

Being Black in Canada: Musician works with students to promote equity

Glenn Marais knows firsthand the struggle for equity.

The Newmarket-based Juno-nominated musician and educator has roots in South Africa, from which his parents came to Canada because of apartheid and, through his work, has tackled topics ranging from inequity in the world around us to bullying within the schools.

Next Thursday, February 20, Mr. Marais is set to bring his own unique experiences to the fore at Being Black in Canada, a panel discussion hosted by the Aurora Public Library to mark Black History Month.

"Racial equality and inclusivity are very important to me, and I think particularly now with the rise of right-wing conservatism and what is happening, I want to really feel how people are seeing what is going on and participate in a discussion that can hopefully help people to get a better sense of where we need to go as a country," says Mr. Marais on why he accepted the invitation to join the panel.

Joining him on stage will be Tessa Benn-Ireland, the York Region District School Board's first African-Canadian trustee and Jacqueline Benn-John, Executive Director of the Women's Support Network of York Region.

Through his work in the schools Mr. Marais teaches "mindfulness and kindness", particularly in areas surrounding mental health. He facilitates workshops in the schools, bringing in different artists to create a conference-style day featuring yoga, martial arts, hip-hop dancing, and more.

Mr. Marais' work as a community advocate began with the Stephen Lewis Foundation, where he dedicated his time to fundraising and building awareness for people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa. From there, he said, he made a conscious decision to work with marginalized youth in inner-city Toronto as well as with Indigenous persons.

"I wanted to help the two groups I felt were neglected the most, but it was an evolution of that beginning to find my way into it," he says. "The more I do it, the more I want to do. It is very fulfilling on a personal level, but there is such a growing need in all of the sectors - poverty, social stigma, mental stigma - and issues of equity too. I hate the thought of people living in a situation where they don't have the same access to things we do and they have to suffer for it. As far as Indigenous rights and youth go, I have come to know them very personally and it is such a huge wrong how they are treated. I can't stomach it anymore. It really pushes me to do more. I also have two girls, so when it comes to gender equity and inclusivity for women, they are a big motivation for me to get more involved in that aspect."

During Black History Month, Mr. Marais is often in the

schools making presentations on that subject ? yet the term 'Black History Month' is not a term he is particularly comfortable with as 'identifying a racial demographic by colour is so detrimental and we seem stuck in it.'

'For some reason Black and White people continue to call themselves 'Black' and 'White' and I think we're so past that in our capacity of learning [to continue] in this narrow-minded approach,' he says. 'I think it dishonours people's heritage too. The fact that I am still up here talking about this means we have a lot to do!'

To hear more from Mr. Marais and to learn more from his perspective, come out to the Aurora Public Library on Thursday, February 20 at 7 p.m. for the panel discussion 'Being Black in Canada.' 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