

Reaching out for Diversity and Inclusion



Racism is something Glenn Marais says he has lived with his whole life.

The musician, artist and educator who grew up in Aurora, says although he has "a lot of affection" for his hometown, he also has a very "clear perspective" on what he went through "and it is this perspective he brings to the Aurora Cultural Centre in Marias' new appointment as the organization's Education Outreach Coordinator.

The Aurora Cultural Centre announced Marais' appointment to the role last week, stating the creation of the position is part of the Centre's plan to "address diversity and inclusion in the workplace and the community."

"Selected members of the [Centre's] team worked together over this past spring with a newly-formed Diversity & Inclusion Collaborative Working Group," said the Centre. "Comprised of community-based social activists and artists who identify in under-represented communities, this volunteer group provides valuable feedback and guidance as we move forward with intention and action to create increased artistic opportunities for our entire community.

"This role will expand the Centre's commitment to grow and learn how to serve all communities. We act intentionally to create opportunities for artists from vulnerable or marginalized groups who have faced systemic barriers that have limited their ability to participate in the arts. The Centre looks forward to working with Glenn on this dynamic and exciting new direction."

The Juno-nominated performing artist, in turn, is also looking forward to helping the Centre execute this vision.

A long-time proponent of equity and inclusion, principles which are found not only in his own artistic output but in programs he brings into local schools, Marais says the drive to increase the Centre's artistic roster to ensure the LGBTQ2S+ community, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour) persons and persons with disabilities are represented was of great interest to him.

"I felt a strong connection to what this was trying to achieve, having lived it," he says. "This is an idea that I not only embrace but my work in the school system with music and the arts, even with my band and music to a degree, is based on social justice work in terms of Black History, Anti-Racism, LGBTQ2+, I have supported York Pride for years and have always advocated for the equitable treatment based on people's gender and also people's identity, recognizing and supporting that.

That thread has always wound its way through the work that I do, so I think I can take this position and I am looking to expand it in a way of really being creative with it and finding exciting, innovative projects with the Centre, also focusing on education because I think there is a lot of learning to be done, particularly in York Region and not just Aurora. Globally, we have made a lot of strides in equity across all these sectors, but we have seen some things happen in the last year that have shown us that racism is still very strong. It might be below the surface a little bit, but it doesn't take much to bring it to the service.

But, in this role, Marais says he would rather not focus on 'issues of historical contention'; rather he would like to look at 'where we're moving forward to.'

'I want to build [the Centre] a really strong and diverse roster,' he says. 'I have already started reaching out to artists, people who work in important sectors in the community, that work in anti-racism, that work in York Pride to have a strong contact list of different artists. Alongside of that I really want to send a message about being open to learning and open to engaging in positive discourse, to learn. We're in this state right now with all this news around Indigenous people, where Canadians need to learn and to ask how we can help and how we can be good allies. The concept of this is sometimes foreign to certain demographics ' 'I'm Canadian, I'm not racist' ' and I want to remove walls by being open and trying to engage people in good, creative conversations. I am open to talking about anything as long as it has a positive direction.

'We're open for ideas. If someone has an idea for persons with disabilities, how can we make things more accessible? How can we use the arts and music to educate the public, for these people to have access, and for people to be represented in a way that is respectful of them? If we can come in with solutions and ideas, we need to stop and ask questions and listen ' and that is the philosophy I hope people will embrace around Culture.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter