



Honoring the Past, Strengthening Communities for the Future

By Wanda Seeney

Your past is not your future. This was a common, underlying theme during this year's Black History Month Celebration. The event was organized by a statewide team representing the OA, DCI, DED, DHSS, DOC, DOLIR, DOR, and MoDOT.

On Thursday, Feb. 23, the State of Missouri hosted the annual program that drew hundreds of people. Held in Jefferson City at the Harry S Truman Building, attendees representing State government, the Missouri Legislature, or friends of the State gathered for a series of history lessons told through spoken word and music. While paying homage to the contributions of Blacks and African Americans, attendees were reminded that out of adversity comes strength. Strengthening communities for future success starts with each of us!

OA Deputy Commissioner and General Counsel Caroline Coulter provided welcome remarks and introduced OA Division of Personnel's Theresa Mello, who sang the Star-Spangled Banner. Via video presentation, Gov. Parson provided an opening presentation. State Rep. Marlene Terry, representing St. Louis County (District 66), highlighted the accomplishments of Blacks and African Americans – some of whom have historic ties to Missouri. The Lincoln University Vocal Ensemble sang a soul-stirring rendition of "My God is So High."

Dr. Alphonso Sanders, a multi-instrumentalist and educator, told how different music genres were influenced by black musicians and their artistry. What struck a chord with attendees, literally, was Dr. Sanders' rendition of a popular 1969 song by Joe South, an American singer-songwriter, guitarist, and record producer. The lyrics to "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" challenges people to put aside their egos and have empathy for the life experiences that others may have gone through. By the end of the song, the room had become Dr. Sanders' backup singers who were swaying and singing the bridge line:

"Walk a mile in my shoes
Walk a mile in my shoes
And before you abuse, criticize and accuse
Walk a mile in my shoes"



Black History Month celebration audience



Dr. Alphonso Sanders plays for the Black History Month celebration audience

There's nothing like music to unite people from diverse cultures and experiences!

Admittedly, Dr. Sanders "was a hard act to follow," mentioned the keynote speaker, the Rev. Charles R. Jackson, who was introduced by DOLIR Department Director Anna Hui. From the moment he took the mic, Jackson held a captivating audience. He spoke of how people helping people strengthens communities, and like Rep. Terry, Jackson paid homage to the numerous inventions and accomplishments achieved by people of Black and African American descent.

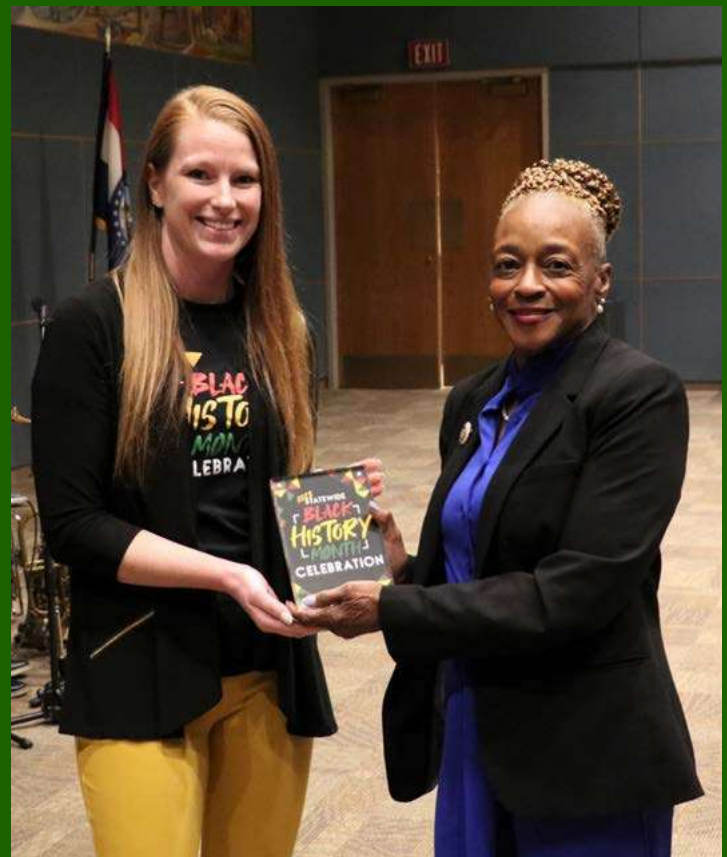
Singing the Black National Anthem is always a tradition during Black History Month, and this year's celebration was no exception. Reece Ellis gave a background on the origins of the celebrated song, pointing out its origination occurred 12 years before The Star-Spangled Banner was created. Dr. Sanders provided the musical accompaniment.

OA Communications Director Jeremy Washington provided remarks before introducing OA's Office of Equal Opportunity Deputy Director Danielle Briot, who provided closing comments that ended the joyful celebration. Attendees were invited to enjoy refreshments following the event.

Although the Black History Month Celebration has ended, the accomplishments and contributions of Blacks and African Americans will continue to live in the hearts and minds of many people beyond the month of February. After all, honoring the past strengthens communities for the future.



Keynote speaker Rev. Charles R. Jackson



Danielle Briot with Rep. Marlene Terry



Lincoln University Vocal Ensemble