

Women's History Month, We have good reason to celebrate

Written by By Ron Busby Sr., President, U.S. Black Chamber, Inc.
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As this year's women's history month comes to an end, I am reminded of how proud I was to have our history acknowledged every February for Black History Month. My parents made sure I learned everything possible about our Black heritage, the struggles and obstacles we endured and the importance of African Americans on the history of our nation.

In 1987, our government decided that women also deserved to be honored in the same way. So, while February is Black History Month, March has been designated as Women's History Month. This is a time to focus on and acknowledge the important roles that women take on in today's world and the contributions they continue to make to history. This year, the theme of Women's History Month is the empowerment of women through education.

For many years, women have struggled to obtain the rights so long held by men alone; the right to an education, the right to vote, the right to work, the right to fair wages, and the right to own their own businesses.

Within the last 20 years, there has been a rise in corporate affirmative action programs, meant to help diversify the workplace and make way for more Black entrepreneurs and businesses. It was intended that African Americans and other minorities would find a level playing field in the business world. Somewhere along the way, women were also categorized as minorities.

This is often seen as a point of frustration for many minorities because while women may own the businesses, in many cases the companies are still being managed by white men, and white men continue to benefit the most. It is believed that for this reason Black businesses have suffered when it comes to all levels of government contract opportunities and access. Federal contracting still does not fall equally between each minority and disadvantaged groups. The U.S. Black Chamber, however, chooses to embrace this point of diversification and celebrate women-owned businesses each day of the year.

African American women have struggled to overcome these disadvantages, and with

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perseverance they have succeeded. In 2007, there were nearly 912,000 African American women-owned businesses in America. From 1997, that is a 191.4% increase. Businesses owned by African American men during that same time period increased 93.1%. Of all African American-owned businesses, 47.4% are owned by women. The U.S. Black Chamber sees this opportunity to partner with fast growing sector.

When we think of Black women who have been successful entrepreneurs, we often look back at Madame C.J. Walker. She traveled the country, demonstrating her methods for African-American hair care and styling. She was the first Black female to own a business valued at over \$1 million dollars.

Fast forward to recent history, we can refer to the success of business women such as self-made billionaire Oprah with her Harpo Productions, Janice Bryant Howroyd founder of Act1-group, the largest minority-owned employment agency in the country and Cathy Hughes, Founder and Chairperson of Radio One, a multi-media company that focuses on African American and other urban consumers across the country, and so many others.

We can also look to the strength and perseverance of our own women, the women of the U.S. Black Chamber that we serve on a daily basis and celebrate all year long. A woman such as the President and CEO of this month's featured Black Chamber, Natalie Cofield. Natalie is the CEO of the Capital City African American Chamber of Commerce in Austin, Texas. She has brought her extensive skills and knowledge to the chamber in order to help with the economic development on behalf of the African American community in the greater Austin area.

Another shining example of strong female leaders is the owner of the U.S. Black Chamber's featured business of the month, Leah Brown, President and CEO of A10 Clinical Solutions, Inc. Ms. Brown has earned the honor of being Inc. Magazine's Number One African-American-Run Business. Her company is one of the fastest-growing businesses in America.

New York, Georgia and Florida are the three states which have the highest number of businesses owned by African American women. The top industry in which African American women own businesses include social assistance and health care (32%).

No matter the industry, African American women have a place to stake a claim. They have the ability and opportunity to become leaders and to make a true difference in their communities. It takes drive, passion, strength and knowledge to get to where these women are today.

Through education and inspiration, we can see a country that is full of businesses that are owned and operated by African American women. Those businesses cannot help but succeed if we work together and take their dreams for a future company and turn them into reality.

The U.S. Black Chamber takes great pride in celebrating the successes of Blacks and women, not just during a single designated month, but all year long.

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