

Making Black History by investing in the future

Written by Esther Sliver-Parker
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Black History Month 2009 is now history itself, but new Black history is made every day by African Americans who are willing to share their time, talent and resources with the larger Black community. Everyone gets the opportunity sooner or later, sometimes in surprising ways.

I was fortunate to come of age during a dramatic period in the history of both African Americans and the United States. My high school years in the small, segregated North Carolina town where I grew up coincided with the climactic years of the Civil Rights movement. I'll never forget marching with my classmates down our main street past the local branches of retail store chains where I wouldn't have been allowed to sit at the lunch counter or use the rest room.

Fast forward through the decades, and today I, an African American woman, work as an executive with Wal-Mart, a retailer with a commitment to promoting diversity and a philosophy of giving back to the communities it serves. Wal-Mart exemplifies this philosophy through its support of endeavors that highlight the legacy of African Americans.

Wal-Mart is the presenting sponsor of Tavis Smiley's "America I AM: The African American Imprint," a mobile museum and exhibit that celebrates the impact African Americans' actions, innovations and teachings have had on nearly 400 years of American history. We were also able to provide a \$12.5 million letter of credit through the Wal-Mart Foundation to start construction on the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial in Washington, D.C. We are proud to be a part of a project that will help future generations uphold the legacy Dr. King stood for by studying his work, ideals and vision for America.

It's personally gratifying to be part of efforts that help make a corporate investment in the continuing history of Black America. I'm constantly aware, though, that whatever I've achieved in my own life is the result of investments others have made in me.

My family had more love than money, but my father and mother always made it a point to give back. There were seven children in our family and my father worked as a janitor, but my parents saw to it that we all went to college.

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Like most children in our tight-knit community, I also benefited from the investment of older African Americans who were our role models. They ranged from the highly motivated teachers in our schools to the elderly “porch ladies” who watched over the community’s children from their front porches. They delivered the message that we were the future, and our future would only be limited by our own goals and commitment.

You can’t directly re-pay personal investments like that, but you can make investments of your own in those who need it most. It’s something we all can do on some level. We can help a motivated, but financially needy, young person attend college. We can share our time and experience by acting as mentors to students or young people finding their way in the business world. It can be as simple as providing an elderly neighbor good company or perhaps a hot meal.

No matter who you are, or how you do it, giving back is one of the best ways to honor and exemplify the spirit of black history and make a big difference at the same time.

Esther Silver-Parker, as senior vice president of Corporate Affairs at Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., is charged with the strategic planning and execution of Wal-Mart’s relationships with community-based organizations and leaders in the United States, and in countries around the world, where Wal-Mart does business.