

## Breaking Down Barriers and Celebrating Black Resistance

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31

Wednesday, 08 February 2023 07:20 - Last Updated Monday, 06 February 2023 17:36

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<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/juneteenth-flag-buffalo-soldiers-s5.jpg>



***The theme for Black History Month 2023 is Black Resistance. This month serves as a reminder that the fight for racial and social equity is nowhere near finished, and none of us should be on the sidelines.***

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MADISON - When the state of Wisconsin first tried for statehood in the 1840s, Wisconsin's constitution allowed for referenda to expand suffrage to new groups. Activists wasted no time in getting Black suffrage on the ballot. Wisconsin's first referendum for Black suffrage failed in 1847, but two years later in 1849 Black suffrage was approved by voters.

In reality, however, African-Americans would wait twenty years to exercise their franchise. In 1866, Ezekiel Gillespie, a prominent member of Milwaukee's Black community, sued for the right to vote. The case went all the way to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which affirmed that Black men had the right to vote since the 1849 referendum.

This illustrates one of the most enduring lessons Americans have learned from struggles for equality. Just as Black men in Wisconsin had to wait to exercise their franchise, equality under the law has not always translated to equality in practice. Commitment and courageous action of individuals defied the odds against an entire system of injustice.

From the early years of the Republic through the Civil Rights movement into the present, many

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courageous Black Americans have made their voices heard while facing physical violence or even death. Too often, narratives – written by white authors – focus on Black victimhood. That is not the story we need to tell.

The theme for Black History Month this year is Black Resistance. This is meant to reframe the conversation about Black history around a theme of empowerment. By celebrating Black Resistance, we honor Black people throughout Wisconsin's history and rightly center their experiences and their accomplishments. While there are many important Black leaders that we celebrate by name, there are even more heroes whose names we've never heard. It takes the efforts of many to accomplish sweeping change.



A quick glance at the news will show you many Americans who have a difficult time believing that racism still exists in our country. Since before America's founding, both American leaders and the American populace have ignored so many brutal injustices, both individual and systemic. For decades, politicians have been aware of racial disparities in America. Yet it seems our country's leaders either deny the disparities completely or only give lip service to how terrible they are, taking no meaningful action.

Meanwhile, the legacy of racism continues to impact Black communities and individuals, from income disparities impacting communities of color, to horrific acts of violence fueled by hatred, to stereotypes broadcast in the media. Any effort to eradicate racial injustice requires a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach. This injustice has impacted every aspect of our society, and there are no simple answers when it comes to untangling hundreds of years of bias and oppression.

Racial injustice cannot be fully addressed on an individual level. It is not enough to simply educate individuals; we must change the institutions that treat some citizens differently from

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others. Atoning for centuries of racism and discrimination is an effort that requires systemic and transformative social change.



As I've discussed in previous columns, it is the job of legislators to evaluate state laws and change them when they are out-of-date. As state legislators and leaders, it's our job to prioritize racial equality in our legislative work. We do this by introducing new legislation to tackle problems, but also by removing barriers to inequality that are currently ingrained in our laws.

As an ally and a public servant, I remain committed to working toward a more just and equitable future for all Wisconsinites. I am here to listen and learn. The fight for racial and social equity is nowhere near finished, and none of us should be on the sidelines.