

Community leaders honoured at Black History Month gala



The community came together to mark the start of Black History Month on Saturday as the Aurora Black Community Association (ABC) held its second-annual gala at the Salvation Army's Northridge Community Church.

More than 200 people filled the auditorium for the event, one which was attended by a host of dignitaries including Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy, Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas, and former Federal cabinet minister Dr. Jean Augustine, who was a driving force behind recognizing Black History Month in Canada.

In her remarks, ABC President and Founder Phiona Durrant shared her gratitude for the community bonds that have been forged at events like these since the organization started and relayed her own journey both in Jamaica and in Canada.

Durrant shared memories of her often-difficult youth, including finding herself in her adopted home country as a young 19-year-old mother.

Behind in rent by the time her son was six months old, she said she found herself locked out of her apartment and calling the police for help as her only recourse.

"Before I knew it, I was in Aurora running for mayor in 2022," she said. "Nobody can stop your transition. I never dreamed I would be a person who made Black History Happen."

But, through the work of the ABC, Black History Month is being made regularly in Aurora and, to borrow a phrase from Dr. Augustine, "Black history is Canadian history."

"It's important we not only learn but we teach, not only as we come together as a community but we ensure Black history is Canadian history? not just history for Black people," said Dr. Augustine.

Dr. Augustine was joined before the dais by Magna founder Frank Stronach, now of The Stronach Group, in presenting leaders with the Dr. Jean Augustine Community Builder Awards, including York Regional Police Sergeant Kolin Alexander and Michelle Hanson.

Speaking of her co-presenter, Dr. Augustine paid particular attention to Stronach's efforts to house hundreds of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, an initiative which resulted in the development of Canadaville where enough homes for 600 people were constructed in little over three weeks.

"This is a man who is part of your community who has done so much for humanity," said Dr. Augustine, who said the people who came to call Canadaville home were never asked about colour, religion, or nationality. "I am happy to stand with you tonight."

Guests to the 2024 Black History Month Gala were welcomed to Northridge in remarks delivered by Brampton-area MP Kamal Khara and MP Taylor Roy who, in turn, delivered remarks on behalf of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Khara said she has been "struck" while speaking with numerous organizations and stakeholders "the number of incredible Black Canadians who each and every single day work tirelessly to uplift the communities and our country."

"It's about telling stories " the hundreds of thousands of stories of Black trailblazers who have made Canada the country that it is today," she said. "It is about celebrating the fact that Black history is Canadian history, but I what I really love about this year's theme (of Black Excellence) is it is not just about looking into the past and celebrating Black heritage, it is also a call to action.

"It is about the country we want to continue to build. When we talk about what kind of country we want to build, to me it comes down to choices. Obviously in Canada diversity is a fact, but inclusion is a choice. It is a choice that every single one of us has to recommit every single time to be able to do this" to ensure we are equitable, make sure we are supported?"

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter