

Courage is the ability to find your voice and speak up: Jean Augustine



Jean Augustine knew she had to go for the jugular.

As the first Black woman elected to the House of Commons, Ms. Augustine wanted to make a difference. She was following in the footsteps of just two others African-Canadians who had served as Federal elected representatives and she knew she had a lot to contend with.

First elected in 1993, she found her seat in a Parliament that was engulfed in trade issues, tackling debt and deficit, and finding a balance with the rise of two new political parties in the Bloc Quebecois and the Reform Party.

There was a difficult discussion to be had, she said, but in order to spur the discussion, she needed to zero in on her target.

"I was an elementary school principal, starting with the Catholic School Board in Toronto, teaching social studies in Grade 7 and 8, and there was nothing in the textbooks about African Canadians, about Indigenous peoples, or what I considered important information for these students at that specific age group to understand the workings of society," said Ms. Augustine, who was the keynote speaker at a virtual gala hosted by the Aurora Black Community Association to mark the start of Black History Month.

The virtual gala included greetings from Premier Doug Ford, the participation of Deputy Premier Christine Elliott, MP Leah Taylor Roy, MPP Michael Parsa, Mayor Tom Mrakas, along with several members of Council, including Sandra Humfries, who was among the speakers.

In her address, Ms. Augustine, who was the first Black woman to serve as a Federal Minister of the Crown, illustrated how it takes concerted leadership to make a difference.

"When I came to Canada in 1960, we had no Charter of Rights and Freedoms," she continued. "We had no Human Rights Commission, so when things happened to you, you had nowhere to go to complain. We had no Landlord-Tenant Act. We had no Police-Community Relations. We had no schoolboards or trustees talking with parents or bringing parents into the system so they could understand what was happening with their children.

"We stepped out in 1971 in Canada as the first country in the world to say we are diverse, we are multicultural, multiracial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious – that is a society we are in Canada, but those of us who were participating in all the areas in the society, we did not see ourselves included in so many different ways."

Politics was just one arena African-Canadians didn't see themselves represented, but that was about to change through "constant struggle, constant protests, demonstrations, advocacy and activism," along with Augustine's efforts from her seat in the House of Commons to have Black History Month recognized in Canada.

She initially conceived doing this through a private members bill, but getting a bill such as this on the floor was purely by chance as they were picked through a lottery system. 'I had been buying lottery tickets and I wasn't winning, so I decided I wasn't going to do the draw!' and ultimately made a motion in the house.

'I was told each time I went with what I considered a finished motion, 'No, this is debatable. You have to have things in there that are not debatable.' The motion was a very simple one. The motion went right to the jugular. The motion had nothing in there that anyone could question: 'That this House take note of the important contributions of Black Canadians to the settlement, to the growth, to the development of Canada; that Black Canadians are making contributions to Canada; that we are a diverse Black community in Canada; and, therefore, I am asking my colleagues to designate February as Black History Month.'

'I was thinking of the time of those teachers who were afraid to teach anything outside of the module. I was thinking about the opportunities that would be given to us, to have opportunities like we have today, where we can bring all of us together. The leadership, the community, the neighbours, the friends and allies, so that we could talk very openly without any censure about the history of people who have been here since 1603.'

It took courage, but the motion ultimately passed.

From Ms. Augustine's perspective, 'courage' is the ability to find your voice, to speak up for others, and the ability to understand what is necessary and what is important. It took courage to push back against the barriers and to speak up, she continued, but she was guided by the philosophy that 'Lord, help me to change the things I cannot accept and to find allies who would stand with me to make the change.'

She also lived by the words of her grandmother that 'talk is cheap.' 'We can talk the talk, but it is how we're able to go from the talk into ensuring that we do what is necessary.'

'It is important for you, as leaders, to engage your community, to draw them in, to look around the boardrooms, to look at opportunities that there are, and ensure that we're not just talking about diversity, but talking about including those voices because we have all the studies that are done that tell us we make better decisions when there are different voices in the room,' Ms. Augustine told the local leaders sharing her screen. 'We move better as a society and as a community when everyone is engaged. It is important as the community engages itself, as the community does its own mobilizing, as the community begins to develop and form the organizations that your voice is there, you are supporting them and you're finding opportunities for their voices to get beyond just talking to each other in the community.'

'You can only be an ally if you understand what allyship is about. You can't be an ally today and an ally for this issue and then you run and hide? An ally sees what's important to make the move forward. But I think you're all allies now just listening to you today, just seeing the turnout here. Just seeing the enthusiasm. Just the responses? that here we have a few miles outside of Toronto, a city called Aurora, but working together as allies, working with courage, working with commitment, working with competence, working with the knowledge that we have to build together. As we build together, we'll have so much to offer not only our community but to offer the entire province and the entire country.'

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter