

Black History Month closes with challenge to maintain momentum



Black History Month was a time for celebration and reflection, celebrating heroes past, present and future while also building opportunities.

Now that February 2022 is in the history books, community leaders are looking at ways to keep the momentum going throughout the year.

'February is Forever' was the overriding theme when community leaders came together on Saturday evening for a Black History Month closing gala hosted by the Aurora Black Community (ABC) Association.

'There is no race or competition for who owns Black History,' said Phiona Durrant, President of the ABC. 'Sometimes we don't get enough cohesion and collaboration because we're thinking it needs a particular ownership. With over 60,000 people in Aurora, we know that it needs everybody coming together making this happen.'

Underscoring this message was Dawn Gallagher Murphy, representing Deputy Premier Christine Elliott, who provided a message on behalf of the Newmarket-Aurora MPP.

'While we reflect on the accomplishments of Black Ontarians that enrich our lives here in Newmarket-Aurora and Ontario, we must remember that many of these accomplishments were achieved despite racism and discrimination,' said Ms. Gallagher Murphy.

'Many Black, Indigenous, and other racialized people experience racism and hate on a regular basis. Our government continues to ensure all communities have equitable opportunities to fully participate in society.'

'To build a more inclusive Province, we are strengthening anti-racism efforts to identify and remove barriers that stand in their way. Building inclusiveness is a collective effort. It takes exchanging best practices, creating networks and amplifying voices to create meaningful change' and that is what's happening this evening.'

Essential in making that happen was local business leader Colin Campbell of Keller Williams Realty who led a panel discussion on just how the community can keep the momentum experienced during Black History Month going all year round.

Participating in the talk was Aurora-Oak Ridges Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy, advocate Yvonne Kelly, educator Meshell Lynch-James and Staff Sergeant Kolin Alexander, Unit Commander of the York Regional Police's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Bureau.

'[The conversation is to] demonstrate to our community that Black History will not just be a window dress for February that is soon

forgotten in March or later on," said Mr. Campbell. "This conversation is to demonstrate the commitment and the work that is needed in our community."

Throughout her career as an educator, including in her current role as Principal of Bill Crothers Secondary School in Unionville, Ms. Lynch-James said she has always pressed upon students that "Black History is Canadian History."

"It was hard to find someone else who would echo those other than the Black History Society of Ontario," she said. "As a school leader, we call it Black History 365/24/7 and we incorporate that into all we do, not just in February but throughout the school year and celebrate all the wonderful things that Canadians have done since 1603 coming to Canada."

"Right now, as a Province, we struggle because the curriculum doesn't reflect the Black experience. It doesn't reflect the richness of our Black communities. It shows us in a negative light, so we have been working at our school to show us in a positive light and show all our school community what Black communities have done in Canada since 1603."

"Currently, we're very proud to say we have offered our first Black History course at our school but once again it is a struggle with the Ontario government and the Ministry of Education to hold that course so it is recognized for students who want to go on to post-secondary studies in university. Right now, it is an Open course, which means it is not counted as a university or a college credit."

"We are working really hard to ensure Black History is a solid part of the fabric of Canadian culture and that all students, all staff, and our whole school understands that."

Ms. Kelly agreed that part of this momentum begins in schools.

"It is just saying over and over again that this is Canadian history and we need to talk about it, we need to learn about it throughout the year. It will be interesting to see if we can start hosting celebrations that don't just happen throughout a given month for Black History, for example. More opportunities for learning, more opportunities to have conversations around things like economic or social justice from a Black perspective, I think it is really putting those things out in front in every opportunity we have and make it happen so we won't only think of it as something you talk about during February."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter