

Rep. Allen: Statement on Black History Month

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream was that we will look at character in judging others and not at skin color. He did so much more than lead a movement for civil rights; he cast a vision for us to aspire to.

Carter G. Woodson, the creator of Negro History Week, the precursor to Black History Month, taught us a lot about what he called "the mis-education of the negro," whereby blacks were conditioned to seek out a second rate position in society. He became known as the father of black history due to his extensive writing on the history of blacks in America. Mr. Woodson originally selected February for Negro History Week because of the long standing traditions in the Black community of celebrating the births of Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, a black man and a white man.

In December I circulated a possible resolution to recognize February as Black History Month in Wisconsin. The proposed resolution concentrated on the character of individuals involved in an important effort in American and Black history, the operation of the Underground Railroad. The resolution was judged as inappropriate by many because it was authored by a white-skinned man and because it recognized some white-skinned individuals.

More important than content, however, are the feelings of the members of the African-American caucus and our relationship as legislative colleagues.

Over the last two years I have made unsuccessful attempts to dialog with members of the African-American Caucus about the Black History Month resolution. As people, we often make assumptions or draw conclusions about our relationships based on our interpretation of experiences. Sometimes those assumptions are

wrong. Sometimes we just don't know.

We cannot change our history, but we can change our course. It is possible that I made incorrect assumptions.

Relationships erode due to a lack of communication and relationships can grow when we invest in communication. Over the last couple of weeks I have had personal conversations with several members of the African-American caucus. I appreciate and respect the feelings that they have shared with me. I will continue to reach out to those with whom I have not spoken.

As a result of those conversations I will not be submitting the resolution that I authored for consideration by this legislature. Instead I will support and, if I may, co-sponsor the resolution proposed by the African-American Caucus.

The time has come for us to extend black history from one month to twelve, for us to recognize that there would be no America, as we know it today, without the vital contributions of black Americans. The time has come for black Americans to cash the promissory note guaranteeing the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in all aspects of American society.

We, together, have an unfulfilled dream. Working together we can accomplish that dream.