Education for Life

Celebrating the Contributions of Tennessee’s African-Americans to Education
Dear Fellow Tennesseans,

Did you know that less than 150 years ago, it would have been illegal to teach an African American to read what I am writing to you today?

In spite of that, pioneers – both black and white – broke down barriers, built makeshift schools and educated African American children and adults.

This brochure and DVD honors those leaders, as well as the ones who came after them. It is a part of our series of programs that honor African American successes. It seeks to document achievements in education and pay homage to the people who paved the way.

Unfortunately, there is still much work to be done. Education is not the only area where African American citizens have barriers that need to be broken. BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee is particularly concerned about health disparities in our state.

Minorities are more likely to suffer from some illnesses and diseases. African Americans are at a higher risk for diabetes, heart disease, asthma and stroke.

During research of this DVD, we discovered that many schools are taking steps to address these issues early on by educating students about their health – and encouraging them to seek out treatment when they are ill.

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee is excited to see high school students in Tennessee who are visiting hospitals and nursing homes to get a hands-on experience and possibly make career decisions – or at least, healthy life choices – based upon those onsite visits.

We encourage everyone, whether you are a minority or not, to seek ways to improve your health. Many African American doctors and educators have made it possible for us to lead healthy lives, and it is important for us to continue their legacy.

Sincerely,

Ronald Harris
Senior Manager of Diversity
BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee

"None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody – a parent, a teacher, an Ivy League crony or a few nuns – bent down and helped us pick up our boots."

Thurgood Marshall,
U.S. Supreme Court Justice
(1967-1991)

Pursuit of Education

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts one can receive in life is the gift of education. When a child or adult learns to read, new doors open and great journeys begin. Knowledge is power. Early leaders and every-day heroes unleashed that power to make education available to all and to boldly unlock doors that had been closed to African-Americans for so many years.

In spite of many obstacles, young African-Americans took it upon themselves to earn an education – and to create a bright future for those who followed.

Courageous men and women representing a variety of ethnic backgrounds learned how to read, taught others from their homes, established schools and challenged an establishment that denied them the right to earn an education. In doing so, they changed the future for generations to come.
Early Education of African-Americans

The Reverend Isaac Anderson founded what is now Maryville College in 1819 with an open-admissions policy, allowing blacks, whites and Native Americans to be educated together.

In 1819, Isaac Anderson, a white Presbyterian minister, founded a seminary in east Tennessee that would become Maryville College in 1842. Located just 15 miles from Knoxville, the school was established with an open-admissions policy that allowed blacks, whites and Native Americans to attend school together. Anderson, who advocated the abolition of slavery, invited people of all races to attend his church and taught many of them in school before the college came into existence. In 1901, the school was forced to stop admitting African-Americans. But it worked around the system, giving $25,000 in endowment to the Swift Memorial Institute to support black education until Maryville College was able to admit black students again in 1954.

In Nashville in 1866, just six months after the end of the Civil War, three white men – John Ogden, Rev. Erastus Milo Cravath and Rev. Edward P. Smith – founded Fisk University, Tennessee’s first black-only college. A decade later, Meharry Medical College, the first black medical school in the U.S., was also started in Nashville.

Other schools, such as the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, LeMoyne Owen College in Memphis and Tennessee State University in Nashville, were early institutions that provided African-Americans the opportunity to gain a higher education – and to learn from emerging leaders. Champions of the civil rights movement, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, studied at Highlander Folk School.

Impact of Segregation in Schools

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court voted unanimously in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka trial that school segregation was unconstitutional.

March on D.C., 1963

The signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 freed all slaves in Confederate states, but racial segregation was woven into the fabric of Southern culture. In 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine in Plessy v. Ferguson that led to the return of institutionalized segregation across the South. Taught in separate schools from whites, African-American students often read from second-hand books and learned in older buildings – even if better schools were located closer to their homes.

But, in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court voted unanimously in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka trial that school segregation was unconstitutional. Still, Tennessee – and many other states – remained segregated.

In its first decade, integration was sometimes met with violence. In 1956, Clinton High School near Knoxville became the first Tennessee school to desegregate when 12 black students enrolled there. Protesters arrived to try to stop the integration, and violence almost erupted in front of the Anderson County Courthouse. The National Guard was called to maintain order in the city for the next two months.

In 1957, protests from whites held up progress and only 13 black children attended white schools in Nashville. After the first day of school at Hattie Cotton Elementary, a bomb went off. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

While some schools experienced violent resistance to integration, most schools in Tennessee desegregated without major incidents.
Determination Breeds New Generation of Students

_In 1954, the Supreme Court declared that racially separate public schools and other racially segregated public facilities were inherently unconstitutional._

Opportunities to earn an education did not readily exist for young African-Americans, but early leaders determined to create a bright future for their people provided facilities for students to learn.

Austin Raymond Merry, a Fisk University graduate, opened a school for young black students in his home in Jackson, Tenn. He financed the school using his own money and taught children whose families moved them to Jackson in order for them to earn an education. A true pioneer in education, Merry remained principal of the school for more than 40 years, until his death in 1921. A year later, the school was renamed Merry High School in his honor.

