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- ERIC L. EWING, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, GREAT PLAINS BLACK HISTORY MUSEUM

# Black History Month

IS EVERY DAY FOR LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

**The theme for this Black History Month, African Americans and Labor, centers on the varied and profound ways work intersects with the collective experiences of Black people.**

According to the Washington D.C.-based Association for the Study of African American Life and History, 2025 also marks the centennial anniversary of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids, the first Black union to receive a charter in the American Federation of Labor.

Closer to home, the Great Plains Black History Museum has been an invaluable resource for the community since 1975 when Bertha Calloway envisioned creating a place to share the rich history of African Americans in Omaha. The museum's mission is to educate as a means of bringing everyone together and encouraging the dialogue that bridges the divide.

"The Great Plains Black History Museum offers educational exhibits on African American organizations and pioneers in Omaha and the region," explained Executive Director Eric L. Ewing.

When asked about particularly memorable or surprising historical facts, two came to mind.

"Omaha is home to Nebraska's oldest African American-owned business, which has been operating since 1938 as the state's only African American newspaper – [The] Omaha Star," he said. "Hayes

& Associates, the largest independently owned and operated accounting firm based in Omaha, Nebraska, has been serving the community since 1983."

Ewing also confirmed how history impacts present day entrepreneurship and business contributions, and its overall importance.

"Through our exhibits, we aim to inform guests about the history and contributions of African Americans to the United States and their influence on current and future entrepreneurs," he stated. "Black history is American history viewed through the experiences of African Americans, and it is essential for everyone to learn."

During Black History Month, GPBHM is hosting its annual membership drive. Ewing encourages anyone wishing to support its exhibitions and gain members-only benefits to visit [gpblackhistorymuseum.org](http://gpblackhistorymuseum.org). There are various membership levels, from student to business and lifetime memberships.

Year-round, he said, teams can schedule an appointment to visit the museum online on Wednesdays to Saturdays between the hours of 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. Ewing also noted readers can request a traveling exhibit for display at their respective organizations, or a virtual or onsite Lunch and Learn presentation.

**As the nation engages in more open and ongoing conversations about Black experiences, students of all backgrounds are increasingly eager to explore these topics in-depth. Black Studies provides a platform for those open discussions.**

- CYNTHIA L. ROBINSON, DEPARTMENT CHAIR AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, BLACK STUDIES DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA OMAHA

## The community classroom

For Cynthia L. Robinson and her team at the Department of Black Studies at the University of Nebraska Omaha, every month is Black History Month.

"That said, we are working on organizing speakers who can engage with both the campus and the broader Omaha community," the department chair and associate professor said. "These efforts are part of our commitment to fostering ongoing dialogue and education around Black experiences, history and culture."

Robinson indicated the department has made significant strides in 2024.

"One highlight was the North Omaha Initiative, which is housed in the Department of Black Studies, receiving Weitz Innovation Excellence Fund support," she said. "The grant has enabled UNO to further engage with and support the local community, strengthening our mission to connect education with real-world impact."

As a partnership with the Urban League of Nebraska, this "community-centered" education initiative is described as not just a classroom, but a hub of collaboration, innovation and opportunity.

The Weitz Innovation and Excellence funds are designed to inspire faculty and staff to consider new ideas that align with one of the following pillars: educating all learners; community engagement, development, and partnerships; and workforce and economic development.

"There are several ways the business community can support our mission. Getting involved with the North Omaha Initiative is a great start," Robinson added. "This program is now in its second semester, with enrollment numbers increasing. Additionally, contributions toward tuition assistance for our community classes make a tremendous difference."

While many individuals want to participate, she said they need support with tuition costs.

"Even small donations can help us extend access to these valuable educational opportunities," Robinson said.

In general, she emphasized that there is great excitement in Black Studies among students and in the community.

"Our focus is ensuring that students are well-advised and aware of the broad applications of a Black Studies major, which integrates seamlessly with other fields of study," Robinson said. "As the nation engages in more open and ongoing conversations about Black experiences, students of all backgrounds are increasingly eager to explore these topics in-depth. Black Studies provides a platform for those open discussions."

The department describes Black Studies as a "newly revitalized



discipline."

"The revitalization of Black Studies lies in its interdisciplinary approach," Robinson said. "By connecting with other departments across the university, we've made it easier for students to pair Black Studies with other academic interests, whether as a major, minor or through elective courses. This flexibility allows students to integrate Black Studies into a variety of career paths while highlighting the program's relevance across disciplines."

