A Q&A with Joel Harris, creator of the new Black History Month merchandise designs

University Communications
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Strength in our roots. Lifting as we climb.

These are the statements at the center of a new line of merchandise launched by the University for this year's Black History Month. The designs are the work of Joel Harris, assistant director of digital and creative services for the W.A. Franke Honors College.

The new designs expand on the University's Black History Month merchandise offerings, which also include products featuring a cultural logo made up of icons representing the contributions and culture of the Black community. (You can read more about the cultural logo design process in this UA@Work story.)

In interviews with Adrienne Barela, director of content in Marketing and Brand Management, and Lo Que Pasa, Harris discussed his artistic journey, the inspiration behind the designs and what he hopes the campus community can take from them.

How did your interest in graphic design develop?

Well, I started off in fine art and I went to an art and science high school in Virginia. In the ninth grade, my art teacher did a career day and she brought in all these different artists, like a fashion designer, a graphic designer and an interior designer. There was just something about what the graphic designer did that I connected with that made me think, "That's what I want to do."

Has a career in higher education always been your goal?

I went to Virginia Commonwealth University, which has a very rigorous design program. There I learned the fundamentals of graphic design and my professors really inspired me to want to work in higher ed. It was just something about what they did. They were practitioners and they were teachers. They were inspiring. They would also do research on design topics and write books. They had a balance of still being in the field, and being in the classroom training the next generation of design practitioners. So, working here at the University is living a dream that I have always had for myself.

What does Black History Month mean to you?

It's more than a month, you know. It's every day, it's the entire year. It's living, breathing, inventing, creating, celebrating our rich heritage. And we're creating Black history right now. I'm hoping that I can leave a legacy that inspires the next generation of Black artists and designers and entrepreneurs to go live their dreams and make a positive impact in our world.

What were the inspirations behind the new designs you created?

They were inspired a lot by late '80s and '90s art and design, especially hip-hop design, and the statements on the shirts are statements that we hear in the Black community. "Lifting as we climb" is something Mary Church Terrell said. She was one of the first Black women to earn a college degree. She was an educator and an activist. The phrase means not forget where you come from and, as you continue to advance and move forward, bring somebody up with you. And, from a marketing standpoint, I wanted a retro feel. Students are really into nostalgia and the '90s was a decade that had significant cultural impact in the art world and society.

The other design, "Strength in our roots," speaks to our ancestral heritage. Some of the trauma from our past is still carried in our community. I want these designs to say yes, we have a troubled past, but we have overcome, we are resilient and we are thriving.

What impact do you hope your designs have?

I hope that the designs educate and inspire people to learn more about Black history and the contributions African Americans have made to our country. Both phrases on the shirts speak to the rich ancestral heritage we have as African Americans, and I hope it instills pride in our heritage, recognizing the work that has been done by those before us who paved the way for us to be where we are at today. It's my hope that what we do in our present day, what we create, innovate, establish and build, will be the things that future generations will look back on as their guidepost.

Apparel, notebooks and other products featuring the new designs are available for purchase through the BookStores. A portion of the sales will go to African American Student Affairs to benefit students.
Read more about how the University is celebrating Black History Month as well as the ongoing “Beyond Juneteenth” effort in these UA@Work stories:

- **Celebrating Black History Month**
- **Celebrate Black History Month with music, dance and art activism**
- **Beyond Juneteenth: A yearlong celebration of Black history, culture and contributions**

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