Much in the same way Merry’s school was started, similar schools opened across the state: the Pearl School in Nashville, Austin High School in Knoxville and Clay Street School (which later became Kortrecht High School and is now Booker T. Washington High School) in Memphis, to name a few.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when education was illegally denied to people because of their skin color, some African-Americans stood up (and “sat in”) for their rights. Following his participation in the Knoxville sit-ins to desegregate Knoxville’s downtown restaurants, Theotis Robinson applied to the University of Tennessee, where he was initially denied admittance. In 1961, after multiple meetings with school officials, Robinson walked onto campus as the first black undergraduate to attend UT.

A Bright Future

_“Education begins not when one enters school and education does not end when one walks across the stage and graduates from college. Education is a lifelong process.”_ Dr. Reavis Mitchell, Fisk University

As Theotis Robinson and others like him were knocking down the barriers that kept African-Americans out of segregated schools, historically African-American colleges were also growing in enrollment and gaining accolades. Many of Tennessee’s historically African-American colleges are considered among the finest of all learning institutions in the U.S.

In 2006, a Newsweek magazine-sponsored survey listed Fisk University one of the top 25 universities in the nation. Tennessee State University has, for 11 consecutive years, been listed in U.S. News and World Report’s “Guide to America’s Best Colleges.”

An excellent education starts the first day of school. Today, Dr. Joe Cornelius, the principal at Joseph Brown Elementary School in Maury County, Tennessee breaks down barriers and makes an impact with his own one-act play about African-American history. Donning more than a dozen hats, his characters offer people an inspiring message of hope and demonstrate the power of a good education.

The people who most directly influence education, historically and today, are teachers, principals and school administrators. But they are also parents, religious leaders, neighbors, lawyers, politicians, doctors and community members.
Timeline

1806: The federal government required Tennessee to devote land to build schools so Tennesseans could be educated.⁹

1819: Presbyterian minister Isaac Anderson founded a seminary with an open-admissions policy that allowed whites, blacks and Native-Americans to be educated together. The school was renamed Maryville College in 1842.¹⁰

1835: A working public school system was put in place in Tennessee.⁹

1853: After years of corruption, Tennessee’s public school system was reevaluated.⁹

1862: LeMoyne Normal and Commercial School was founded as an elementary school in Memphis for freedmen and runaway slaves. The merger of LeMoyne and Owen Colleges in 1968 joined two institutions, which had rich traditions as private, church-related colleges that have historically served black students.¹⁷

1863: The Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in Confederate states.¹⁵

1866: Fisk School, now Fisk University, was founded in Nashville to educate African-Americans.³

1867: The Tennessee legislature passed an act for the reorganization and maintenance of Tennessee schools, marking the beginning of organized primary and secondary schools – and segregation. Both black and white schools suffered from a lack of funding.⁹

1868: The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified, which provided all people born in the United States, including African-Americans, the privileges and immunities of citizenship.¹⁹

1870: The Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed prohibiting governments in the United States from preventing citizens from voting based on race, color or previous status as a slave.¹⁹

1875: Knoxville College was founded to prepare students in grades 1 – 12 for higher education but eventually discontinued its elementary and high schools programs and offered only a college curriculum.²⁰

1876: Meharry Medical College was founded in Nashville as the Medical Department of Central Tennessee College.⁴

Late 1870s: Austin Raymond Merry, a Fisk University graduate, began teaching young African-Americans from his home in Jackson. His school was later named Merry High School.¹⁶

1882: Lane College was founded in Jackson, Tenn.²¹

1883: William H. Franklin, the first African-American to graduate from Maryville College, founded the Swift Memorial Institute in Rogersville, Tenn. to educate black students during the years of segregation.¹

1896: The Supreme Court of the United States of America upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine in Plessy v. Ferguson that lead to the return of institutionalized segregation in the South.¹⁴

1899: Tennessee law required the establishment of facilities for secondary education.⁹

1901: Maryville College was forced to stop admitting African-Americans. That year, it gave a $25,000 endowment to the Swift Memorial Institute to support black education.¹⁰

1909: Tennessee State University was formed in Nashville.²²

1909: W.E.B. DuBois, a Fisk University graduate, co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).²³

1942: Charles S. Johnson, Fisk University’s first black president, created a race relations institute where he held meetings denouncing segregation.⁵

1952: Four black students were admitted to graduate programs at University of Tennessee.²⁴

1954: The Supreme Court of the United States voted unanimously in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka trial that school segregation was unconstitutional.¹³

1955: Nashville attorneys Z. Alexander Looby and Avon Williams filed a lawsuit asking that a black Nashville teen be allowed to attend East High School, which was much closer to his home than the all-black Pearl High School.⁶

Feb. 1960: Black college students in Nashville launched formal, full-scale sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters at Kress’s, Woolworth’s and McLellan’s stores.¹²

May 1960: Nashville became the first major city to desegregate public facilities.¹²

1961: Theotis Robinson, Jr., challenged and ultimately reversed the University of Tennessee admissions policy, which did not allow African-American students in its undergraduate program. He and two other students were the first black undergraduates
admitted to the university.\textsuperscript{11}

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically...Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.”

\textit{Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.}

For additional copies or information, please e-mail BlackHistory@bcbst.com.

\textbf{Bibliography}

The type of education we receive can change the course of history. It plays a major role in the transition children make into adults. It empowers all of us to make better decisions in life.


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