16 Black Influencers in American History and Successes

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In honor of Black History Month, I will be sharing 12 black influencers who made an impact on America’s successes and have drawn attention recently. They include black influencers from different major topics such as medicine, sports, civil rights, and the arts. Note, I am listing a few in the community as there are many black influencers who contributed to a great percentage of American history, not just these 12.

1. **Dr. Rebecca Lee Crumpler, MD**

In 1864, she became the first Black woman in the United States to receive an MD degree. In addition, she was the only black graduate of the New England Female Medical College in Boston. She spent her career caring for freed slaves, poor women, and children. Dr. Crumpler persevered and made it her mission to help those most in need in her community.

1. **Dr. Daniel Hale Williams**

Dr. Daniel Hale Williams performed the world’s first successful open-heart surgery. He was a champion of equality and founded the first interracial hospital with integrated staff and a nursing/intern program for black professionals to train in 1981. In addition, he became the first African American to join the American College of Surgeons.

1. **Haben Girma**

In 2013, Haben Girma was the first deafblind person to graduate from Harvard Law School. She is a human rights lawyer advancing disability justice. Using this to her advantage, as an attorney with Disability Rights Advocates, she represented the National Federation of the Blind and Heidi Viens in suing Scribd, an online publishing platform and book subscription service, for discrimination because they weren’t making texts accessible to the blind. President Obama named her a White House Champion of Change. She received the Helen Keller Achievement Award, a spot on the Forbes 30 Under 30 list, and TIME 100 Talks. President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and Chancellor Angela Merkel have all honored Haben.

1. **Kobe Bryant**

Drafted right out of Lower Merion High school at the age of 17, Bryant won five titles as one of the marquee players in the NBA for the Los Angeles Lakers, widely regarded by many as one of the greatest players of all time. He was an 18-time star, won one MVP, won 2 Finals MVPs, and was a member of the All-NBA team 15 times. He was a member of the gold medal-winning U.S. men’s basketball teams at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Unfortunately, Bryant and his daughter Gigi and seven other passengers died in a helicopter crash in late January of 2020. Later in 2020, he was posthumously voted into the NBA Hall of Fame.

1. **Arthur Ashe**

Ashe’s resume includes three Grand Slam titles and he was the Black player selected for the United States Davis Cup team. He was also the only black man ever to win the singles title at Wimbledon, the US Open, and the Australian Open. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1992 which was believed he contracted the virus from blood transfusions during his second heart surgery. In response, Ashe started the Arthur Ashe Foundation for AIDs, working to raise awareness about the disease and advocating the teaching of safe sex education.

1. **Jackie Robinson**

Jackie Robinson was an American professional baseball player who became the first African American to play in Major League Baseball. Robinson broke the baseball color line when he started at first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947.

1. **Octavius V. Catto**

Known as one of the most influential civil rights activists in Philadelphia during the 19th century, Catto fought for the abolition of slavery and the implementation of civil rights for all. He was prominent in the movements that successfully desegregated Philadelphia's public trolleys and played a major role in the ratification of the 15th amendment.

1. **Bayard Rustin**

Bayard Rustin was an American leader in social movements for civil rights, socialism, nonviolence, and gay rights. He was gay and due to significant criticism over his sexuality, he typically worked behind the scenes assisting key Civil Rights Leaders. He was a key adviser to Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013. He also participated in many movements advocating for workers’ rights with numerous different union leaders. He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013.

1. **Medgar Evers**

Evers was an American civil rights activist in Mississippi, the state’s field secretary for the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and a World War II veteran serving in the United States Army. He bravely challenged the segregation of schools by applying to the law school at the University of Mississippi. Evers was assassinated by a white supremacist in 1963, inspiring numerous civil rights protests which sprouted countless works of art, music, and film.

1. **Amanda Gorman**

Amanda Gorman, a Harvard graduate from Los Angeles, made history as the youngest inaugural poet ever at Joe Biden and Kamala Harris’ inauguration in Washington D.C. on Wednesday, January 20, 2021, where she generated international acclaim. She performed a poem she wrote called The Hill We Climb that had the main themes of hope, birthright and legacy, diversity, and unity. She was also the first poet to perform at the Super Bowl, less than a month after the inauguration. She was highlighted in Time Magazine’s 10 Next lists. She continues to publish best-selling books and poetry.

1. **Chadwick Boseman**

Boseman was an actor and artist-activist. He played many huge roles such as Jackie Robinson in “42” and T’Challa in Black Panther. As an artist-activist, he fought for the appropriate representation of the Black community in the world of Hollywood. He, unfortunately, passed away due to Colon Cancer on August 28, 2020. Throughout his career, Boseman influenced many young children, many of whom were and are battling cancer and other illnesses.

1. **Jean Michel Basquiat**

Jean Michel Basquiat is known as the most iconic African American artist in history. Basquiat famously used social commentary and statements in his work in a way that shined a special light on contrasting themes such as wealth and poverty. Many of his works showed themes and characteristics that were distinctly African American in nature. Though the style and art quickly became one that the city of New York identified with as a whole.

Many black influencers who have made a great impact on all the different passions we share in America and around the world. However, generally across schools, not enough attention is brought towards the black community and their contribution to America’s successes. It is important for history curriculums to become more representative by bringing greater attention to figures like the ones above.