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## Celebrating past and future legacies at ESU's African American Heritage Month Festival

By **Christina Tatu**  
**Pocono Record Writer**  
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When people talk about civil rights, the famous Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is perhaps the first figure who comes to mind.

But it was the people, "college students like you," who spearheaded the civil rights movement and pushed King's message forward, said Michael M. Leonard Sr. as he addressed the crowd during Sunday's fourth annual African American Heritage Month Festival at East Stroudsburg University.

The event was hosted by ESU's African American Student Alliance.

Leonard, a motivational speaker and criminal justice consultant, told the story of King's 1955 bus boycott, which started in 1955 with the arrest of Rosa Parks, who's famously known for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person.

The Montgomery, Ala., boycott had a crippling effect on the city's public transportation system where the majority of riders were black, Leonard said.

"I want you to understand it was the people that made the difference. Some of them had to walk 10 miles just to get to their jobs," he said.

Leonard also spoke of other famous black people in history, like Henry "Box" Brown, a Virginia slave whose desire for freedom was so great he mailed himself to Philadelphia abolitionists in a wooden crate.

There were also stories of unimaginable abuse, like that of Ota Benga, an African pygmy who was displayed in a cage along with the apes at New York City's Bronx Zoo in 1906.

Pygmy is a term used for various ethnic groups worldwide whose average adult height is usually no more than 4 feet, 11 inches.

After much outrage from the city's pastors, Benga was taken off display, and tried to assimilate to his new life in America, but he became depressed and committed suicide, Leonard said.

Today's social equality issues aren't just about "black and white," he said.

"A lot of people think of the issue in terms of color, but it's an issue of right or wrong," he said.

"My question to you is, 'What will be your legacy?' If you want to be somebody, you have to wake up and pay attention. Don't give up."

The event also featured posters on African American history, music, fashion and famous black people.

There were also local vendors, poetry readings, a performance by the step team, Explosion, and a performance by the gospel choir Voices of Triumph.

About 100 people were in attendance, said Latesha Saunders, president of the African American Student Alliance.

She hopes the event will continue to grow.

"We just want to get everyone to come together, and we want people to keep coming out," she said.

For more information on ESU's African American Student Alliance, contact Saunders at [lds3316@live.esu.edu](mailto:lds3316@live.esu.edu).

Those looking for more information on Leonard, who is also an East Stroudsburg resident and author of the book "Youth Gangs and God: Why Are Our Children Dying to Join Gangs," can find out more at [www.gangsrreal.com](http://www.gangsrreal.com).

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