People EXCLUSIVE

Black History Month Has a Deeper Meaning This Year, Says Former NFL Star Emmanuel Acho

PEOPLE's Voices from the Fight Against Racism will amplify Black perspectives on the push for equality and justice

By **Joelle Goldstein**

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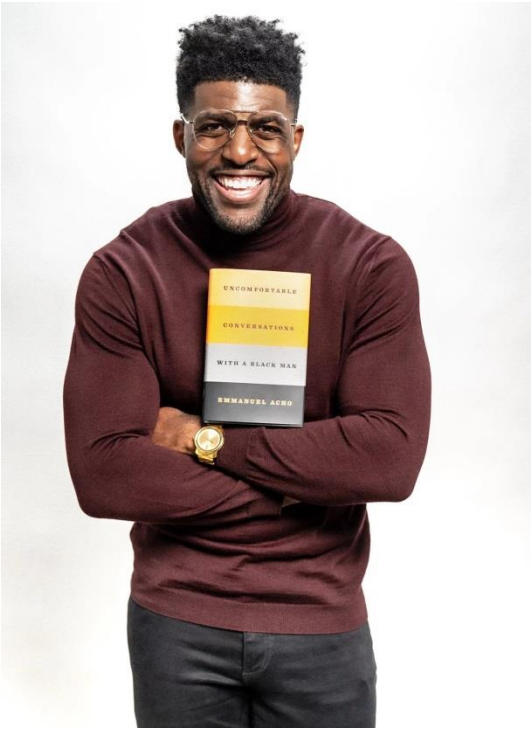

Emmanuel Acho is a former Philadelphia Eagles linebacker turned sports analyst and the New York Times *bestselling author of* Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*, named after his successful YouTube series of the same name. After growing up* in a predominantly white neighborhood and later embracing his Black culture in *college and the NFL, Acho, 30, felt he could serve as "a bridge" between the Black and white communities. On the heels of George Floyd's killing in May 2020, Acho began conducting interviews on race issues in America, with millions of viewers watching each week. As Black History Month officially kicks off, Acho talks to PEOPLE about why he believes the month will be perceived differently this year, the importance of conversation and how having the will to listen will move our country forward.*

In football, everybody has a job to do. If everybody does their job equally, we will all succeed and win as a team. But what happens in team sports or a group project when somebody doesn't do their job? If you still want to get an A on the project, you've got to stay up all night and you've got to pick up that person's slack.

In America, what we've realized is white people haven't necessarily done the job of protecting all people, over the course of hundreds of years. And because my white brothers and sisters haven't done their job in protecting their Black brothers and sisters, I said, "You know what? Let me try to pick up some of the slack that my white brothers and sisters have left over the course of time."

Sure, I could sit back and do nothing, but it's for the greater good of the team that I try to speak. What I'm trying to do is make sure that, collectively as a country, we pass this course of racism, which we have for so long failed.

Growing up in Dallas, Texas, my experience was a little bit different because I'm first-generation American. So while I am Black in skin, I grew up Nigerian-cultured and white-cultured.

I went to this affluent, all-boys school, and it was predominantly white. I often heard, "Emmanuel, you're not that Black," or, "You don't talk or dress like you're Black," or, "You're like an Oreo — Black on the outside, white on the inside."

I guess to these white colleagues or friends of mine, to be Black was to be like Nelly circa 2002 without the bandaid under his eyes. To be Black was to be a gangster or a thug or to have tattoos, and I didn't fit that description of a Black character to them.

It wasn't until I got to college that I really realized just how racially insensitive and ignorant so many of the things my peers told me were. I vividly remember when I was like, "Man, they were assuming that I speak too intelligently to be Black." It hurt my heart as an adult when I reminisced on the words of my past.

After George Floyd was murdered, I, like so many Black people, was distraught, and I said, "Okay, Acho, what can you do?"

The problem in America is there's a communication barrier between my Black brothers and sisters and my white brothers and sisters. And since I fully understood how to communicate with both, I said, "Let me stand in the gap and be a bridge."

People are willing to listen if you can package the message in a manner that they can digest, but you have to find a way to speak with truth, grace and love.

What I will never do is expend too much energy on someone who's unwilling to listen. I'm not sitting here proclaiming that I'm right or anyone else is wrong, but what I am proclaiming is, "Here's a way to assess and address something that may improve our society at large. Let's all look at things a little bit differently."

As a country, we've already looked at things one way for hundreds of years. Maybe it's time we look at and address things another way.

With Black History Month, I think it will now be received as Our History Month. For so long, it has been a "Black week." But Black history is American history. We're just now shining a light on the Black people in the country that, for so long, the country neglected to shine a light on.

I think now white people won't feel like, "Oh, good for Black people celebrating themselves." I think, finally, it'll be like, "Good for all of us, celebrating each other."

We need to acknowledge Black creators, Black creation, Black products, Black- owned things, Black-owned restaurants, Black-created TV shows, Black-written books — just really try to lift up and celebrate so many of the amazing Black creations in this country.

That being said, it's very hard to attain something that you don't know exists for you.

Representation is very important, because growing up, I didn't want to be a financial planner. I didn't want to be in oil and gas. I didn't want to be in private equity, because I didn't know anybody in those industries. I was growing up in Dallas during the Cowboys dynasty, so I looked up to NFL star Emmitt Smith.

Then, as I got older, I saw figures on TV like Oprah Winfrey. You see Black women who are dominating their fields, dominating their craft. Kamala Harris is now the vice president of the United

States. And that's why representation is so important. It's very hard to be something if you don't see something.

The other problem that we've seen in years past is there was too much silence when injustice occurred.

We need to be staunchly opposed to hate, oppression and discrimination, and we need to be vocal about injustice. That's really what I'm hoping to see moving forward, especially with the Biden administration.

The president can't cure racism. The president can't change my heart or change yours, but what they can do is take a very public stand and not tolerate it from a governmental level. Words matter, every word matters.

As for me, I just want to continue to be a bridge for reconciliation. I want there to be a ripple effect from my actions. How you remember somebody is irrelevant if you weren't impacted by them. So I want my impact to continue to resound, and the vibrations of my impact to continue to permeate society.

To help combat systemic racism, consider learning from or donating to these organizations:

- *Campaign Zero works to end police brutality in America through research- proven strategies.*
- *Color of Change.org works to make the government more responsive to racial disparities.*
- *National Cares Mentoring Movement provides social and academic support to help Black youth succeed in college and beyond.*