

Western Winner Essay

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In August of 1619, the White Lion, a Dutch ship, sailed into Point Comfort and dropped anchor in the James River. Virginia colonist John Rolfe documented “20 and odd” Africans on board. Thus began a 400-year and counting struggle for freedom, equality, and the end of racism. This year marks the 400-year anniversary of that 1619 landing, and what better way to pay tribute to the strong African-American men and women in Virginia’s history than to acknowledge how crucial it is to study their struggles and celebrate their triumphs. It is important to study their experiences for several reasons. First, their perseverance and determination are reason enough. Second, there can be no truthful discussion of American history without a discussion of slavery, emancipation, and a fight for civil rights, for our country’s founding documents were false until African Americans fought to make them true. Furthermore, studying African-American history puts contemporary injustices like racial disparities regarding incarceration, the wealth gap, and educational funding into perspective. In order to tear apart modern systems of oppression, we must first learn the history of them.

The struggles of African Americans over the past 400 years and their perseverance provide invaluable lessons. Harriet Ann Jacobs, born into slavery in North Carolina, spent seven years hiding in an attic she couldn’t even stand up in before making her daring escape to the North to begin writing crucial abolitionist materials. In 1955, Mamie Till reshaped the Civil Rights Movement by insisting on a glass-top casket for her fourteen-year-old son, Emmett. American history is overflowing with stories like theirs, and modern examples of the fight for justice can be seen in the work of Deanna Reed, Clarence Dunnville, and countless others. The fact is that we should not be asking what can be learned from the struggles and accomplishments of African Americans; we should be asking what lesson cannot be learned. The unbreakable spirit of African Americans teaches me that, even without opportunity, there is still possibility.

When I consider my role in ensuring that the contributions to American history and culture that these individuals made is not forgotten, I realize I must do two things. First, I must continue to study and read about both past struggles and triumphs along with current ones. Second, I must apply the inspiration I feel from these stories and use my voice to speak out against the systemic and social presence of racism and injustice today. While my voice is just one among millions, the real-life experiences of African Americans have shown me the power of one voice.