

**Black History Month: A Year
Round Effort in a Massachusetts Prison**

By
Charles N. Diorio

Black History Month is a twelve month proposition here in MCI-Shirley, a medium security clink located in eastern Massachusetts; home to nearly twelve hundred convicts.

Each month, classrooms ring out with workshops and encounter groups which focus on some aspect of African American concerns affecting the community here in prison and throughout society at large. Groups like the Second Degree Lifer's Group address issues like restorative justice, and recidivism; while Toastmaster's offers black, white, and hispanic and asian inmates a chance to speak in front of a group about their experiences in and out of prison. Many issues are raised, and most deal with crime, punishment, employment, and race relations.

In June, the African-American population celebrated "Juneteenth," an event which looks at a period in post Civil War reconstruction when the last vestiges of slavery was stamped out in Galveston Texas on June 19th 1865.

More recently, Kwanzaa was celebrated by about a hundred inmates, guests, and dignitaries in this facilities visiting room. In each case, inmates and civilians gathered peacefully with righteous pride and offered up speeches, songs, poetry and lots of support.

Black History Month is an annual observance which coincides with the birthdays of the civil war era black leader Frederick Douglass, February 14th, and of Abraham Lincoln, February 12th.¹ Controversial since its inception in 1976, prisons like Shirley have an opportunity to build good relations among

the African American prison population by permitting events like commemorating the celebration of Black History.

Black history begins and is set in motion in the United States by the institution of slavery which held sway for nearly three hundred years until the thirteenth Amendment to the United States constitution emancipated slaves in 1865. The Jim Crow system followed during a brutal reconstruction period in many southern states.

Jim Crow's system of de facto and de jure racial segregation was not dismantled until the 1940's through the 1960's as courts and federal initiatives chipped away at carefully constructed laws designed to oppress African-American's. In *Shelley v. Kraemer*,² for example, state courts were prohibited from enforcing racially restrictive covenants specific to housing and real estate exclusions. *Brown v. Board of Education*³ opened the door for a variety of civil rights initiatives including the Civil Rights Act, and Voting Rights Act of the mid 1960's.

The history of African-American's vis-a-vis Corrections has been dismal. During Jim Crow, those who were convicted of crimes were forced to work for little or no pay as prisoners, often leased out to white employers.⁴ Here in MCI-Shirley, prisoners labor for a dollar a day. Race is not a distinction.

The Jim Crow period has been described as a "Seventy-five year disaster, a vicious system of terror during which some five thousand African-American's were slaughtered many of them ritually burnt alive."⁵ It is within this context of years of discrimination that forms the basis of Black History Month. Many events which African American's promote year round are carefully designed to promote a positive outlook on black culture in America.

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Fifty years ago, a young Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, wrote a slim white paper for the Johnson Administration on race in America. His work, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," (1965) made the case that there are two America's, one black, one white. The message of the work was startling, "The Negro community was doing badly, and its condition was probably getting worse, not better." Moynihan, who was a trained sociologist judged that "most Negro youth are in danger of being caught up in the tangle of pathology that affects their world, and probably a majority are so entrapped."⁶

African American's migrated to northern cities to escape racial persecution and in part for jobs.⁷

The decline of the sharecropping system and the advent of chemical herbicides and the mechanical cotton picker had reduced the demand for farm labor in the south.⁸

In 1978, William Julius Wilson popularized the term "underclass" to describe the non-working poor who have been left behind by the disappearance of blue-collar jobs.⁹

The 1970's also were a watershed time for American Corrections. Riots at Attica and uprisings at MCI-Norfolk here in Massachusetts ushered in reforms, programs, and progressive jailing. Events like Black History Month, Kwanzaa, and Juneteenth celebrations are a direct result of reforms made forty years ago. Reforms which lately we see being slowly bit by bit dismantled and done away with completely.

Here in MCI-Shirley, the African American community knows the value of the past to effect change for the future. Prison administrators likewise know this institution, and others like it, are dangerously overcrowded and hopelessly

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underfunded.

Prison administrators find it serves their interest to permit events celebrating Black History Month which is organized by the inmate population and are peaceful gatherings where local politicians, clergy and community activists preach a positive message.

Lately privileges and food have been slowly deliberately taken away. The misery factor here in this facility is way up. Jail officials have been enforcing crack down's on minor rule infractions such as cell decorum, wearing prison identification on an outhar garment, restrictions on personal property, and nit picking small violations. Area supervisors take a hard line saying, "We have rules, rules must be obeyed."¹⁰

Prison officials seem to realize, or at least acknowledge, that if they are going to ratchet up petty rule enforcement, take food items off the menu, and create a hostile climate in which to do time, they can strike a constructive tone by permitting a commemoration of Black History Month.

Sadly, in the end, small concessions like this soften the blow from the heavy handed taking of priviliges which contribute to an overall sense of misery and hopelessness prevalent in the facility.

Correctional Facilities like MCI-Shirley are tinderboxes where convicts are double bunked, marched to meals, and where race relations are a delicate matter on the back burner always simmering. Built in 1991, Shirley is currently 160%¹¹ percent beyond design capacity for housing prisoners.

MCI-Shirley is designated a Medium and Minimum security lock up. It was initially accredited in 1995. The annual cost per offender (FY 2013) is \$36,997¹² dollars. It was originally designed for a maximum capacity of 720 in the medium, and 299 in the minimum. Today, the medium is home to nearly 1,200 bodies.¹³

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Events like commemorating Black History attract nearly sixty-or-so inmates. All races are welcome. Supporters come from the community and arrive with a positive message, and little real knowledge of the day to day goings on. There are speeches, songs, and lots of applause and gratitude.

For an hour, inmates may break away from a routine of prison politics familiar to these outlying islands of social welfare.

Questions of race in America have always been dicey. Surprisingly, nobody allows their true feelings about race relations to interfere with a good time. There are no answers, but there will always be emotions which frame the debate. Some seek to expose what America is doing to the black community, while others say the real problem is what black communities are doing to themselves.

There will be no answers here in MCI-Shirley; people gather and pray for a safe good time. If there is any finger pointing or recrimination, it is directed squarely at the Department of Corrections for failing those in its care. More than anything else, what unifies this disperate prison population is that the system itself is failing everyone equally.

End

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Mr. Diorio welcomes all comments

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NOTES

1. The World Book Encyclopedia, (2009)
2. Shelley v. Kraemer, 334 US 1, 92 L.Ed. 1161 (1948) "The individual is entitled to judicial protection against classification based upon racial or ethnic background..."
3. Brown v. Board of Education, 347 US 483, 98 L. Ed. 873 (1954)
4. Blackmon, Douglas A., Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black American's From the Civil War to World War II p. 7-8 (2008)
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6. Sanneh, Kelefa, Don't Be Like That: Does Black Culture Need To Be Reformed? The New Yorker, Pg.62 (Feb. 9th 2015)
7. Wilson, Julius Wilson, When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor, Pg. 53-54 (1996)
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Authors Note: From a conversation with an area supervisor named Sgt. Burke on my being denied the chance to take a shower during the thirty minute lunch movement on February 11th 2015
11. Massachusetts Department of Correction Population Trends 2013 Pg. 5
12. Ibid at Note 11.
13. Ibid at Note 11

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Bibliography

Authors Note: While direct quotes may be reflected by notes, inspiration, certain concepts were influenced by the following works. And where possible, I did attribute the substance of influence.

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10. Massachusetts Department of Correction Population Trends, Institution Overview, (2013)