

Black history is made every day ? not just February: Trailblazer

Library hosts 'In Conversation' event February 20

February is Black History Month, but black history is made every day, says Tessa Benn-Ireland.

Ms. Benn-Ireland knows this from her own lived experience, having blazed a trail as the first African Canadian Trustee with the York Region District School Board in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

As Black History Month gets underway Friday, Ms. Benn-Ireland is set to join other Black community leaders in a conversation at the Aurora Public Library called 'Being Black in Canada.'

Set for February 20 at 7 p.m., the panel will also bring Jacqueline Benn-John, Executive Director of the Women's Support Network of York Region and musician Glenn Marais together to discuss 'contemporary challenges and celebrations experienced by Black people today' including race and economic mobility, systemic discrimination and the arts and culture scene.

Ms. Benn-Ireland, a recently retired Justice of the Peace, is a well-known community builder and education advocate with a passion for community involvement. In addition to her work as a Trustee, she worked as a school librarian before founding the Markham African Canadian Association.

'I believe in serving the community in which you live,' she says. 'My parents always instilled in me that education is the key and that's why I got involved in the community.'

As a Trustee, she was passionate about increasing parental involvement in the schools.

'It was about getting involved with the parents so that they're not just opening up the door to send [their kids] to schools and opening up the door to welcome them back without asking what was going on at school and finding out what went on in terms of their work. I had the pulse of the community and I felt as a parent in the community, regardless of ethnicity, I felt I would be there if the community needed someone to speak to.'

The panel for the February 20 In Conversation event was selected by Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration for the Aurora Public Library. Ms. Mandelcorn says each speaker was picked for their strong identities and their equally strong commitments to equity and justice.

'I wanted to celebrate Black History Month with intent - taking Aurora Public Library's traditional acknowledgement with displays on the Underground Railroad and (mostly) American Civil Rights leaders to a different place,' she says. 'This year, I wanted to hold conversation that brings a modern-day context to the

understanding that Black history continues to evolve and that systemic discrimination and inequality in social and economic mobility continues to be a reality in Canada and in York Region. And I also wanted to celebrate the incredible contributions Black artists continue to make on the arts and culture scene that we all enjoy.

I reached out to leaders in our local Black community for help and they did not disappoint. We have a stellar panel whose work and passion drive a strong identity that strengthens a commitment to equity and justice. Brock Weir, the moderator, is a seasoned journalist with the professional skills to conduct an engaging and stimulating discussion.

Ms. Benn-Ireland agrees that Black history does indeed continue to evolve even in ways that are sometimes unheralded.

My proudest moment is being elected as the first Black trustee in the history of the York Region District School Board, she says. That is Black history. History is made every day. We celebrate Black History in February, but history is made by Blacks every day. Sometimes they're not celebrated, sometimes it is not documented and, for me, that's history.

Being Black in Canada will take place at the Aurora Public Library on Thursday, February 20, from 7 to 8.30 p.m. Admission is free, but registration is encouraged to reserve a seat. To do so, visit aurorapl.ca or call 905-727-9494 x230.