

NIEHS celebrates African American History Month

By Kimberly Cannady

In honor of African American History Month, NIEHS hosted a series of activities Feb. 7 to celebrate the achievements of past civil rights activists and provide mentoring and networking opportunities. The theme for this year, Civil Rights in America, coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The keynote speaker for the event, Crystal deGregory, Ph.D., is founder and executive editor of [HBCUstory](http://www.hbcustory.com/).

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A native of Freeport in the Bahamas, deGregory fused this year's theme with her country's civil rights movement, giving an engaging presentation titled "Herstory: Civil Rights (and Wrongs) at Home and Abroad."

She began her presentation with pictures of famous Bahamians, such as Sidney Poitier, Roxie Roker, Esther Rolle, and Bert Williams, highlighting the importance of these actors and musicians to American culture. Not one to shy away from her Bahamian pride, deGregory included herself in the list, as a nationally known advocate for African American culture advancement and awareness.

The quiet revolution of the Bahamas

Demonstrating her talent as a dynamic storyteller, deGregory's interwoven stories illustrated how the civil rights movement in America influenced the revolution in the Bahamas during the 1950s and 1960s.

Sir Randol Fawkes, a famous Bahamian civil rights activist, figured prominently in many anecdotes. Fawkes followed the American civil rights movement, especially the actions of Martin Luther King Jr., to help shape the Bahamian revolution. In 1958, Fawkes led the Taxi Cab Union strike, the Bahamian equivalent of America's Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. Fawkes urged a nonviolent protest, a concept that resonated throughout the civil rights movement.

King wrote to Fawkes after visiting the Bahamas in 1958. In the excerpt deGregory shared, King highlighted the immense role Fawkes had in the Bahamian revolution. "I will long remember the expression of genuine goodwill and moral support on the part of the people of your community," wrote King. "Please allow me to express my personal appreciation to you for your determined courage and dedication to the cause of freedom and human dignity. I am sure your name will live long in the annals of your nation's history for your willingness to suffer and sacrifice for a cause that you know is right."

Majority rule achieved

In 1967, the determination of the Bahamians paid off when a majority of black representatives were voted into the house of assembly. "There was a triumphant resolve of majority rule," said deGregory. In addition, the Bahamas elected Sir Linden Oscar Pindling as its first black premier in 1967 and prime minister in 1969. He ruled for 25 years.

Summarizing the election day moment, deGregory said, "It was one, not just for black Bahamians, but also for black Americans as they traveled to the Caribbean to be a part of the new spirit." She concluded her remarkable presentation by declaring, "The civil rights movement in the Bahamas did not happen by chance or in isolation. All across the African diaspora [scattered population], there were changes in the people, the nation, and in the world."

After the lecture, deGregory participated in a meet and greet, as well as speed mentoring networking sessions. The intimate setting fostered dialogues between strangers, enabling participants to learn about events and programs at NIEHS and in the wider community. It was an appropriate way to end a day focused on celebrating civil rights in America, as it highlighted the eagerness of the community to come together and promote advancement.

(Kimberly Cannady, Ph.D., is an Intramural Research Training Award (IRTA) fellow in the NIEHS Chromatin and Gene Expression Group.)



With her high-energy presentation about the Bahamian Revolution, deGregory commanded the attention of the audience. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Charletta Fowler was among the audience members who enthusiastically enjoyed deGregory's stories of Bahamian and African American culture. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Welcoming remarks from Joellen Austin, NIEHS associate director for management, included a brief introduction of the origins of the African American History Month celebration, and touched on key events of its theme, Civil Rights in America. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Members of the NIEHS Diversity Council welcomed deGregory to NIEHS. From left, Brad Collins; Veronica Godfrey Robinson; Ron Herbert, D.V.M., Ph.D.; deGregory; Victoria Gross, NIH Black Employment Program Manager, NIH Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management; and Austin. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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