

ABC, Library honour contributions of Black Canadian soldiers



The contributions of Black Canadian soldiers, both in history and in today's Canadian Armed Forces, were celebrated at the Aurora Public Library (APL) last week, in a presentation facilitated by the Aurora Black Community Association. (ABC)

Hosted by Phiona Durrant of the ABC and Nelia Pacheco of the APL, the November 5 panel discussion showcased the lived experiences of Dr. Vincent Conville of the Jamaican Canadian Association, Captain Kevin Junor (Retired), Sergeant Darnel Leader (Active Duty) and Registered Psychotherapist Leticia Osei.

As the panel shared the history of the Black soldier, as well as the role of the Black soldier today, local artist Dubi used his skills with the paint brush to bring a historic photo to life in real-time, with the finished product set to be donated to the Aurora Museum & Archives.

"The goal of this evening's program is to honour and raise awareness of the contributions made by Black Canadians who served in the Canadian military, both in times of conflict and in peace," said Durrant. "Black Canadians have a proud and enduring legacy of service to the country, serving with courage, distinction, and, in some cases, making the ultimate sacrifice."

"Today, Black Canadians, inspired by the legacy of their pioneering predecessors, continue to serve with pride in uniform, contributing to the sacrifice and achievements of the Canadian Armed Forces. By immersing ourselves in the culture and history of Black Canadians, we enrich the fabric of Aurora, making it more inclusive, informed and vibrant for all."

Junor, a resident of Bolton, shared that he first considered a job in the Forces when a recruiter came into his Scarborough High School, pitching it as a summer job. He said it sounded like fun and, once the summer was over, stayed in part because of the camaraderie.

"One of my favourite movies is *The Good, The Bad & The Ugly* and over that summer, over my career, there is the good, the bad, the ugly and the very ugly," said Junor. "It is all of that who made me who I am today and why I stayed over 30 years in there."

Leader came into the service with heritage. In St. Kitts, his father, uncles and many other members of his family served in Cadets. Here in Canada, he said he was partially inspired to pursue a role in the Army due to the long-running TV drama *J.A.G.* He agreed it was all about the challenge and camaraderie.

In their respective roles, both have served as change-makers in their units and the wider-forces.

Junor, for instance, as served as a Personal Advisor to Canada's Chief of Defence Staff, tasked with developing ways and initiatives

to ensure the Forces were fully inclusive.

'My job as a leader was to change the game,' he said.

Indeed, a common theme in last week's panel was to increase the sense of diversity that comes with Remembrance Day, Remembrance Week, and how we think of the Forces throughout the year.

'Black men and women are not excluded,' said Junor, when asked by an audience member how communities like ours can raise awareness of the day-to-day experiences of Black soldiers. 'I don't think we're respected the way we should be. From an inclusion perspective, inclusion means you're a part of the organization and feel comfortable. What we have within the Canadian Armed Forces is a diverse organization, diverse in that we have different races, different cultures, different ethnicities.'

Speaking to the role of the Black soldier in the role of Remembrance and within branches of the Royal Canadian Legion, he added, 'we have to change the game.'

'In needing to change the game, sometimes it's uncomfortable because people are used to the status quo, they are used to doing things the way they have been done forever,' Junor continued. "When I moved to Bolton, I went out for Remembrance Day and the local legion was doing their thing and I went up and said, 'Can I help?' I was a Regimental Sergeant Major at that time and part of my role was to do parades. When I walked up to him, he said, 'I don't know if you know what you're doing.' Well, I had a little bit of experience and he said, 'Okay, I'll tell you what to do and make sure you do it to the letter.' After that, he came to me [and said], 'I'll never do another parade here again.' We need to get into these spaces and let people know that we're there. Don't just take what they're going to give us.'

Added Leader: 'I think the first thing is showing your true authentic self is the way to go. Just don't get discouraged. I think there is a lot of synergy between the Legion itself and the community, and those bonds need to be strengthened by finding similarities, not focusing the negativity.'

By Brock Weir