In the new year, Robinson said a top institutional priority remains increasing the number of Black Studies majors and enrollment in its courses.

"This year marks my 10th year as chair and during this time, we have completely overhauled the curriculum to make it more interdisciplinary," she said. "This transformation ensures we are meeting students' needs and growing interest in the field."

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IS EVERY DAY FOR LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

[The program] aims to create a cohesive and attractive business district that will attract visitors and shoppers, ultimately boosting local commerce.

- LAVONYA GOODWIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NORTH 24TH STREET BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT ASSOCIATION



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New life for a historically important area

LaVonya Goodwin serves as executive director of the North 24th Street Business Improvement District Association, which is dedicated to championing the economic development, infrastructure improvement, promotion and safety of the area. The nonprofit association functions as the operating arm of the BID.

Goodwin highlighted four priorities: the North 24th Street Streetscape Master Plan; building restoration and façade improvement; litter control and beautification; and crime prevention through environmental design.

Master plan projects address the likes of sidewalk repair, pedestrian safety, sustainable landscaping, historical themes, parking, and multimodal transit from Meredith Avenue to Cuming Street. The project, which has about \$53 million in funding, will, in part, include community engagement beginning in the first quarter of this year.

The \$2 million restoration/façade improvements seek to revitalize the visual identities of businesses between Meredith Avenue and Cuming Street.

"[The program] aims to create a cohesive and attractive business district that will attract visitors and shoppers, ultimately boosting local commerce," Goodwin said.

The latter projects include regular groundskeeping and cleanups, advocating against commercial dumping and improving upon neglected properties, as well as the efforts of its pilot Crime Prevention Through Environment Design (CPTED) program.

The 24th Street BID's CPTED program was launched in June 2020, and Goodwin said through grassroots efforts and low-cost, accessible tools they are working to "create a neighborhood that is conducive to economic investment and healthy living."

She referred to tools and efforts such as monthly community conversations, dusk-to-dawn lighting, public safety announcements and closed property signs.

Going forward, she highlighted the opening of the restoration/façade improvement program in March; Good Morning Business Networking event on March 12; and Community Clean Up dates on Saturdays starting in April. More information on corporate sponsorship opportunities can be found at [north24thstreetbid.com/](http://north24thstreetbid.com/).

This significant investment allows us to rigorously evaluate and enhance the Youth Attendance Navigator program, ensuring its continued success and providing a blueprint for replication nationwide.

- WAYNE BROWN, PRESIDENT & CEO, URBAN LEAGUE OF NEBRASKA



Addressing classroom, business barriers

The Urban League of Nebraska recently announced two projects with big implications for the business community and greater community as a whole: the Nebraska Opportunity Exchange: Empowering Small Businesses to Thrive Through Contracts Onboarding and Certification Series, and a grant to support the Youth Attendance Navigator program.

The former initiative aims to support underrepresented small businesses in the state by equipping them with tools, resources, and training to access capital, navigate contracting and thrive in the competitive business landscape.

These efforts are in conjunction with the Greater Omaha Chamber and MCL Construction, and the series (which runs from January to March) spans in-person and virtual workshops and training on unlocking venture capital and federal grants, and financial planning and tax strategies.

"Nebraska Opportunity Exchange Fund participants will have the chance to apply for a microloan of up to \$50,000, specifically designed to assist with procurement costs," said President and CEO Wayne Brown. "To qualify, participants must attend three in-person sessions on topics such as capital access, legal compliance, financial planning,

and contract growth, in addition to completing three procurement-focused sessions."

Eligible participants include minorities, women and veteran-owned small business entrepreneurs who are looking to scale and win government and corporate contracts through funding, certifications and growth strategies.

The Urban League is also involved in a program through the Oregon Research Institute to help improve student attendance and academic success in urban schools.

The Youth Attendance Navigator Program operates across eight urban middle and high schools in Omaha, and will include embedding mentors with lived experiences into schools to effectively address barriers to attendance and foster meaningful connections.

Brown noted that the program has demonstrated success in addressing chronic absenteeism exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This significant investment allows us to rigorously evaluate and enhance the Youth Attendance Navigator program, ensuring its continued success and providing a blueprint for replication nationwide," he said. "This research partnership with ORI enables us to refine and expand a program that is already making a difference in the lives of students and families."