

Aurora Black Caucus hosts solemn commemoration of Emancipation Day



The Aurora Black Caucus hosted a solemn and reflective Emancipation Day celebration at Town Hall on Thursday evening.

Forty-five attendees commemorated the 190th anniversary of the end of slavery across the British Empire. Historically, August 1 marks the day in 1834 when the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 came into effect across the colonies connected to the British Empire.

In a series of speeches, the event's participants discussed the struggle for freedom, the merciless nature of the slave trade, the Black community's past and current hardships as well as the daunting manifestations of systemic racism in Aurora, York Region, and across Canada.

Aurora Black Caucus Board Chair Milton Hart's dynamic opening remarks established that "the celebration is not a Black celebration?it is a Canadian celebration.?"

Hart, who will be inducted into the 2024 Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in November, acknowledged the key role played by Richmond Hill MP Majid Jowhari to raise national awareness of the Slavery Abolition Act. He applauded the Liberal MP's courage needed to enact Emancipation Day after so many prior failed attempts by Canadian legislators.

"It took guts to stand up in Parliament and call for a day to recognize the end of slavery.?"

Hart, who served in the Jamaican and Canadian military and, more recently, as a Seneca College English professor, called elegantly for an "all-hands-on-deck approach to problem-solving in Canada.?"

After Hart's opening words, the hospitable co-emcee George Harper introduced a series of videotaped messages from Prime Minister Trudeau, Premier Doug Ford, and MP Tony Van Bynen, which complemented the subdued tone to the celebration.

Prime Minister Trudeau acknowledged the inspirational leadership of Black advocacy groups and, in a forceful and formally-rendered request, asked "Canadians to recommit to a more just society.?"

A comparably more buoyant Premier Ford noted in his remarks that "Diversity is the greatest strength of Ontario?" and veteran Newmarket-Aurora MP Van Bynen emphasized in his message from the Netherlands that residents need to embrace "the ideals of Emancipation Day.?"

Aurora Black Caucus organizers praised Van Bynen's work as "a trailblazer?" to raise public consciousness about Emancipation Day.

Attendees of the event included Mayor Tom Mrakas as well as Town Councillors Ron Weese (Ward 1) and Wendy Gaertner (Ward 3). Mayor Mrakas's reflective insights into the significance of the Emancipation Day were consistent with the dignitaries who spoke in Council Chambers.

He noted the mistakes of the past and expressed a hope for a better future.

“We acknowledge this dark chapter in history and we reaffirm our commitment to a fair and equitable community.”

Mayor Mrakas also read the Proclamation of the Abolition of Slavery in its entirety and thanked the Aurora Black Caucus for its leadership in the community.

Other dignitaries in attendance echoed the Mayor's reflective stance.

MP Leah Taylor Roy (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill) addressed the importance of Emancipation Day.

“Many of us take freedom for granted but there are so many people around the world that do not have freedom.”

The Harvard University-educated Liberal representative acknowledged poignantly the “triumphs, hardships, and accomplishments of the Black community” and observed that Emancipation Day is “about the importance of our day-to-day actions—it's about the respect and dignity that we all deserve.”

In the spirit of an inclusive community, Taylor Roy invited the attendees to “treat each other as complete equals” and that “we all have that ultimate freedom.”

Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy's Provincial Emancipation Address opened with her thanking Emcee George Harper for his kind words of introduction and she moved seamlessly to describe her first trip to Africa.

Attending a Francophone Women's Conference that focused on human trafficking and women's health issues, the Progressive Conservative representative discussed the “deep meaning” of her trip.

She showed travel photos including a shot of “a beautiful beach in Africa from which fishermen would be taken into the slave trade.” She also described how “human beings were put in chains and taken away.”

“These pictures tell us a story. I was moved by the history of Black people—about people being taken from their homes, their families—never to be seen again.”

Gallagher Murphy directed attendees to her slide of “The Woman King” statue located in Esplanade des Amazones “a public square in Cotonou, Benin.

“The L'Amazon statue demonstrates the power and majesty of Black women.”

Gallagher Murphy's insights and images resonated among the attendees.

