

History, Heritage, and Hope

By Dr. Al Roberts

The opening of a new year provides an opportunity for self-assessment and the chance to embrace renewed hope for the months yet to come. At the same time, revealing January's calendar page begins an annual roll call of holidays that commemorate past events, reminders of our shared history and challenges we've already overcome.

On the third Monday in January, which this year will fall on January 16, our nation honors Martin Luther King, Jr., a dynamic civil rights leader and advocate of nonviolent activism. Dr. King was born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929 and assassinated in April 1968.

Rosa Parks, another civil rights pioneer, was born on February 4, 1913 in Tuskegee, Alabama. Mrs. Parks inadvertently stepped into the national spotlight in 1955 by refusing to obey a bus driver who was enlarging the section of seats reserved for white passengers. Her refusal to move to a different seat resulted in her arrest for violating a city law that mandated the racial segregation of public buses.

These two remembrances lead into February's observance of Black History Month, which provides an opportunity for learning more about the stories, struggles, and achievements of African American people. Other nationally recognized heritage months provide similar opportunities to learn about diverse groups that comprise our nation's multicultural landscape. These include Women's History Month (March), Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month (May), Hispanic Heritage Month (from mid-September to mid-October), National Disability Employment Awareness Month (October), and Native American Heritage Month (November).

Higher education is a key tool in efforts to vanquish inequalities of the past. In a recent report on diversity, the U.S. Department of Education noted, "Student body diversity in institutions of higher education is important not only for improving the economic and educational opportunities for students of color, but also for the social, academic, and societal benefits that diversity presents for all students and communities."

Southside Virginia Community College is committed to fostering, cultivating, and sustaining a culture of diversity and inclusion. We believe our community is stronger when we welcome diverse ideas and perspectives, as well as people from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. The College's Diversity and Inclusion Committee embraces goals such as identifying practices designed to hire a diverse faculty and staff, supporting culturally expanding experiences, requesting that students with disabilities self-identify and utilize provided services, and encouraging employees to volunteer with charitable organizations that help diverse populations and people living in poverty. Student organizations include the Minority Awareness Programming Club and Make It Happen, a program that provides an institutional climate supportive to African-American male students.

Through these efforts and more, the College strives to create a welcoming, inclusive environment where all people feel respected and valued.

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at al.roberts@southside.edu.