Black History Month kicks off at UMaine with the Black Lives Matter flag raising

The University of Maine kicks off Black History Month raising the Black Lives Matter flag on Thursday, Feb, 1 outside the Memorial Union. Photo by Maggie Gautreau, Photo Editor.
As snow fell upon the first day of February, many University of Maine students, faculty and community members congregated between the Memorial Union and Fogler Library in the name of racial justice. Thursday, Feb. 1 marked the start of Black History Month, and the Office of Multicultural Student Life (OMSL) and the Black Student Union (BSU) have partnered to put together an impressive lineup of events spanning the entire month.

The ceremonial Black Lives Matter flag raising marked the beginning of Black History Month. A sizable crowd endured the snow and cold to witness the event, and cheers erupted as staff from the OMSL hoisted the flag into the sky. The bold text proclaiming “BLACK LIVES MATTER” flew solemnly against the snowy white sky. The celebratory mood continued as people relocated to the North Pod inside the Union due to weather concerns to hear speeches from students and faculty about the importance of the month.

Silvestre Guzman, the director of OMSL, spoke first. He began by thanking everyone in attendance, saying, “I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for braving the weather to support our student groups and to celebrate Black History Month.” He noted all the hard work that went into making the events for the month happen, and encouraged the audience to continue showing up throughout February, as all the events are open to the public.

Guzman then introduced the speakers. The first was Kirsten Daley, a UMaine student and president of the BSU, who spoke more about the significance of the month. Daley thanked the audience for supporting the BSU and the cause of racial justice. She spoke on the issue of the continued importance of the month, noting that although some people do not understand the necessity of black history, there are others still who will continue to advocate for better treatment of black communities and efforts to preserve and celebrate black history.

Daley noted that without black people, this country wouldn’t be where it is today, despite the effects of slavery that are still present in our modern society. She explained that Black History Month is a remembrance of our past and a celebration of black culture, art, history and more. She said that “black lives, in their entirety, matter. Black trans lives matter. Black Afro-Latino lives matter. Black disabled lives matter.”

President of Black Student Union Kirsten Daley addresses the crowd in the Memorial Union on Feb. 1 to commemorate the Black History Month. Photo by Maggie Gautreau, Photo Editor.

The Black Lives Matter movement originated in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. The movement defines itself on its website as “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.” It confronts issues like police brutality, racial disparities in school systems and mass incarceration and believes in diversity, restorative justice, globalism, queer affirming, collective value and empathy (to name a few).

Daley was also proud to report big news for the UMaine community, announcing “a scholarship fund for black leaders on campus to give them the means to make change in our community.” The scholarship includes funds for students to attend conferences, purchase resources, earn their degree and more. Daley concluded with the powerful message of more inclusivity, more intersection, and the hope “that one day we can celebrate black history not just 29, but 365 days of the year.”

Eleanor Kipping, a Master of Fine Arts candidate at the UMaine Intermedia program, took the stage next to discuss her work the “Brown Paper Bag Test” art installation, part of UMaine’s Black History Month. She too thanked the people in attendance for their support, and stressed the importance of commemorating black history, Kipping emphasized that we should continue to organize and advocate for racial justice, and to “not take these efforts for granted.” Her art installation features
15 portraits and interviews done with black women and “explores colorism through the experiences and portraits of black women,” according to Kipping. You can view the project at seven different locations on campus throughout February, including the Fogler Library and the Memorial Union.

Dean Robert Dana then stepped up to say a few words, remarking how “it’s so tremendously empowering to have us all here together.” Dana explained how UMaine celebrates and reveres differences, and he hopes we will continue to learn and respect different cultures.

“Black history is ancient and modern,” Dana said, and continued that understanding its history and the justice associated with it “requires constant work.” Dana concluded that he yearns for us to continue to strive to heal the earth, and achieve the dream of “a connected, unified, caring and compassionate society.”

The last speaker to address the audience was David Patrick, a graduate assistant for OMSL. He gave a short speech about his gratitude for the support our community has shown toward these issues, and encouraged people to stop by the Office of Multicultural Student Life on the third floor of the Union in room 312.

Frances Bateman, a fourth-year psychology and women’s and gender studies student, was in attendance to show her support. When asked what her reaction to the event was, she was quick to voice support for the issues.

“I really think events like this are incredible,” Bateman said. “The work of women of color is often understated or dismissed from history, so it’s really inspiring to see black feminists like Kirsten [Daley] making things like this happen on campus and for UMaine to recognize it.”

UMaine’s Black History Month got off to an enthusiastic start with the flag raising, but there are many more events to keep an eye out for. Throughout the month of February, the Black Student Union will be hosting Black History Mondays from noon to 2 p.m. in the Office of Multicultural Student Life. There will be two Lunch & Learn events on Wednesday, Feb. 7 and Feb. 21 at noon in the Loun Room. Kickin’ Flicks will be showing “Marshall” on Wednesday, Feb. 7 in Room 101 Neville Hall and “Love Beats Rhymes” on Feb. 21 in Neville 101 and on Saturday, Feb. 24 in the Bangor Room. On Thursday, Feb. 8 and Feb. 22 there will be WOKEshops offered in the Bangor Room at 1 p.m. Fogler Library and the BSU have partnered for a Black History Month book circle on Monday, Feb. 26 from 5-6 p.m. Visit the Black Student Union’s Facebook page to view the flyers and learn more. The Black Student Union meets weekly at 3 p.m. in the Office of Multicultural Student Life.

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