Equally-resonant were the words of MP Jowhari. Introduced as “The Architect of Emancipation Day,” he acknowledged that “the pathways of reconciliation have opened up for aboriginal and Black communities living in Canada” and eulogized “those that suffered prior to the Emancipation of Slaves in the British Empire.”

The Richmond Hill MP added context to the bill he introduced to Parliament, including the failure of three predecessors to enact the legislation, but praised the “unanimous support of 338-0 in the House of Commons to impel the bill into being.”

He modestly compared himself to 'running the last meter of a 4 by 100 relay' in terms of his role in bringing Emancipation Day to life. In a contemplative moment, Jowhari mourned the slave trade's toll: 'Two million people lost to the Atlantic Ocean. Twelve million people taken from their lands and families.'

He commended the Black community for 'its resilience in the face of anti-Black behavior in Canada.'

The theme of anti-Black behavior was reinforced by Phiona Durrant and Jerisha Grant-Hall who presented a series concerns related to municipal, regional, and national communities for unseemly acts of racial prejudice in the Town's parking lots; unflattering wealth and employment rates for Black people in York; and a country-wide malaise suggesting that the Emancipation Act of 1834 had not accomplished much in terms of equity and advancement of Black people in Canada 190 years after the enactment by British Parliamentarians.

In a message of reflection that criticized the Town's response to a recent racist incident that she experienced in an area parking lot, Aurora Black Community President Durrant 'kept it local because this is where I live.'

She challenged attendees to embrace 'real equity and diversity' and to achieve it. Durrant implored that 'we must measure where we are.' The community leader noted that she was 'triggered' by Gallagher Murphy's slide show and offered emotionally-charged commentary about Aurora's shortcomings.

Durrant expressed her displeasure about 'where we are.'

She equated recent political commentary about whether 'we're ready for a Black woman President' to contemporary shackles worn by the North American Black community. Durrant expressed the 'lack of respect' she has experienced in Town of Aurora Committee work and discussed how she felt she was made to feel 'unsafe' in a recent dispute over a parking space in Town.

She complained about the lack of response by the Town of Aurora to the incident.

To offset what she described as a lack of representation, Durrant encouraged Black residents to participate in the community.

'We have to show up and show that we belong?' and she closed her address by acknowledging the key roles played by the York Regional Police and the Aurora Black Caucus.

The message of reflection delivered by Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association Founder and Chair Jerisha Grant-Hall called into question the often-used word 'resilience'—a term deployed by many of the dignitaries to describe the response of Black people to systemic roadblocks.

'When I hear the word 'resilient,' I prefer 'resistance.' I want us to think about 'When will we be free?' Emancipation in 1834 did not mean social and economic freedom.'

Grant-Hall delivered statistics regarding the plight of Black people across Canada including housing discrimination, higher rates of homelessness, and lower rates of home ownership.

'In all areas of life, Black Canadians are suffering.'

In light of these metrics, Grant-Hall called for 'the removal of oppressive barriers, to challenge these racial barriers, and treat people with dignity and respect.'

The leader of NACCA noted Regional disparities in earnings and employment.

'For every \$1.00 a White person earns in York Region, racialized Blacks earn 66 cents. Black youth unemployment in York Region

is double that of the national average.? She did praise local politicians ?who are learning? and she observed that MPP Gallagher Murphy's moving video about the African slave ports showed ?they're learning.? She expressed her gratitude to the Aurora Black Caucus for creating ?an event that was critically-important? to commemorate the ?800,000 enslaved Africans and their descendants liberated across the British Empire in 1834.? Grant-Hall called for ?robust anti-discrimination laws, equity audits, the need to be data-driven and support Black-owned businesses, and to mandate diversity in hiring.?

In closing, she offered some degree of hope that ?we have the intelligence to end racism.?

The celebration's uplifting closing words belonged to Aurora Black Caucus Vice-Chair Michael Corniffe.

The engaging software executive noted that ?hope is coming? and pointed to evidence ?in this room full of people who know more.?

He praised Gallagher Murphy's moving slide show and observed that, ?We cannot give up and we're not quite there yet.?

Corniffe encouraged attendees to be ?agents of change in our community? and offered a glimpse of the event's future: ?We look forward to a bigger, better celebration day next year with panels featuring politicians and local leaders engaged in discussions with those in attendance.?

By Jim Stewart