Black History Month Statement
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The Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) has selected “Civil Rights in America” as the theme for Black History Month 2014. The theme was selected in part because during 2014, we will observe the Fiftieth Anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

This Act, viewed by many as one of the most significant pieces of federal legislation, prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion or national origin. Jim Crow laws that legalized segregated public places were nullified by its passage. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was created and the Community Relations Service.

I am happy to celebrate the civil rights gains in the United States because I remember growing up in the segregated South. My father was a civil rights leader, and as a result, he and our family were subjected to physical, economic and psychological mistreatment, harassment and violence. He spent years using direct action, persuasion, and legal action to gain the right to vote for black people in his parish (county). He was never deterred from his ultimate objective. When the state of Louisiana outlawed the NAACP, my mother (who was secretary) and my father (who was president) took the local branch underground. My assignment was the threatening phone calls and my sister and my brother were backup security (with shotgun lessons provided by my father). I heard the shots ring out when nightriders shot at our car, attempting to kill my father, mother and four of my siblings. My father’s remarks to the Jet Magazine reporter who came to cover the story was, “They’ve waited too long to kill me, I’ve Voted Now!

It took a long time for black people in my hometown of Lake Providence, Louisiana to reap the benefits that were provided through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and it took litigation, suffering and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to give them voting rights. Yet, if Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and the Congress had not acted, it would have taken a much longer time for some semblance of equality to reach the northeast corner of Louisiana.

In 2014, we are celebrating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act at a time when attempts are being made to roll back the clock on black progress. The challenge is for the young generation to become activists like my parents and not let economic or physical threats deter them.

The civil rights movement was led by young people like Dr. Martin Luther King and Dr. Ronald Walters. Ron Walters was the leader of the NAACP Youth Council of Wichita, Kansas in 1958 when they targeted the lunch counter at the Dockum Drug store for a sit-in demonstration because blacks were not allowed to eat there.

After becoming a professor, Dr. Walters urged students to become scholar-activists, working for positive change in the conditions of black people around the world. So as we celebrate another Black History Month, I urge the youth of today to remember Dr. Walters’ words that young people “have a mandate from their history to engage in social struggle”.