

Black History Month should be time for celebration, reflection: organizers



Black History Month doesn't have to be just a time to reflect upon trailblazers who paid the ultimate sacrifice in the fight for racial justice and equity, it should be a time to celebrate people young and old who are still fighting the fight and achieving significant milestones, according to Phiona Durrant, founder of the Aurora Black Community (ABC) Association.

This was a message Ms. Durrant delivered alongside colleagues from the Aurora Black Caucus and the Town's Anti-Black Racism and Anti-Racism Task Force at Town Hall last Tuesday to mark the start of Black History Month and the raising of the Pan-African flag outside the municipal offices.

'We know there is oppression involved [in Black History] but that does not define who we are,' she said. 'Black is awesome, Black is beautiful, courageous, intelligent. We are authors, presidents, teachers, lawyers, house cleaners (and I love to clean a good house!), we're everything! So, today, when we celebrate Black History month, I hope you don't remember just the ones who were killed; just remember we're excellent [and] we're filled with potential.'

'No matter what you're fighting for, someone is going to stand against it. What's the difference between raising this flag and everything else? What will change? The flag will be raised, everybody will get their photos, and we will go back to our beds, roll over, and nothing happens.' I am telling you what will change. What will change is you finding the courage to speak up. I don't care if you're White - don't tell me you're White so you can't speak - this flag is not just raised for Black people. Jean Augustine (the first Black Canadian woman to serve in Federal Cabinet) says, 'Black history is Canadian history, not only Black people.' When you make excuses, for your colour, for why you don't speak and show up, I forgive you.'

Dozens of people from all different backgrounds attended last week's ceremony, including MP Leah Taylor Roy, MPP Michael Parsa, Mayor Tom Mrakas, and Councillors Wendy Gaertner, John Gallo, Rachel Gilliland, Sandra Humfries, Harold Kim, and Michael Thompson.

Taking her chance to speak up, Taylor Roy said that as proud as Canadians are of their history, 'there are things about our history we're not as proud of.'

'I think acknowledging that and moving forward to make sure that those things don't happen again, that we really fight hard to ensure there is no more discrimination, that we all work together, and that those of us who are allies realize that the work that has to be done is not for the Black community alone - it is for all of us,' she said.

Added Parsa: 'All forms of racial injustice and inequality should never be tolerated anywhere. This should be the focus of not just

the month of February but every single day of the year. I encourage all of you to reflect and learn about the contributions Black Ontarians have and continue to have in our Province. We must all find ways to contribute and make our communities free from racism, inequality and discrimination.?

Stories of contributions made by everyday Black Ontarians were shared by Mark Lewis, Chair of the Town's Anti-Black Racism and Anti-Racism Task Force. He shared poignant stories of the pioneers in his own family, including his educator father, mother, and grandfather.

?'Black History Month is a time to reflect upon and celebrate the accomplishments of our ancestors,?' said Lewis. ?While we push forward and build upon their legacy, it is important to recognize not only the pioneers in our struggles to achieve equality in society but our hometown heroes.?

His grandfather was a teacher and principal in The Grenadines prior to coming to Canada. His father followed in his footsteps as a high school teacher after achieving his Engineering degree from McGill University.

?'An engineering degree from McGill carries a lot of clout in this country, but for a Black man in the sixties, it did not guarantee employability due to racism,?' he shared. ?It was at this point my dad followed in their footsteps and taught in the North York Board of Education for two years before going back to school to earn a Masters Degree in Education from Queen's University.

?'His hard work, coupled with the drive of my hard-working mother, who was a middle school English teacher and librarian in East York, one of the most diverse and low-income neighbourhoods in the GTA ? their work afforded my sister and I the privilege of growing up in Markham in the 80s, a town at the time not unlike Aurora, about to experience exponential growth and struggle.

?'I am proud to be an Aurora resident. I am also proud of the struggles of my parents that shaped my development. It is important for us to take time and reflect upon the legacies of our forefathers and mothers. As Nelson Mandela once elegantly stated, ?The history of struggle is rich with the stories of heroes and heroines. Some of them leaders, some of them followers, all of them deserve to be remembered.'?

For Milton Hart, head of the Aurora Black Caucus, these leaders include Durrant as well as Jerisha Grant-Hall, Chair of the Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association.

?'These women are doing a fantastic job and will go down as part of Canadian history,?' said Hart. ?It should be Black History Year. It should also be a situation where Black history is woven into our curriculum. It should be woven into every facet of our media. There is a very simple truth I want to convey here: Black history is indeed Canadian history. Yes, we can talk about racism. We should indeed talk about the atrocities of the past. But we cannot forget Viola Desmond. We should talk about societal ills, but we can't forget about someone like Garrett Morgan, whose work gave us the three-light stoplight. We can talk about the atrocities of the past, but we should never forget Lewis Latimer, whose work gave us the electric bulb.

?'I'm here because some folks, White, Black, people from every race decided not to settle. I am here because people from every race decided to stand up so that I could run. They decided to sit so I could move around. Let's learn from Black history in order to bring honour to the stalwarts on whose shoulders we stand on. Indeed, we stand on the shoulders of giants. Indeed, we stand on the shoulders of people who just wouldn't settle, people who resisted. Every single civil rights movement that we have come to know only gained traction because people from every single race decided to stand up.?

By Brock Weir
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