

Black History Month gala celebrates community leaders, looks to future



Black excellence, both within the community and far beyond, was in the spotlight at the Royal Venetian Mansion on Saturday night at the Aurora Black Community's (ABC) annual Black History Month Gala.

The sold-out evening, which featured music and fashion, poetry and prose, a keynote from former Canadian cabinet minister Marci Ien, and the regal presence of cultural leader King Nana Yaw Osam I, who represents the Central Region of Ghana, was a night of celebration, reflection, and displays of community unity.

?Our people's determination carved out spaces ? spaces where we can now lead,? said Charmaine Williams, Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity in the Ontario Government, and the first Black council member for the City of Brampton. ?Today, we hear the echoes of the past, but we still encounter barriers, biases, and burdens that have endured across generations, but we also inherit that unshakable determination ? the same determination that has defined the Black experience in this Province [and] across the country.?

Williams, who is the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario's first Black Cabinet Minister, took a moment to reach across the political divide by paying tribute to Ien, who served as Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth in Justin Trudeau's Liberal government, and her work to establish Canada's National Childcare Strategy.

?Global pressures remind us daily that our future will be shaped by the decisions we make now,? Williams continued. ?These challenges call for boldness, for innovation, it calls for unity, and for leadership that reflects the diversity and the dynamics of Ontario. That's why the voices in this room, and the communities all represented here, are so essential. Black entrepreneurs, Black educators, frontline workers, public servants, all you beautiful artists and youth, are shaping the culture and the economic fabric of our Province every single day. We are not contributors to the margins; we are drivers of a modern Ontario story ? remember that.?

Addressing the leaders of tomorrow in the audience, Williams said their leadership is needed now ? not someday in the distant future, but today.?

?To all of us, if you ever walk into a room where you're the first or only, [remember] you belong there. You've earned your place, and you carry with you the strength, the sacrifice, and the brilliance of generations who prayed for your moment.?

Among the local leaders joining ABC founder and president Phiona Durrant in underscoring this theme were Newmarket-Aurora MP Sandra Cobena, Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, and Mayor Tom Mrakas, who was joined by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim.

And the cross-section of Black entrepreneurs, educators, frontline workers, and public service were well-represented in the room, several of whom received special honours during the evening.

Three recipients of the Dr. Jean Augustine Community Builder Award, an honour established by the ABC in the name of Dr. Augustine, the leading force behind the establishment of Black History Month in Canada, received their awards in the presence of the trailblazer herself: Ivan Dawns, a barrier-breaking union leader, ABC founding member Bobbie Marshall, who currently serves on the ABC's Board of Directors, and York Regional Police's Lincoln Boyd, who was described as ?a consistent and genuine supporter? of the ABC's work.

Each received a trophy bearing the shape of a symbol that represented their contributions: Dawn, a lion to represent leading with strength and heart, Marshall a gold ocean wave, and Boyd, a similar wave depicted fittingly in police blue.

?The ocean represents your leadership in service,? said MP Cobena, reading Boyd's citation. ?You show up again and again, not always loud, but always present, shaping change through consistency, integrity and care. Your service moves people forward, just like the waves shape the shore over time. We honour you for the depth of your commitment and the strength of your impact.?

Bookending this year's Black History Month gala were words from Mayor Mrakas and King Nana Yaw Osam, both of whom built upon the night's theme of Collective Strength, Shared Future.

?As I look around this room, I see something powerful: connection, conversations, laughter, pride ? and a community that has chosen to come together, not out of obligation, but out of respect. That matters. Because Black History Month is not just about remembering history, it's about recognizing people ? people who built, contributed, challenged, led, and persevered,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?People whose stories are not separate from Canada's story, but essential to it.?

?Black History Month reminds us that progress has never come easily, and has never come without courage,? he continued. ?The freedoms we enjoy today exist because individuals were willing to challenge injustice, to push past barriers, to insist on dignity and equality, even when the odds were stacked against them, but Black History is not only a story of struggle, it is a story of excellence. Of artists, educators, entrepreneurs, advocates, and community leaders whose impact continues to shape our Town, our region, our Province, and our Country. Of families who built lives here, raised the next generation, and helped make Aurora the welcoming community it is today.?

It was his hope, he said, that people left the gala feeling inspired ?not just by the history we honour, but by the future we can build together, that we carry these conversations beyond this room, and that we continue showing up for one another ? not just this month, but every day.?

Added King Nana Yaw Osam: ?Today, we are not only honoring those who came before us, but also burning the flare of hope for those who will come after us. Our presence here is an indication to the strength that lies within our communities and the power of our shared culture. Yet, as we exhibit on the greatness of our past, let us also acknowledge the challenges that continue to confront us: fear, doubt, and division. These are the shadows that have too often held us back from realizing our true potentials. But I stand before you to be clear, we must let go of fear and doubt. We must rise above the voices that seek to divide us and instead embrace the power of unity and inclusivity.

?Let us remember that our diversity is our strength. Across continents and cultures, across languages and nights, we are bound by a common dream. The dream of a world where every African child, every descendant of Africa, stands tall with pride, dignity, and

purpose. I urge each of you, as leaders and as members of this great community, to reach out to one another with open hearts and open minds. Let us lift each other up, support each other's dreams and champion the cause of justice and equality wherever we go. Let us create spaces of belonging where no one is left behind and every voice is heard.

?Our future depends on our ability to work together, to share our knowledge, our resources and our love. Let us be bold in our activities of progress, fair in our commitment to inclusion and devote our dedication to the legacy of our ancestors. Tonight, we celebrate our rich heritage. Let us also renew our commitment to building a future where every person, regardless of background or circumstances, is empowered to succeed. Together let us be the architects of a new era, one defined not by fear, but by hope, not by doubt, but by determination, not by exclusion, but by unity.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter