



Celebrating Black Excellence at  
Monroe Community College  
Vol. 1  
February 2025

*"You must give your own story to the world."*

~ Carter G. Woodson, Historian, Educator, and Negro History Week Creator

## 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 ([msilas@monroecc.edu](mailto:msilas@monroecc.edu))
- Dr. Tokeya C. Graham (ENG), Vice Chair ([tgraham@monroecc.edu](mailto:tgraham@monroecc.edu))

*"A people without knowledge of their past history,  
origin and culture is like a tree without roots."*

~ Marcus Garvey, Jamaican Political Activist

## A Conversation With

### ***Dr. Calvin Gantt***

Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Belonging  
Executive Director, MCC Downtown Campus

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

As a first-generation college student and the first in my family to graduate from college, I understand the lived experience of those who think that the “American Dream” is unattainable. So, in the work that I do every day, I try and show up as a beacon of light to those students that despite reality of the “American Dream,” we do have some control over our life’s direction and an opportunity to give back to our community.

*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 educational leaders that I follow is Dr. Freeman A. Hrabowski, former president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. During his time as president Dr. Hrabowski made it his life's mission to uplift others. His background is in Science and Math, and he created ground-breaking pathways for underserved groups to find greater success in STEM. He also created a program for ex-felons which became incredibly successful and still runs today. It is leaders like him that find a way to get to yes when the predominant response to change for underserved populations is no.



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

I celebrate my heritage through reading about different historical figures and I love looking at African art. I also, in my work, support events for Black History Month and cultural arts that depict Black history. Like many, exposure to my African American roots was not developed until college; thus, I continue to try and learn as much as I can.

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

Black joy for me means that I celebrate all opportunities possible to be in the skin that I am in. I also celebrate and support Black culture and events when I can, and I try and financially support Black-owned businesses, when and where possible. What is important for me to help others understand is that my desire to celebrate who I am does not equate to expecting others to.

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

My favorite song is “Ain't No Stopping Us Now” by McFadden and Whitehead, and one of my favorite movies is *Rustin*, which is about an activist who helped [Rev. Dr.] Martin Luther King plan the 1963 March on Washington.

# Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing

By James Weldon Johnson

1 Lift ev'ry voice and sing,  
till earth and heaven ring,  
ring with the harmonies of liberty.

Let our rejoicing rise  
high as the list'ning skies,  
let it resound loud as the rolling sea.  
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.  
Facing the rising sun  
of our new day begun,  
let us march on till victory is won.

2 Stony the road we trod,  
bitter the chast'ning rod,  
felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
yet with a steady beat,  
have not our weary feet  
come to the place for which our people sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.  
We have come, treading our path thro' the blood of the slaughtered,  
out from the gloomy past,  
till now we stand at last  
where the bright gleam of our bright star is cast.

3 God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
thou who hast brought us thus far on the way,  
thou who hast by thy might  
led us into the light,  
keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee;  
lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee;  
shadowed beneath thy hand,  
may we forever stand,  
true to our God, true to our native land.

## A Conversation With

### **Mr. Willis Major**

Manager, Advanced Manufacturing  
Finger Lakes Workforce Development Center

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

I have gained knowledge from working as an engineer for over 30 years for General Motors and four years at Tesla. I have been an adjunct instructor at MCC for five years, and a student at General Motors Institute and Rochester Institute of Technology. I have been on the board of the United Way charity, Theta Omicron Scholarship Foundation. The insight I have gained from the experiences above has prepared me to make a bigger contribution to MCC because in my present position I have to form a good understanding and relationship with instructors, students, and community and corporate partners in order to further the mission of upskilling students through workforce development. My previous experiences relate to my current position at MCC.



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

In 1911, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity was created at Howard University. This historically Black fraternity's cardinal principles are Manhood, Scholarship, Perseverance, and Uplift. I joined this great organization in 1988, and these are the four principles that have guided me throughout my life.

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

I don't actually have a specific tradition that I focus on celebrating. I am just proud of where I came from, proud of having roots in Coleman and Cuthbert Georgia, and proud of being born and raised in the inner city of Rochester (on Troup, Brown, and Reynolds Streets). I grew up in the 70s and 80s, which allowed me to experience the old school Black culture. So, I am fortunate to have been born during a time to be able to experience and appreciate both old and new school Black culture to the fullest and this is what keeps me connected to my roots.

