



Celebrating Black Excellence at
Monroe Community College
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*“For me the history of the place of Black people in this country is so varied,
complex and beautiful. And impactful.”*

~ Toni Morrison, Author, Editor, and Educator

African American Affinity Group (3AG)

The African American Affinity Group (3AG) at Monroe Community College is a supportive space dedicated to fostering community, advocacy, and professional development for Black faculty and staff. Rooted in the principles of empowerment, equity, and cultural celebration, 3AG provides a platform for members to connect, share experiences, and contribute to institutional initiatives that uplift and support Black employees and students.

3AG engages in meaningful dialogue, organizes events, and collaborates on initiatives that enhance diversity, inclusion, and belonging at MCC. Whether through networking opportunities, mentorship, or cultural programming, the group is committed to strengthening representation and amplifying Black voices within the college community.

As part of Monroe Community College's Black History Month celebration, we are proud to highlight the diverse voices and experiences of Black employees across all roles, from administration to maintenance. These profiles showcase the journeys, cultural influences, and contributions of our colleagues, celebrating their impact within MCC and beyond.

Each spotlight provides insight into the personal stories, values, and traditions that shape our employees' lives and work. Through their experiences, we honor Black excellence, resilience, and joy, while fostering a deeper sense of community and belonging at MCC.

For more information on the African American Affinity Group or how to get involved, please reach out to:

- Dr. Melany J. Silas-Chandler (HED), Chair ([Melany Silas \(msilas@monroecc.edu\)](mailto:msilas@monroecc.edu))
- Dr. Tokeya C. Graham (ENG), Vice Chair ([Tokeya Graham \(:tgraham@monroecc.edu\)](mailto:tgraham@monroecc.edu))

"Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world."

~ Harriet Tubman, Abolitionist

A Conversation With

Ms. Melissa Browning

STEP Program Advisor/Specialist

How has your personal journey shaped the way you contribute to MCC and the work you do every day?

My professional journey, which greatly impacted my personal journey, began in 2004 when I enrolled as a full-time, non-traditional student at MCC. Graduating in 2006, I developed a deep sense of gratitude and a desire to give back—not only to my community but also to my alma mater. After earning both my Bachelor's and Master's degrees, I discovered that my true passion lies in helping others achieve their goals: personally, educationally, and professionally.

As an Academic Advisor for the STEP Program, I find great fulfillment in guiding high school students to reach their full potential. This role keeps me grounded and humble, as I constantly reflect on how to encourage positivity and resilience. I strive to inspire students to focus on solutions rather than problems, no matter how challenging the situation may appear.



Can you share a person, tradition, or moment in Black history that has deeply influenced you and how it shapes your perspective?

One person in Black history who has deeply influenced me is Maya Angelou. Her resilience, wisdom, and ability to use storytelling as a tool for empowerment have had a lasting impact on my perspective. Maya Angelou's journey of overcoming adversity, from her early years of trauma to becoming a renowned poet and activist, is a powerful reminder of the strength of the human spirit.

Her famous work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, showed me the importance of self-acceptance and the power of finding one's voice. Her words—“We may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated”—serve as a constant source of inspiration in my own life.

Angelou's ability to speak truths about the struggles of Black communities while also offering hope and compassion has shaped how I view challenges in my own life and work. She reminds me to stay focused on solutions, embrace my own story, and find strength even in the face of adversity. This mindset continues to guide my work as an advisor, helping me encourage others to rise above their challenges.

In what ways do you celebrate your heritage, and what traditions or practices keep you connected to your roots?

Celebrating my heritage is an integral part of who I am, and I make a conscious effort to stay connected to my roots. One way I do this is through storytelling, particularly sharing the history and experiences of my ancestors with younger generations. By passing down their stories, I help ensure their wisdom, resilience, and strength live on. It's also a way of honoring their sacrifices and celebrating their accomplishments.

Another tradition that keeps me grounded is cooking and enjoying dishes that have been passed down through generations. Food has such a strong connection to culture, and preparing meals that are part of my heritage not only nourishes my body but also connects me to family and memories of past gatherings.

Music is another important part of how I celebrate. Whether it's through listening to traditional songs, spirituals, or contemporary music rooted in my culture, the rhythms and lyrics serve as a constant reminder of where I come from and the community that has shaped me.

Lastly, I celebrate my heritage through community engagement. I participate in local events, whether cultural festivals or discussions, that honor the contributions of Black communities. This practice keeps me informed, inspired, and connected to a larger movement of progress and pride. Each of these traditions helps me stay rooted in my identity while continually growing and learning from my heritage.

What does Black joy mean to you, and how do you experience or cultivate it in your life and work?

Black joy, to me, represents a celebration of life, resilience, and the ability to find beauty and happiness even in the face of adversity. It's the joy in creating, connecting, and thriving within community, and it's deeply rooted in a history of overcoming struggle while never losing sight of the richness of life.

I experience Black joy in various ways, particularly through the traditions and practices I mentioned before—sharing stories of my ancestors, cooking family recipes, and listening to music that connects me to my culture. These moments aren't just about nostalgia, but about celebrating the vibrancy of Black life and the strength that runs through generations.

In my work, I try to cultivate Black joy by inspiring others to take pride in their own heritage and pursue their dreams with confidence and optimism. I encourage students to find joy in their journeys, knowing that their unique stories, much like those of our ancestors, contribute to the beautiful mosaic of Black history and culture.

What's a favorite song, book, or movie that always makes you feel connected to Black culture and history?

One of my favorite songs that always makes me feel connected to Black culture and history is “*A Change Is Gonna Come*” by Sam Cooke. The song resonates deeply with me because it reflects both the pain and hope of the Black experience, speaking to the struggle for justice and equality while also carrying a sense of optimism. It's a reminder of the resilience that has defined Black communities through generations and the belief that change, while slow, is inevitable.

In terms of books, that deeply connects me to Black history and culture is *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois. This groundbreaking work not only examines the social and political realities of Black Americans in the early 20th century but also explores the duality of Black identity and the struggle for equality. Du Bois's concept of “double consciousness”—the sense of always being aware of how the world sees you while also maintaining a sense of self—resonates powerfully with me and offers deep insight into the complexities of the Black experience.

The book's exploration of education, identity, and the path to social change has influenced my understanding of Black culture and history. Du Bois's writings remind me of the intellectual richness within the Black community and the ongoing fight for justice and equality. *The Souls of Black Folk* serves as a timeless resource that connects me to the struggles, triumphs, and resilience that have shaped Black culture throughout history.

As for movies, *Selma* is one that always brings me back to the core of Black history and the civil rights movement. The portrayal of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the march from Selma to Montgomery is a vivid reminder of the sacrifices made by so many to fight for equality. It underscores the importance of collective action and the ongoing struggle for justice.

All of these works, in their own way, reflect the richness, complexity, and strength of Black culture, and they continue to inspire me to honor and celebrate that legacy.

I, Too

By Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Copyright © 2002 by Langston Hughes
(Poetryfoundation.org)

A Conversation With

Ms. Kamilla Claiborne

Credit for Prior Learning Coordinator

Economic and Workforce Development and Career Technical Education

How has your personal journey shaped the way you contribute to MCC and the work you do every day?

My personal journey has greatly shaped the way I contribute to MCC and the work I do every day. It has instilled in me resilience and the unwavering belief that everything will work out in the end. Born and raised in Harlem, New York, I was brought up by a single mother who faced many challenges while raising three children. Her struggles taught me valuable lessons about strength and perseverance, which have shaped the strong person I am today. I continue to work hard to be a role model for my two children, showing them the importance of resilience and determination.



Having worked in the Criminal Justice/Investigation sector for over ten years, I made the decision to switch careers to the Education field. While this journey has had its ups and downs, I remain steadfast in my belief that with faith and perseverance, everything will work out. This is the message I share with the students here at MCC: to persevere, to not let anyone tell them they can't achieve something, and to understand that challenges and setbacks are inevitable, but they will ultimately find success.

Can you share a person, tradition, or moment in Black history that has deeply influenced you and how it shapes your perspective?

One of the most influential people in my life was my Pastor, Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, from my hometown in New York City. Dr. Walker was a national Civil Rights leader and served as the Chief of Staff for Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His lifelong commitment to social justice and his work around the world had a significant impact on me. Dr. Walker often said, "Whatever dream of life it is we envision for our children, ourselves, our community, our church, we will never bring it to our fingertips unless it begins first with some initial risk." His powerful preaching on Sundays and his tireless advocacy for social justice shaped my perspective and encouraged me to take collective action to create meaningful change in our communities.

In what ways do you celebrate your heritage, and what traditions or practices keep you connected to your roots?

I celebrate my heritage by supporting Black-owned businesses, attending cultural events, and participating in Black heritage celebrations such as Black History Month activities, Juneteenth, and other venues. The traditions and practices that keep me connected to my roots include preparing traditional foods passed down through generations, embracing natural hair and styles, exploring my family's genealogy, and teaching my children about their cultural heritage.

What does Black joy mean to you, and how do you experience or cultivate it in your life and work?

For me, Black joy is a deep affirmation of life, resilience, and the ability to find happiness in the face of adversity. It is both personal and collective—manifested in family gatherings, creative achievements, and moments of togetherness. I experience and cultivate Black joy by embracing creativity and connection with others. I encourage joy by celebrating even the smallest successes, supporting others in their pursuit of fulfillment, and taking time to appreciate the beauty of life.

What's a favorite song, book, or movie that always makes you feel connected to Black culture and history?

A favorite song that always uplifts me is “Encore” by Cheryl Lynn, a classic.

won't you celebrate with me

By Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

from *Book of Light*. Copyright © 1999 by Lucille Clifton
(Poetry Foundation)

A Conversation With

Dr. Gloria Morgan

Retired Professor and Former Department Chair; Adjunct Professor
Information and Computer Technology

How has your personal journey shaped the way you contribute to MCC and the work you do every day?

My parents and grandparents were migrant workers and traveled from Florida to New York to work the fields. One of the things not lacking in my family was love and a strong work ethic. As a preteen, I worked the fields. I was born in Florida, and [I am] the second child of my parents. However, life took a major shift when my father left the marriage. Even though that was a difficult time in my life, I never forgot the lessons about hard work my family taught me. I bring this into my work with the students.



Can you share a person, tradition, or moment in Black history that has deeply influenced you and how it shapes your perspective?

When I was a teen, I babysat two children aged 4 and 8 for one summer. I had been with them for a few days when one morning Brian, the eight-year-old, told me not to touch him when trying to wipe his hands after lunch. He told me that I was dirty. He literally ran out of the house and ended up three houses away. I scooped up his sister and ran to catch him. He stopped when he saw me with his sister. I squatted at his level and asked him why he said that I was dirty. His response was, “You don’t look like us.” I was holding his sister’s hand and agreed with him, and shared that my skin was clean and not dirty. I asked him to rub my skin on my hand. He did and realized that no dirt was on his finger. I explained that God made people with many colors just like cars are different colors. My “ah-ha” moment came as I realized that he had no exposure to Black people. I shared the event with the parents. That day influenced the way I would eventually raise my children. I exposed them to other races, cultures, and lifestyles via school, social events, and activities.

In what ways do you celebrate your heritage, and what traditions or practices keep you connected to your roots?

I celebrate my heritage daily. When doing my daughter's hair, I would say, “happy nappy” so that they would love their coils and curls. On a regular basis I would share the names of their grand and great parents and the impact of their Southern-style work ethic, faith, and dedication to family. When attending family reunions, they connected with not only those of their age group but also with the “elders.” Yes, ma'am or yessir were necessary. Connection with my Jamaican roots always reminds me of the importance of family! Music, food, and positive relationships are essential parts of my heritage.

What does Black joy mean to you, and how do you experience or cultivate it in your life and work?

When I think of my heritage of a strong work ethic, I celebrate and reflect on how my parents and grandparents accomplished so much with so little. Seeing others succeed—especially my daughters—and accomplish their goals, brings me joy. I always tell them to “show or help another.”

What’s a favorite song, book, or movie that always makes you feel connected to Black culture and history?

The Other Wes Moore is a book that tells the first-hand story of a Black family’s challenges with poverty, crime and racism. The author is now the Governor of Maryland. Resilience is what he and I have experienced. We’re different but the same as we embrace our culture, our Blackness.

A Final Word

As Black History Month ends, we reflect on the stories, contributions, and impact of Black faculty and staff at Monroe Community College. Since its origins as Negro History Week in 1926, this month has served as a time of recognition, education, and celebration—but the work of honoring Black excellence doesn't stop here.

Black history is living history—it's in the classrooms, the offices, the conversations, and the communities we build every day. As we move beyond February, we encourage you to continue learning, uplifting Black voices, and fostering spaces where equity, representation, and joy thrive.

Here's how you can stay engaged:

- Learn about Black history beyond the month—read, watch, and explore new perspectives.
- Support Black colleagues and students in their journeys.
- Engage with MCC's African American Affinity Group (3AG) and upcoming cultural initiatives.

Thank you to everyone who shared their stories and to all who took the time to read and reflect. Let's keep the momentum going—Black history is now, and it's every day.

*"You may not control all the events that happen to you,
but you can decide not to be reduced by them."*

~ Maya Angelou, Writer and Civil Rights Activist

Compiled by Tokeya C. Graham for 3AG