



PRESIDENT'S PAGE

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TMBA, Black History Month and a Legal Legend

February is Black History Month, which commemorates the contributions African Americans have made to American history in their struggles for freedom and parity. As such, I thought it appropriate to highlight our affiliate bar, the Thurgood Marshall Bar Association (TMBA).

TMBA was founded in 2012, by the Honorable Daphne G. Sykes (Family Law Judge, OC Superior Court), Carolyn K. Carlisle (Senior Deputy District Attorney, OC District Attorney's Office), Michael A. Gregg (2021 OCBA Treasurer and Shareholder, Littler Mendelson, P.C.), Marion H. Wheeler, Jr. (Attorney at Law), and Connie Louis Vallas (Assistant Statewide Field Director, SEIU Local 1000). TMBA's mission is to "promote diversity, professional improvement, and the advancement of justice through positive community involvement and excellence in the practice of law for the Black legal community, allies, and the community at large." Its mission embraces the same principles articulated in the OCBA's mission: justice, support for fellow lawyers, and community service.

Several distinguished Orange County judges and lawyers have been honored at TMBA's installation galas. In 2018, TMBA paid tribute to the Honorable Karen L. Robinson, the first African American female judge in Orange County, appointed to the bench in March 2003. Prior to becoming a judge, she was the first female African American City Council Member and Mayor in Costa Mesa. TMBA honors her pioneering accomplishments with its annual award.

In 2019, TMBA presented the Judge Karen L. Robinson Legal Excellence Award to the Honorable Erithe A. Smith, who is the first, and still only, female African American Bankruptcy Judge in the Ninth Circuit. Judge Smith gives back to the Orange County community by speaking to young lawyers and law students, and is an active member on the OCBA Diversity and Inclusion Committee. She explains, "the importance of diversity and inclusion in our society can best be summarized this way: Everyone matters, everyone has value, and everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity, fairness, and equality in all aspects of life. Period."

Other distinguished TMBA honorees include the Honorable Fred W. Slaughter, the Honorable Frederick P. Aguirre (ret.), Dean L. Song Richardson (UCI School of Law), Chancellor's Professor of Law Michelle Goodwin (UCI School of Law), and OCBA Board member John Gibson (DLA Piper Global). TMBA will host its annual installation gala virtually on February 28, 2021, and will recognize prominent lawyers and judges in our legal community.

In addition to the annual gala, TMBA raises funds for bar scholarships, connects with local Black law student organizations, and encourages Black lawyers to stay and practice in Orange County. Rebekah Thomas, TMBA's 2021 President, plans to "reconnect with the greater legal community, reinvest in the Black community, and rebuild the professional development of Black lawyers so they can remain competitive in the legal field." You can contribute to TMBA's

Charitable Foundation, a 501(c)(3) entity, via the TMBA website. TMBA continues to honor Justice Thurgood Marshall's legacy by recognizing "no ethnic, social, or cultural group is valued above any other," and by its commitment to diversity and multiculturalism. Membership is open to all.


Dimetria Jackson, 2012 OCBA President, is a former TMBA board member. She imagines that the late Donald S. Gray, first African American OCBA President (1999), would be "proud of the Orange County legal community's efforts to galvanize around inclusion, diversity, and mentoring."

Now, here's a little background on Black History Month that I recently discovered. Black History Month was spearheaded by historian Carter G. Woodson, the son of former slaves. After receiving his Ph.D from Harvard, he promoted the importance of including African American history in classrooms and culture during the 1920s. Many years later, President Ronald Reagan would state, "Understanding the history of Black Americans is a key to understanding the strength of our nation."

Woodson chose the month of February to celebrate Black history because Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, both prominent abolitionists in American history, were already celebrated in February. Per the Library of Congress, since 1996, every United States president has issued an annual proclamation for National African American History Month.

I reached out to TMBA President Rebekah Thomas to find out why it's important to celebrate Black History Month locally. As Rebekah observes: "When you look at Martin Luther King's speech . . . he had a dream that one day 'people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.' We have great content and we have character. It's important to remember that all of us have made contributions to history. Black history is American history, and that's what Black History Month is about."

Judge Erithe Smith recalls growing up in Los Angeles in the 60s and 70s, and having two encyclopedias: the World Book Encyclopedia and the Encyclopedia of Black History. Judge Smith "looks forward to the day when the history of all cultures in this country are fully incorporated into American History. Until that day, Black History Month remains relevant and necessary."

To learn more about Black history, Judge Robinson recommends attending the annual Black History Cultural Fair hosted by the Orange County Heritage Council. No parade is possible this year, but—in the spirit of connection, community, and unity—I encourage you to learn something new about Black history and heritage in Orange County this year. 

Larisa M. Dinsmoor is 2021 OCBA President, an Orange County Public Defender, and co-chair of the OCBA's Racial Justice Task Force. She would love to hear from you at larisa@ocbar.org.