

BROCK'S BANTER: Celebrating Hometown Heroes

By Brock Weir

Students, in my experience, have never failed to be enthralled by learning the stories of our heroes.

I often cast my mind back to 1992 when I was just six or seven years old, feeling my way through the first couple of years of elementary school, thrilled that there was something on the horizon to break up what already seemed monotonous: the Canada 125 Celebration.

Perhaps it was a sign of the times, or the consciousness of a young mind, but this celebration did not seem to come with the rightfully placed baggage that came with Canada 150 over a quarter-century later. Instead, 1992 was the first spark of what turned out to be a steep, but enjoyable learning curve, getting myself up to speed on homegrown heroes.

We were absorbed in the journey of Laura Secord, one that many of us were surprised to learn, had absolutely nothing to do with confectionary; hearing about our first Prime Minister in John A. Macdonald; about the heroism of Terry Fox; the wartime exploits of Sir Isaac Brock, a lesson that spurred a seemingly endless barrage of snickers in my general direction due to our shared name; and, in what seemed like the only whispers of diversity, the environmental work of David Suzuki and the artistic endeavours of Pitseolak.

What we didn't realise at the time was that there was a huge chunk of our proud Canadian heritage missing from these very valuable lessons and the creative electives that went along with it.

It's not that we were completely ignorant of this missing piece of the puzzle, but it's hard for a six or seven year old to make the connection.

In 1969, then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was quoted as telling the Washington Press Club, "Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast, if I can call it that, one is affected by every twitch and grunt."

The relevancy of that quote, a quote that is all too true, is certainly not applicable just to the realms of diplomacy and international trade, but many aspects of growing up in this proud country.

In addition to Laura Secord, John A. Macdonald, Terry Fox, Sir Isaac Brock, David Suzuki and Pitseolak, we were often regaled at other points in the school year about the heroism of the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose tireless fight for Civil Rights and untimely end brought ongoing injustice in our world sharply into focus. The simple action of Rosa Parks instilled in us the power of the individual to spark sea change and holding fast in the battle between right and wrong.

Few of us realised, however, that as heroic as these individuals were, that they weren't necessarily our heroes per se; rather, they belonged to the world, having their most profound impact in that friendly beast to our south. Those of us on the northern side of the sheets, however, were merely experiencing the leftover grunts and twitches.

Fast forward a quarter-century to 2016 and the lead-up to Canada 150 and the announcement by the Bank of Canada that our country would soon have a new series of banknotes celebrating individuals who have made a lasting impact on our nation outside dead, white Prime Ministers, I am ashamed to say I was almost completely ignorant of Viola Desmond, the Nova Scotia woman who was the first "civilian" honoured in the new series of banknotes.

While Ms. Desmond's background as a young, black entrepreneur finding success in a still racially-charged nation is reason enough for celebration, she is best known for her arrest in 1946 after flouting the convention of racial segregation in a Halifax movie theatre. Viola Desmond's resistance is often compared to that of Rosa Parks, but there are very important distinctions. While Ms. Parks' act of resistance challenged the laws of many southern states in which she grew up, Ms. Desmond's action challenged convention, racism that was less overt but nevertheless bubbling beneath the surface and inspired a community to galvanize.

"Desmond, an icon of the human rights and freedoms movement in Canada, was selected from a shortlist of five iconic Canadian women," said the Bank of Canada in a statement. "A successful Nova Scotia businesswoman, she is known for defiantly refusing to leave a whites-only area of a movie theatre in 1946. She was subsequently jailed, convicted and fined. Her court case was the first known legal challenge against racial segregation brought forth by a Black woman in Canada."

Added Finance Minister Bill Morneau in an announcement that Ms. Desmond would replace John A. Macdonald on the \$10 note: "Today is about recognizing the incalculable contribution that all women have had and continue to have in shaping Canada's story. Viola Desmond's own story reminds all of us that big change can start with moments of dignity and bravery. She represents courage, strength and determination - qualities we should all aspire to every day."

While it is a great comfort that a potent reminder of Desmond's fight and what it represents to our country is now only as far away as

our own pockets, and will go a long way to make sure both her struggle and the results of her struggle are never forgotten, there is much more work to be done to drive home the work of others who joined her in Canada's Civil Rights Movement.

Take Lincoln Alexander, for instance. While he is probably best known today as a trailblazer in the public sphere, from barrier-shattering status of becoming Canada's first Black Member of Parliament in 1968 and the first Black person to represent the Queen in Canada as Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, he also worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make a difference, from challenging the racially-charged environment of his post-secondary education as a young man to his elder statesman role in retirement as Chair of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation.

"I am not the spokesman for the Negro; that honour has not been given to me," he said in the House of Commons. "Do not let me ever give anyone that impression. However, I want the record to show that I accept the responsibility of speaking for him and all others in this great nation who feel that they are the subjects of discrimination because of race, creed and colour."

That voice was silenced in 2012 at the age of 90, but it still resonates today.

And it should resonate louder, as should the achievements of all those who broke barriers, dedicated their lives to making a difference, advancing our country and in some cases, literally saving lives.

Unfortunately, they often seem to be lost in a much wider, louder conversation.

And they should be trumpeted.

Loudly. Every day. And certainly not just in February.