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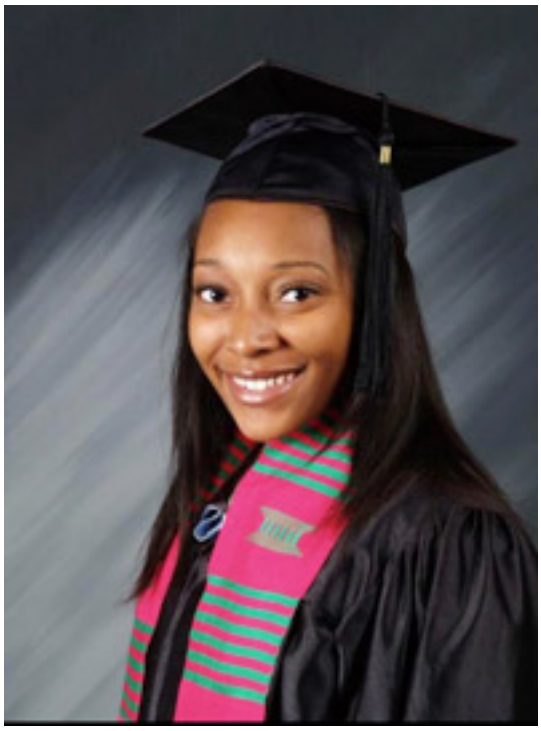

WASHINGTON (NNPA) – Although born long after the 1963 March on Washington and passage of landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many Black youth are excited about celebrating Black History Month in February.

“It is a time to remind you of your ancestors’ struggles and the things that they’ve experienced so you don’t lose sight of the past,” says Ryann Roberts, 22, who refers to the month as an opportunity to “lift as you climb.”

Lifting up the accomplishments of Blacks is what historian Carter G. Woodson and his Association for the Study of Negro Life and History had in mind when announced in 1926 that the second week in February would be observed as Negro History Week. On the bicentennial of the founding of Negro History Week in 1976, the celebration was expanded to Black History Month.

All modern presidents have acknowledged Negro History Week or African American History Month through executive orders and proclamations.

In his proclamation last year, President Obama said, “The story of African Americans is a story of resilience and perseverance. It traces a people who refused to accept the circumstances under which they arrived on these shores, and it chronicles the generations who fought for an America that truly reflects the ideals enshrined in our founding documents. It is the narrative of slaves who shepherded others along the path to freedom and preachers who organized against the rules of Jim Crow, of young people who sat-in at lunch counters and ordinary men and women who took extraordinary risks to change our Nation for the better. During National African American History Month, we celebrate the rich legacy of African Americans and honor the remarkable contributions they have made to perfecting our Union.”

Like everything else in American society, the occasion is used by many major corporations to

increase market share for their products. That's evident even when some young Blacks discuss their heritage.

"Along with McDonalds, I celebrate my history 365 [days]," says Phil Jones, 22.

Ryann Roberts, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, said Black History Month helps ease the sense isolation that some Black students feel at predominantly White institutions.

"Going to a school with a small Black population showed me that there is a need for cohesion, and opened my eyes to the benefits of sharing and connecting with people who are in your same minority group," Roberts explains.

But Black History Month is not fully appreciated by some students even on the campuses of historically Black universities.

Aminata Sow, who graduated from Howard University three years ago, remembers encountering such students.

"People would say things like 'no one else has a month,' and all kinds of other limited mindsets of what it means to celebrate yourself," says Sow, who makes a point to commemorate the month in any way she can—whether it's going to a Black History themed program or volunteering in her community.

She explains, "Black History Month isn't just about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. This month should be the time we celebrate who we are as a people and teach it to someone else."

This year Ryann Roberts,, along with members of her chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. and members of the Black Student Union at George Washington University, where she now attends graduate school for Public Health, will host and attend events that she hopes will get people talking about and uplifting the value of Black contributions.

"If we don't acknowledge it, it's easy to forget the great things we've done as a people," she says.

And Blacks have accomplished many great things, overcoming slavery and rising to become president of the United States and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.

Aminata Sow, 24, grew up in Detroit, and she, too, has ignored critics who don't fully appreciate Black History Month.

"When other ethnic groups celebrate their race it's fine, but when we do it's 'racist,' we're 'excluding' other people," Sow says. "But my mother always taught me you should celebrate yourself, you should always recognize what makes you different. If you stop celebrating, the legacy is lost."