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

Black joy for me is about being proud of having the full Black experience growing up in the inner city and being able to rise above difficult times and also reflect back on the good times and appreciate all of it during my journey to becoming successful. I also get Black joy from excelling in education, knowledge, and wisdom and being able to give back to those who are not as fortunate as myself. Helping another brother or sister reach their goals and dreams gives me Black joy. Sharing my experiences on what it takes to succeed, is how I cultivate Black joy in my life and work.

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

"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson is a hymn known as the Black National Anthem. When I went to George Mather Forbes Elementary School #4, they made us sing this every morning, so it definitely connects me to Black culture and history.

# BLK History Month

By Nikki Giovanni

If Black History Month is not  
viable then wind does not  
carry the seeds and drop them  
on fertile ground  
rain does not  
dampen the land  
and encourage the seeds  
to root  
sun does not  
warm the earth  
and kiss the seedlings  
and tell them plain:

You're As Good As Anybody Else  
You've Got A Place Here, Too

from Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea.

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## A Conversation With

### ***Dr. Toya Mañón***

Assistant Professor

Education & Human Services

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

My journey as an educator, advocate, and lifelong learner has been deeply influenced by my lived experiences and the communities that have shaped me. Growing up, I witnessed firsthand the power of education as a tool for liberation and the barriers that often exist for Black students. These experiences fuel my commitment to equity and culturally responsive teaching at MCC. Every day, I strive to create inclusive learning environments where students feel seen, valued, and empowered to use their voices. My work is not just about teaching—it's about cultivating spaces where students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds, can thrive.



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

My grandfather, the late, Mr. Alton “Cigar” Sutton, raised me as if I was his own child. He was a highly skilled golfer, that never really boasted about his achievements, though he earned dozens of trophies and created a long-running golf club for little Black boys in the Rochester area. Golf was his passion, but barriers limited his access to the sport. He first discovered the game as a child, caddying on a racist course that only allowed Black players on Sundays. But that didn’t stop him—he taught himself, became one of the best golfers in the region, and built a community of Black golfers who celebrated the game.

He found peace in golf, in fishing, and in the family and community he built. His ability to create his own space within a sport that often excluded him and those that looked like him is something that deeply influences me. He taught me resilience, the importance of building community, and the value of pursuing your passions even in spaces that weren’t originally meant for you.

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

I celebrate my heritage through staying connected with family, community engagement, and the intentional practice of self-care: rest, joy, and wellness. Cooking traditional dishes, supporting Black-owned businesses, and engaging in intergenerational conversations help me stay connected to my roots. I also infuse my work with culturally responsive practices, ensuring that students see their histories, identities, and brilliance reflected in their learning experiences.

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

Black joy, to me, is a celebration of our resilience, creativity, and brilliance. It means finding peace and stillness in a world that often tries to keep us in motion. It is the ability to remain grounded during chaos, to carve out moments of rest, and to embrace the fullness of our existence without apology. It is the ability to laugh and be happy. I cultivate Black joy through meaningful connections with family and friends, creative expression, and prioritizing wellness. In my work, I create spaces where Black students and educators feel seen, valued, and empowered to show up as their full, authentic selves.

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

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin is a book that continues to resonate with me deeply. Baldwin's words are both a mirror and a guide, challenging me to reflect on history, identity, and justice while affirming the necessity of truth-telling. I also find myself returning to the works of Toni Morrison—her storytelling captures the depth, beauty, and complexity of Black life in ways that are both poetic and revolutionary. Whether it's *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, or *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's writing is a reminder of the power of our narratives.

Thank you for reading the stories of our dynamic colleagues. Black excellence is woven into the fabric of MCC, and these stories offer just a glimpse into the dedication, resilience, and brilliance of our Black employees. Their journeys remind us of the power of representation, the richness of culture, and the importance of fostering a workplace where everyone feels seen and valued. We extend our deepest gratitude to those who shared their experiences—your voices strengthen our community in meaningful ways. Let's continue to celebrate, learn from, and uplift one another, not just during Black History Month, but every day.

*"If you know whence you came,  
there is really no limit to where you can go."*

~ James Baldwin, Writer and Civil Rights Activist