2016 The Year of Being Unapologetically Black
I think we all can agree that 2016’s black history month, as well as the events leading up to it, has been extraordinary for the black community. From Beyoncé’s new song Formation to Kendrick Lamar’s Grammys performance, 2016 is now unofficially the year of being unapologetically black.

In recent years, from a media standpoint, there has been a steady increase in black individuals who want to celebrate the dope-ness of being a black person in America. Just as in the movements in the 1960s and 1970s, more black people have been advocates for reclaiming our blackness as our own. Instead of sitting idle, the black community has also been addressing issues that have gone on for too long.

To me, being unapologetically black means that I am proud of my heritage, my melanin and my people. It means that I am proud to be who I am, I will never apologize to anyone for that and I will never dull my shine because it makes some people uncomfortable. I will never be ashamed of my people and I will always fight for more than just equality; I will fight for equal representation and an end to my culture’s appropriation. I will also continue to learn about my people and myself as we all go on this journey figuring out what it means to be black.

Social media movements like #BlackLivesMatters and #BlackGirlMagic are examples of how we are raising our voices to speak on what it means to be a black person in America. We are starting a conversation and starting a change, which makes it a great time to be alive. However, this isn’t your mama’s movement. This time we aren’t doing sit-ins and singing “We Shall Overcome.” Those things were amazing, and I will always give my props to the greats (Angela Davis, Nina Simone, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Marcus Garvey, Sojourner Truth etc.) but this is different.

We have moved past fighting merely for equal rights, we are fighting a battle against the philosophy behind a system that was never built for us. We are fighting to fix the identity crisis all black people in America experience: we are no longer Africans in America, but black people who were born and raised in American society. We as a community are still coming terms with that, while also fighting institutionalized racism that is often hard to see clearly. Gone are the days of wanting the right to vote; now we are battling the complexity of the racial tension in the Western world. This ain’t your mama’s movement.

Ephraim Nehemiah, a Kent State student has dedicated his life to exploring these topics. Nehemiah is a Pan-African studies major and uses poetry as his personal form of protest. Since he is studying the history of the African diaspora, he can see a shift over time in terms the ideology of black people.
“I feel like we are moving into a time where we are trying to liberate ourselves from all the blankets of oppression,” Nehemiah said. “Where as the past, it was very narrow, because it was all about ‘we have to get our rights,’ and so now that we have the illusion of this freedom, a lot of the attitudes that feed the system are starting to be attacked, opposed to just the particular law.”

Kent State’s assistant professor and President of the Pan African Faculty and Staff Association, George Garrison, was alive during a time where basic rights were seen as a privilege to many black people. Garrison was born in Rock Hill, South Carolina while the country was still very much segregated.

“We were working hard to open the doors. The doors are now open and you guys walked through the door. We were trying to open up the doors to universities, to Wall Street, and in the institutions like the military,” Garrison said. “Now, we want to see that you guys have fair representation in all of the decision-making arenas that exist in this country. We need black voices.”

Although it is clear that society has progressed in terms of racial inequality, it is obvious that racism still exists. Because of this, black people still continue to fight towards a better world and Garrison believes that the young generation is key in carrying on this fight.

“From generation to generation the struggle changes; it morphs and it evolves. The same goes for racism and bigotry; it morphs and it evolves,” Garrison said. We need a vigilant group of young people in every generation to monitor that and help facilitate that struggle.”

The struggle of today is no longer fighting to be seen as equal in the eyes of the law. Now, we are fighting institutionalized racism instead of covert individual racism. We may have been liberated physically of our shackles, but we need to liberate ourselves from the effect of those shackles.

“People want to be liberated from their oppression,” Nehemiah said. “They want to be respected for who they are, they want to be aware of how the system creates attitudes for oppression.”

As a 22-year-old activist, Nehemiah says that one of the biggest challenges today is not only fighting a system that is built on discrimination, but also recognizing that black people do not always fall under the same category. Some black people

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experience privilege based on class, sexuality and gender, and that adds some complexity to today’s issues.

“I definitely notice a movement towards liberation...before I don’t think those things were highlighted,” Nehemiah said. “In my personal journey, the first step was being made aware of the past and our history. Recently, I was able to notice why people are saying ‘all black lives matter,’ instead of ‘just black lives matter.’”

Unifying the race has been a constant theme for black people since the day we were brought to this continent. Whether this means unifying to fight for our equal rights as citizens, or unifying against systematic racism, black people will, and have, continue to fight to see a better day for our children.

“It is the responsibility of each generation to pass down to the next generation a better world than what they found,” Garrison said. “Henry Highland Garnett said that we should not pass on our wretchedness as slaves. I feel that way still about my generation and you should feel that about yours.”

Above all, we must remember that we do have the power to change the world. Maybe we aren’t marching on Washington or establishing the Underground Railroad, but we can still make a difference. We can still become the best doctors, lawyers, writers, teachers or anything else we put our minds to. We can still become senators, judges and governors. We can make our voices be heard in a world that wants us to be quiet.

“You have inherited a great position. Despite all the problems that young people see in the world and the United States in particular, you are the most privileged group of Africans that have ever lived and that live anywhere else on the planet right now,” Garrison said. “Despite Ferguson, despite Eric Garner, despite Tamir Rice, despite all of that, if you were to survey any group of black people in the world, they would trade places with you in the drop of a hat.”