

Throughout the month of February, Americans come together to celebrate Black History Month. In this historic year, when we swore-in President Barack Obama to serve as our nation's 44th President, we all have reason to be proud of the rich diversity of our nation.

African American history is filled with remarkable individuals who have left an unforgettable mark on our nation. This month, and throughout the entire year, it is important to take notice of the cultural, political, social and scientific contributions made by African Americans who have enriched our nation.

As I have done every February for the last 29 years, I will join our community in celebrating the achievements and recognizing the critical role African Americans have played in the founding and developing of our country at the Black History Breakfast held annually in Maryland's 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. Over the years, we have been honored to welcome a number of local and national African American leaders to the breakfast, including President Barack Obama, who was the keynote speaker three years ago.

President Obama's ascendency to the nation's highest office is a historic milestone for our country and a tribute to the many generations of Americans who struggled and overcame to advance equality for all. One such individual is former Virginia Governor Lawrence Douglas Wilder. Governor Wilder was the first African American to be elected as governor of a U.S. state, and we will be honoring his role in history and his lifetime of public service at this year's Black History Breakfast.

Overall, the new Democratic-led Congress has been working on improving the lives of African American families, along with all other American families. Last Congress, we raised the minimum wage, benefiting more than 2 million hardworking African Americans; cut the cost of college for the 2.3 million African Americans enrolled in degree-granting institutions; and continue to work to address the crisis in the subprime lending market, which has taken a disproportionate toll on African American homeowners.

During this current economic downturn, a great number of African American families - like other American families - are struggling to make ends meet. Congress is responding - recently enacting an economic recovery package that will create 3.5 million American jobs and provide assistance to families hit the hardest during this recession.

I am committed to continuing to work with the African American community to help tackle the challenges that exist in education, health care, homeownership, and economic development. And I will continue to fight for accessible and affordable health care and quality public education

and to work towards a budget that reflects the priorities of the American people.

Black History Month not only provides our nation with the opportunity to honor the rich history of a community that has overcome so much, but also allows us to recommit ourselves to ensuring that America continues to make progress. Every day, we experience the lasting legacy of the civil rights movement and the impact of its leaders on our lives. The accomplishments of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and countless others who worked beside him have forever changed this nation's history for the better. Let us celebrate the African Americans who made extraordinary sacrifices in the name of justice and equality in the past. Their legacy is honored and perseveres in the progress we continue to make and strive for.

In electing our nation's first African American governor, and 20 years later electing our first African American President, our nation moves forward in fulfilling the great promise of equality for all. As Americans, diversity is one of our greatest strengths, and we must recommit ourselves all year long to ensuring that equality is a reality for all of our citizens. Let us recommit ourselves to continuing to work for an America that fully lives up to its ideals and ensures that e  
very  
American has the tools and opportunity to pursue the American Dream.