

Black History Month flag raised with 'One Heart, One Love'?



Aurora taught Bright Osei what it means to be Canadian but it also underscored to him the challenges of being 'the only person who looked like me.'

'It was a huge adjustment,' said Osei, who settled with his family in Aurora at the age of 10 after coming to Canada from Ghana.

'In the first day of class, it was very evident that I was the only person who looked like me,' said Osei, who is now an AI consultant with Google. 'Aurora taught me everything I know about being Canadian [but] when you're a kid, you don't think about the things you don't have until you grow up.'

There was a lack of opportunity to meet Black professionals, he said, perhaps even a sense of difficulty in finding one's own particular niche in the world.

Yet, on Friday, this example of Black Excellence was back in his community to celebrate the launch of Black History Month at Aurora Town Hall - an event that filled Council Chambers with Black professionals, community leaders, and members of the public alike - all with the common cause of celebrating Black History Month with 'One Heart, One Love.'

Organized by the Aurora Black Community Association (ABC), the standing-room-only event included remarks from MP Leah Taylor Roy, Mayor Tom Mrakas, and included the presence of Provincial Election candidates Chris Ballard (Ontario Liberal, Newmarket-Aurora), Dawn Gallagher Murphy (Progressive Conservative, Newmarket-Aurora), and Michael Parsa (Progressive Conservative, Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill), Councillors Harold Kim, who offered a prayer at the podium, Michael Thompson, and Ron Weese, and community builders like Phiona Durrant, president and founder of the ABC, and Jerisha Grant-Hall, founder of NAACA (Newmarket African Caribbean Canadian Association).

'I want us to be grounded in the connection of who we are and some of the enduring truths about just who we are as African people,' said Grant Hall. 'Our contributions on this land pre-dates the founding of Canada by over 150 years. Black people have been here since the 1600s, arriving as enslaved Africans, freedom-seekers, and settlers who build communities and shaped the nation. Before the 1960s, the majority of black people in Canada were born here and our ancestors played a foundational role in this country's development. Learn of that. Our sweat, skills, experiences, contributions, were taken and used without consent - for free to build and shape early Canada.'

'People of African descent are resilient, courageous, spiritual, and master-builders who have been central to the ongoing campaign

for equality and an equitable Canada. Our new goal is African-Canadian truth-telling starting right here right now today.?

These words were echoed by Unna Fletcher, member of the ABC Advisory Team and Director of City College, who said it was an ?honour to stand before you united in spirit and purpose? to celebrate the ?profound contribution and rich history of Black individuals throughout this country and the world.?

?From the vision of Martin Luther King Jr who had a dream that one day, Black and White would walk hand in hand down the street. To the brilliance of our contemporary leaders in society, Black History is filled with stories of resilience and triumph,? she said, noting the Pan-African Flag raised Friday evening is a symbol of both remembrance and hope. ?It represents our commitment to acknowledge the struggles and victories of our past while inspiring future generations to continue the work of progress, equity and justice. It reminds us that the fight against oppression and inequality is ongoing and it is our responsibility to actively participate in creating a more inclusive and compassionate society.

?As we embark on this month-long celebration, I encourage each of you to engage deeply with the stories ? the history, the rich cultural heritage that enrich our communities. I encourage you to attend events, read literatures and have conversations that challenge our thinking and grow our understanding. Let's learn from each other, let's share our experiences, and let's create a dialogue that fosters unity and respect from one another.?

The Pan-African Flag was raised outside Town Hall moments before the celebrations continued indoors. After he helped do the honours on the chilly start to the weekend, Mayor Mrakas touched upon these themes as he formally issued the proclamation of Black History Month in Aurora.

?When we celebrate Black History Month, we celebrate Canadian history, as well as the incredible achievements and contributions that so many Black Canadians, including many of you, have made to our communities, helping shape Canada's culture and identity,? he said. ?Your leadership and dedication means so much to this community. Your ongoing advocacy, community action and commitment to fostering important conversations strengthens us as a Town. It is with immense pride that we raise the Pan African Flag at Town Hall this evening, a symbol of unity, resilience, and the contributions of Black Canadians to our shared history.

?My sincere gratitude also goes to Phiona Durrant and her entire team who organizes these wonderful events that bring all of us together. It is a very powerful statement that the ABC is extending the celebration beyond February with street banners honouring Black Canadians set to go up for several months and shifting the Black History Month Gala to April. Black History and achievement should be celebrated all year round, not just in February.

?We need to continue acknowledging Canada's history of anti-Black racism and its ongoing impacts and recommit ourselves to always speaking up and acting against any prejudice and racism we see. Tonight, as we come together, let it stand as a powerful symbol of our commitment to dialogue, equity, inclusion and meaningful change.?

Meaningful change doesn't have to be big, it just needs to make a difference, stressed Leticia Osei ? Bright's sister ? who serves as the ABC's Youth and Mental Health Coordinator. From her perspective, it can be as simple as checking in on a neighbour who might be new to this country or directing a resident to the services offered by the ABC.

?I would encourage everyone today and moving on to show some humanity when you're amongst others, to check on your neighbour, and be what we are supposed to be: humanity,? she said.

This is a philosophy shared by brother and sister.

?I happen to have a therapist for a sister? I wake up to, ?How are you feeling?' I think one thing in the Black community [is] just being mindful of how you feel as a person, especially Black men. There is this whole stigma of being a man who keeps things internal and I am thankful I have a sister [who makes sure] I am mindful of how I feel. I think if I had the opportunity to be in Aurora as a teenager, I would try to recognize and cultivate some sort of network or community that encourages men to be more

positive with how they feel? My whole message is to create communities where you can foster that kind of growth.?

By Brock Weir