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OPINION

Apply the 2% way to systemic racism

This 2 percent motto made me an All-American in high school, earned me a place on one of the best college teams in the country, and secured me a Rhodes scholarship. It also propelled me to the NFL and Harvard Medical School.

By **Myron Rolle** Updated February 22, 2022, 3:00 a.m.



Former Florida State and Tennessee Titans defensive back Myron Rolle is a neurosurgery resident at Massachusetts General Hospital. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

I have a confession: I don't particularly care for Black History Month.

Every year we get reminded of Black history for a brief, 28-day period. It reawakens America's conscience to the Black plight, and to Black pain. Then it suddenly stops.

Don't get me wrong: I'm all for having the opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices and achievements of the remarkable men and women whose courage and wisdom paved the way for people like me. But I also know how prevalent systemic racism still is in America today, and I've witnessed firsthand how overcoming it continues to be a monumental task — one that's impossible to confine to just 28 days of the year.

Over the past year or two, reminders of this ongoing struggle for non-Black people have come in the form of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and too many others. Having their stories gain national attention continuously has, in some ways, compelled society to focus on the issue more than once a year. For non-Black allies, it forces them to engage more frequently in conversations that can feel difficult and awkward. I appreciate those who push themselves to engage. I appreciate those who choose to be an agent of change and ally themselves with a demographic that's been oppressed in America for far too long.

So while non-Black people's emotional and psychological aid in response to our tipping-point moments, like those following George Floyd's murder, have been appreciated, the oppressive system remains in place. The structurally violent system is still a daily reality for Black Americans, regardless of whether it's highlighted in the news for non-Blacks that day. Systemic challenges are written into the rules, and they prevent *true* equity.

I see this dynamic at play in the hospital where I work. I have the pleasure of working with truly amazing colleagues, doctors and nurses, and administrators who welcome me as part of the team and treat me as a cherished colleague and a dear friend. But there have been instances where I've walked into a room and a patient has brought me back down to where I was scared to be. I've been mistaken for a food delivery man, a member

of the cleaning staff, or otherwise assumed to be someone who couldn't possibly be part of the neurosurgery crew.

It's frustrating to continue to get stereotyped in that respect. Simply because I'm Black existing amid a white majority — even when I'm dressed in scrubs — my presence is often mistaken for being someone who will serve your lunch not save your life.

So how do we move forward? How do we mitigate the systemic challenges that oppress, even when we have allies who want to help?

As someone whose parents immigrated from the Bahamas, who was raised without wealth or luxury, I was taught from a very young age that the only thing that mattered was working hard and getting better. “Be so good they can't deny you,” my father told me repeatedly. He also instructed me that the only way to get good and stay great was to apply yourself, just a little bit every day, to whatever it is you were doing. Try to achieve everything at once, he said, and you'll end up frustrated.

Setting small and achievable goals every day is a life philosophy that has served me well; it was coined as “the 2 percent way” by the legendary University of Alabama football head coach Paul “Bear” Bryant.

This motto made me an All-American in high school, earned me a place on one of the best college teams in the country, and secured me a Rhodes scholarship. It also propelled me to the National Football League, where I played for the Tennessee Titans and the Pittsburgh Steelers, and then went on to become a senior neurosurgery resident pursuing pediatric neurosurgery.

The same philosophy that helped me achieve all that is, I believe, precisely what we all need to help us come together and make sure that the fight against racism isn't limited to 28 days out of the year, but instead becomes an ongoing journey of small and significant improvements.

Instead of thinking about the system as a large, overwhelming megalithic entity, we must break it down into small pieces. We need to decide that we are going to move the needle ever so slightly, every day. By reading more, by advancing policy, by communicating, and by investing in younger people, we can break the mold.

We could look at all the work still ahead of us and feel powerless, or angry, or desperate. We could focus our energy on demanding that entire industries, companies, and communities overhaul the way they go about their business or else.

Or we could apply the only methodology that succeeds in achieving real growth over time and challenge ourselves and those around us to notice just one small injustice a day, or take one step to self-awareness and improvement each week. Do that, and soon we'll discover that every month becomes Black History Month.

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