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Black History commemorations will welcome leaders to Aurora next month

Black history has deep roots in this community, this province, and the country ? but Black History Month in Canada wasn't an official observance until 1995 following the efforts of then-MP Jean Augustine.

As the 30th anniversary of Black History Month in Canada approaches ever closer, Ms. Augustine will be in Aurora next month to help kick-start local celebrations organized by the Aurora Black Community (ABC).

Augustine will be a special guest at a special gala hosted by the ABC on February 3, just days after the Pan-African Flag is slated to be raised at Town Hall at the start of the month.

ABC founder Phiona Durrant says the month-long series of events are based around the themes of ?Making Room? and ?Opening Doors? ? with ?joy, celebration and warmth? at its heart.

?We have seen a lot of excitement, a lot of laughter, a lot of different things ? but to be in one room and feel the energy of inclusivity and unity in the community, we're really looking forward to that,? says Durrant of the upcoming gala. ?We want to take it from the light of gratitude, celebration and appreciation ? not about what [doors] need to be opened, but just celebrating the doors that have been opened and the opportunities that have been opened. A lot of times we're looking for doors to be opened for us, and when it's opened for us, we do not invite anyone else in. It's from that space that we want to appreciate what has been done, not even to look forward to what's yet to come, but really reminisce and marinate with gratitude for the doors and windows that have been opened and the growth we have seen. Sometimes we want the big things, but miss the little doors, the little windows that have just been opened for the opportunities that we see things have been birthed.

?It's through that lens I hope we emphasize this Black history.?

ABC's Black History Month program, which is being organized with the help of a $10,000 grant from Council and an additional sponsorship from TD Canada Trust, will begin with the Town Hall flag raising on February 1. Ceremonies like these, says Ms. Durrant, are ?not about the thing on the pole? but rather an opportunity to underscore dedication and sacrifice.

Following the Town Hall ceremony and the gala, which will take place at an Aurora venue to be announced shortly, commemorations will continue with ABC's second Black Excellence Paint & Portrait Night at the Royal Rose Gallery on February 17 and a Diversity on the Ice (DOTI) program at the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex on Family Day.

This skating initiative will go hand-in-hand with other collaborations with the Town to coincide with Arctic Adventure, slated to take over Town Park on February 20.

?We're working with the Aurora Museum & Archives to have a final piece that can be stored there,? says Ms. Durrant of the paint night. ?We're also excited to have Diversity on the Ice on Family Day. We're partnering also with the Town and Sport Aurora, looking forward to getting professional athletes and coaches, and people who are excellent at this, to come out and teach. The overall idea behind this is when you're mostly immigrants and [part of] the Black community, these are not our sports you naturally go to. We have to be intentional so we see more Black parents coming out in the winter and having fun with their children, that our children are not deprived, especially during winter, in a country where it sometimes feels like the longest season!?

If all goes according to plan, the ABC aims to wrap up its portion of the commemorations on February 25 and 27 with a trip to the Niagara Region to learn more about Harriet Tubman's time in Canada and of the Underground Railroad, along with a special local film screening.

?We're working with the schools on that to give students and parents [the chance] to go out and see for themselves, to ask questions, and learn,? says Ms. Durrant. ?Last but not least, on February 27, we're collaborating with TIFF and the Aurora Film Circuit at the Aurora Cineplex to show a Black History movie at 8 p.m. It's going to be at least six celebrations and events and every one of them is equally important ? there is something for every taste.?

As Ms. Durrant takes a lead in planning Black History Month commemorations in her community, it's a ?bittersweet? responsibility that she says leaves her feeling both ?grateful and privileged.?

?I want to emphasize ?privileged' to have the ability to contribute even an ounce of anything that could make a difference as we do this because I want this to really be an emphasis of celebration and gratitude,? she explains. ?It's so easy to complain, it's so easy to point a finger, but it's very hard to make the time. It's not because more Black people don't want get their hands dirty and make the time, the struggle is real. Some of them are still single, working two jobs, can't even find the time to dedicate. Their heart is in it but they can't find the time or energy to get involved. Personally for me, I think ?privilege' is to have a voice, I feel privileged to even stand in rooms with Jean Augustine, and be privileged to be in a community I call home that has now said yes to the work we're doing and showing up and doing it.?

For more on next month's Black History Month events and to RSVP to the above mentioned events, visit aurorablackcommunity.com.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter