

BROCK'S BANTER: Igniting the Passion

By Brock Weir

"Their inspiration has ignited in all of us a greater sense of purpose and certainly citizenship," said Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti at the York Regional Police's Aurora headquarters last week.

Scarpitti was one of many local dignitaries on hand to pay tribute to African Canadians who have blazed trails in countless ways across our country and beyond.

In particular, Scarpitti was paying tribute to such individuals as Lincoln Alexander, the first black person elected Member of Parliament in Canada, a feat trumped with being the first visible minority to represent the Queen in Canada with his appointment as Lieutenant Governor of Ontario.

He was also saluting former Cabinet Minister Jean Augustine, a native of Grenada, the first black woman elected to the House of Commons, who remains a tireless advocate, as well as hockey player Herb Carnegie, who founded the Future Aces Foundation to build the leaders of tomorrow.

"There are many African Canadians whose names do not appear in history books, that maybe aren't readily recognized, but nevertheless have made a difference. We celebrate them today. We will not forget their journeys, their difficult journeys, their stories, and we will continue to gather and mark their important contributions to the richness and prosperity of our Region and country."

That "today" was Saturday as people filled the headquarters' auditorium for a celebration to salute Black History Month. The annual York Regional Police tradition has a different theme every year and with the Pan American Games fast approaching, it should come as no surprise that this year's theme was sports. As such, the late Mr. Carnegie featured prominently in the day's celebrations, which included poetry readings, inspirational speeches, and entertainment from the likes of George St. Kitts and the Toronto Mass Choir, among others.

Opening the event, Inspector Keith Merith described Carnegie as the "best hockey player in the NHL never to play in the NHL" by virtue of the fact the pigment of his skin was a little too rich for the times.

Added YRP Chief Eric Jolliffe, who serves on the board of Future Aces, "Dealing with adversity was one of Herb's greatest strengths. He went onto a successful career in business, eventually founded the Future Aces Foundation, which has enriched countless young lives."

In enriching young lives, Jolliffe also saluted basketball player-cum-teacher

Gary Durrant, who was recognized by the YRP with their Deeds Speak Award. Born in Jamaica, Durrant is the only Canadian to secure the NCAA Basketball Slam Dunk Championship, but parlayed his experience on the court to serve as the York Region District School Board's Student and Community Liaison Officer to the African and Caribbean community, as well as teaching in their ACCESS program for at-risk youth.

It is a long way from the troubled boy who came to Canada at the age of 13, joining his single mother who came to Canada a few years previously to lay the foundations of a better life for them both. As Durrant came up on stage to receive his award from Jolliffe, Durrant, in turn, presented the award to his mother.

He spoke of her struggle to build that life, as well as his own in reconnecting with her, a task which proved exceedingly difficult, resulting in a bit of acting out and a few brushes with the law along the way. From there, however, he is now able to use his experiences as a teaching tool to ensure others following a similar path can divert in a better direction.

"It is sad that community, and especially the peers of our children and now social media plays a much greater role than we do, sometimes," he said. "We have to do all we can to bridge that gap and bring back our children from social media and peer pressure."

Continuing the sporting theme, Herbie Kuhn, the voice of the Toronto Raptors, paid tribute to Black History Month in his own way, saluting his German-born father, who moved to Canada in 1965 and subsequently marrying a Guyanese-born woman in 1967. As an interracial couple in the late 1960s, the Kuhns faced their own challenges, but forged ahead to overcome them.

"I think it is also important to remember the people who weren't necessarily African Canadian, who embraced African Canadians as if they were their own blood and family," said Kuhn. "If it wasn't for my dad being bold, I wouldn't be standing here today."

As I looked out into the crowd, I did not see a sea of faces, as one does at similarly well-attended events, but a group of individuals who responded to each speech, each trailblazing story, each small observation differently, perhaps influenced by their own personal journeys, the struggles they have faced, and the trailblazers, as Scarpitti said, who are otherwise unknown to history but integral in getting each person in attendance where they were on Saturday.

In the audience were Carnegie's daughter, Bernice, as well as Keith and Erica Alexander, son and granddaughter of Lincoln, respectively. As I observed their reactions, I also cast my eye across the crowd to Senator Don Meredith, who was seated between his wife and Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown.

Senator Meredith has become something of a regular fixture here in Aurora, most recently speaking to two groups of students at Lester B. Pearson Public School not only about the role of government, but also finding the right role models in life.

One of his primary role models, he explained to students, was Lincoln Alexander. When he asked the youngsters how many of them had heard of Alexander, not more than 10 hands went up in the air. As a follow up, he asked them how many of them had heard of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There was scarcely a hand that did not instantly shoot up in the air.

While I would never diminish the lasting contributions Dr. King made to the world, it was somewhat disheartening to see that our own home-grown trailblazers are, to a degree, being left in the dust. As Black History Month rolls on through the end of the month, take some time to embrace them, educate about them, and ensure this appreciation for Black History is not earmarked solely for the shortest month of the year. We can do better.