

Know the Past, Shape Our Future: Black History Month marked in Aurora



By Brock Weir

Music filled the air as nearly 200 people came together at York Regional Police's Aurora headquarters on Saturday morning to mark the start of Black History Month.

This year's theme, Know the Past, Shape Our Future, was reflected in many ways during the festivities, including poignant reminiscences from York Regional Police (YRP) members on how their own celebrations have evolved over the past fifteen years, as well as from local dignitaries who underscored the work that's still to be done.

"I have been to many celebrations in the past, but this one is a little bit special for me because it is my first as Deputy Chief," said Deputy Chief Robertson Rouse, a recipient of the Human Rights and Race Relations Centre's Gold Medal for his outstanding contributions to the promotion of race relations, who was sworn in last year. As we celebrate Black History Month, I think we just need to reflect a bit on what Black culture is. We not only have a month, we have a decade: the international decade for people of African Descent. This was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly and adopted by resolution on December 23, 2013. That decade runs from 2015 to 2024. This proclamation led by the United Nations has made recognition, justice and development their theme for the entire decade. Our theme for this year is Know the Past, Shape the Future. This, together with the U.N. theme will help take us all to a better place."

These words were echoed by York Regional Police Chief Eric Jolliffe, who said the February 2 celebrations were a way to "celebrate the rich heritage of the African Canadian community, and its many sacrifices, achievements, and outstanding contributions."

"Let me offer my sincere congratulations to each and every one of you for your actions, commitment and dedication as we continue to build a legacy of Black History Month," he said. "Your presence here today is a testament to the continued guidance, assistance and support you have provided to me over the years, our senior command and indeed all the members of York Regional Police. Our ongoing partnerships provide our officers and members of the community the opportunity to learn more about the legacy of the Black community. This legacy is part of our Canadian story and our national history. As we have learned, we are strengthening the bond between us."

Black History Month was formally recognized by Parliament in 1995 following the advocacy of then-MP and Cabinet Minister Jean Augustine, the first Black woman elected to the House of Commons, and her achievements, along with those of Lincoln Alexander and Herbert Carnegie, were highlighted.

"We have highlighted the Black community's courage in the face of adversity, through the telling of perilous journeys through the underground railroad," continued Chief Jolliffe. "We have also come to appreciate the resilience of the human spirit with a series of youth-initiated skits that enlighten us about the displacement and the plight of African Canadians in Nova Scotia's Africville. We

have celebrated the contributions of our multicultural region, made by the many members of York Regional Police of African Canadian heritage.

“We come together today to pause, reflect and pay tribute to the legacies of those many trailblazers who have come before us, carving a path for civil liberties, social justice and human rights. Black History Month Celebrations at York Regional Police have spanned over the last 15 years and we have grown larger every year. It is an event that we always look forward to hosting. Each year it is a privilege to celebrate the significant role of Black History has had towards the building of a multicultural region here in York.” Saturday’s ceremony included the music of George St. Kitts and his band, Jay Douglas, Julia Jones and Trenyce Williams. Attending dignitaries included Aurora MPs Leona Alleslev and Kyle Peterson, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MPP Michael Parsa, and Ontario Attorney General Caroline Mulroney (MPP, York Simcoe).

“Black History Month is a time for all Canadians to celebrate Black culture and history, and it is a time to reflect on the significant contributions Black Canadians have made to building Canada,” said Mr. Peterson. However, it also reminds us of the inequality and barriers many continue to face, from anti-Black racism and discrimination, to a lack of opportunity and inadequate community resources. That is unacceptable. Our diversity is our strength and we need to continue to move forward if we want to achieve real equality.”

Citing the recent addition of Nova Scotia entrepreneur Viola Desmond, an African Canadian woman who stood up for her human rights in refusing to vacate the “white only” section of her local movie theatre, onto the Canadian \$10 bill, Mr. Peterson said stories like hers must continue to be told.

“Keep explaining the past. Make sure the next generation knows the struggle and challenges so they are empowered to continue the next challenges as we all in Canada are pursuing the same things: freedom, liberty and justice,” he said. “We have to always remember that, and that is why months like Black History Month, the stories we can tell, and being aware of the past, is important as we continue to strive for a greater future.”