

Being Black in Canada: Discussion should spur action, says panellist

It is important to have conversations, but it is so important to move beyond conversations to take action.

This is the view of Jacqueline Benn-John, Executive Director of the Women's Support Network of York Region. On Thursday, February 20, Ms. Benn-John will join musician Glenn Marais and former York Region District School Board trustee Tessa Benn-Ireland on stage at the Aurora Public Library for In Conversation: Being Black in Canada.

Held in conjunction with Black History Month, Being Black in Canada will delve into contemporary challenges and celebrations experienced by Black people today ? including race and economic mobility, systemic discrimination and the arts and culture scene.

?I wanted to participate in this panel because I thought it is very important to profile the contributions of Black people in Canada, but also talk about some of the ongoing challenges and issues that Black people face today in Canada,? says Ms. Benn-John. ?I really liked the fact there was an opportunity to create this awareness. Black History Month is often a time when people are talking about all the wonderful contributions of Black people in Canada and I think, in addition, there continues to be a number of challenges and I just loved the chance to be a part of the conversation.?

Ms. Benn-John has been working in the women's anti-violence sector for more than two decades and has a passion about addressing gender-based violence, equity and access for all women.

She first joined the Women's Support Network of York Region, York Region's only sexual violence crisis centre, in 2012, a stint which lasted until 2014. She returned to the organization as Executive Director this past fall.

?I was excited to be back with an organization that cares so deeply about gender-based violence and bringing an end to it, but also having the opportunity to really raise awareness about the issues of sexual violence in York Region and sex trafficking,? she says. ?I thought it was a great opportunity to be a part of an organization that has actually been a leader in Ontario with the Safe Passages Program in addressing sex trafficking, but also to look at how to end these forms of violence against women. We continue providing counselling and support to victims who have been affected by these crimes, but I think it is equally important to raise awareness and try to bring an end and protect against these forms of violence.?

Education, she says, will go a long way in this regard, which is also why she says the February 20 panel is important to her.

?Oftentimes you hear ?Oh, slavery has ended,' and with

colonialism, they think these aren't issues we're still dealing with today, but I think they manifest in different forms," she says. "These are issues that are still taking place in our communities today. It is not another part of our world, we have these problems right here in York Region."

One only has to look as far as the Women's Support Network for examples of this. While Ms. Benn-John says that violence affects all women in all communities, with survivors of violence representing every background, gender and sexual orientation, access to justice can be another story.

Some groups have less access to not only justice, but community resources and support systems. English might not be their first language, which adds another layer of challenge — particularly with the healing process, she says.

There's a very low conviction rate when it comes to sexual assault, she adds, noting it is also the most under-reported crime. Survivors often don't want to be re-victimized by engaging with the justice system if there is inequality to contend with.

"I think an opportunity to have this type of conversation is very valuable," she says. "This panel discussion is for the entire community, not just for Black people and I think it can be inspirational to hear the other panellists and to glean insights from their unique experiences, which can be valuable for teens and adults. From my social justice roots, I think it is important to move beyond conversations. When we think about how we can use our privilege to bring about changes, to be allies and supportive of others and their work, or what is taking place because, again, we can come out and hear a really interesting panel discussion but hopefully it can inspire folks to stay engaged in conversation and also in addressing some of the challenges that still persist in our community for Black people in Canada and others. The feature of this panel might be focused on Black history, but we know there are a number of challenges and barriers out there that other racialized and marginalized communities experience."

Being Black in Canada will take place at the Aurora Public Library on Thursday, February 20, from 7 to 8.30 p.m. Admission is free, but registration is encouraged to reserve a seat. To do so, visit aurorapl.ca or call 905-727-9494 x230.

By Brock Weir