives Black History Month shouldn't end on Feb. 28.

"It needs to be stressed because it is more than just an issue or a month," said Shirelle Crishon, treasurer of the AASA. "It should be going on all year."

"It is somewhat of a slap in the face that it is the shortest month of the year," said James Varner, adviser to the AASA. "Blacks stand out because we have been persecuted for so long."

Varner said Black History Month began in Florida in the 1940s as Black History Week to help blacks learn about their own history, and for whites to have a greater appreciation for blacks as people.

"Courses in black history on this campus are practically non-existent," Varner said. "At the present time, there is no African-American teaching black history, nor is there a white instructor."

Although Black History Month focuses on awareness and commonality, which many students of all colors agree with, it has opened up a new can of worms with some white students on campus.

"Having a black history month is just perpetuating the problem," said Dan Ross, a student at UMaine. "I thought we were supposed to be working towards all being people, not specific groups."

Ross said that the entire purpose of a social movement is to make it so you don't need that movement anymore.

"We also have to consider everyone," said Ross. "There is no Scottish History Month, French History Month or Irish History Month."

Eric Kelley, a student at UMaine, said that having a black history month is racist and glorifies blacks.

"Everyone got f---ed in the past," Kelley

said. "If you make a big deal over it, blacks end up being treated differently again."

Kelley said that Black History Month has the wrong purpose of keeping the false image of blacks alive by drawing attention to the fact that they are black instead of just people.

"I'm not racist, but have stereotypes because of other people," said Michelle Helena. "The other day I waited on a black guy who stole my pen, and my boyfriend said, 'There's a typical black guy for you.'"

One senior here at UMaine said he wasn't prejudiced because he wouldn't treat them (African-Americans) differently, but he wouldn't marry one.

"I talk to black people," he said. "I think everyone should have one."

He said African-Americans bitched about black history because they felt left out, but he talked about them in the Civil War as slaves and mentioned them more during the 60's.

"If you're a black female you have the world in the palm of your hand," he said. "No one in their right mind would not hire a black female."

Jen Price said that Black History Month is a neat idea, but it draws attention to their differences.

"We read stuff like Frederick Douglas and start feeling bad for them," said Price. "Of course that's not what they want either."

Ross agreed and said that they want us to feel for them, but not feel sorry for them.

Other students want the campus to realize that they support racial awareness, unlike what many of these students seem to think.

"People like some of those interviewed give the rest of us a bad name," Kim Smith said. "We need more interaction between races, and I hope that idea doesn't make me in the minority around here."

Smith said racist attitudes, blatant or not, really annoy her and end up causing many problems.

"It's important to set aside time like this," said Becky Cross. "Only about 5 percent of a history course is usually dedicated to black history."

Besides the lecture by Yolanda King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., on Feb. 23, and a performance by actor and comedian Mark Curry on Feb. 24, the AASA sponsors events specifically geared to the African-American community.

"We recently held a dance called the AASA Jam," said Tubbs. "Dance is a part of our culture and sparks the emotions of our rich, African-American background."