

Diversity and inclusion a key focus of new Cultural Centre campaign

Monday, March 21, marked International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

It's a day to reflect back on terrible chapters in our collective history and to also look ahead. For the Aurora Cultural Centre, it was an opportunity to reflect on its place in the community and the programs it delivers ? and a perfect moment to launch their ?We Want to Work with You? campaign.

The initiative, devised by Glenn Marais, Artistic Outreach Coordinator for the Centre, is aimed at reaching diverse musicians, artists, and other creatives through the development of a comprehensive database to highlight their work and talent in the community and start a wider conversation.

It is just one more step in the Cultural Centre's plan ? and Mr. Marais' mandate ? to foster diversity and inclusion throughout Aurora, not just within the Centre's walls.

?We have an understanding of things from what we have heard from what people were dissatisfied with in the past and that [programming] was very homogenized and not a wide representation of different cultures or groups,? says Mr. Marais. ?That is part of why we have created this database. We can't book people if we don't know who they are or where they are.

?Through this campaign, we're inviting people to participate at a grassroots level. If people know anyone in your circle of family and friends who might benefit from signing up, share it with them and tell people about it because these artistic opportunities are paid opportunities.?

Expanding these opportunities has been top of mind for Mr. Marais since he was appointed to his position last year.

One of the first chances for Aurora to see this mission in action was during the National Day for Truth & Reconciliation when the Centre partnered with Jared Big Canoe, a musician from the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, for a moving afternoon of traditional performance and reflection.

?We empowered Jared [to program the event] and followed his lead,? says Mr. Marais. ?He selected the artists and worked with our team to put together the program, but it was following his vision and that is just the right direction to see. The feedback was tremendous and people said it was very moving to see. For us, it is in keeping in line with our mandate.

?A lot of what we do in terms of diversity and inclusion in Canada is calendar-based. We have Black History Month in February and then the tendency is for people to forget about it. Then we have Chinese New Year and everybody is thinking about people from China and their history in Canada, and then we forget about it. One of the things we really want to focus on is, how do you maintain diversity and inclusion throughout the whole year?

?I think one of the things you can do in terms of addressing that is reflect that in our programming. I think that is why we have this outreach. It is kind of a short-term thing. Our goal is to literally have thousands of artists on this database so we can provide that rich, engaging and diverse programming throughout the whole year and those specific calendar days embolden and strengthen our message to coincide with what is also going on and the current relevancy of it.?

Although the development of a database is a relatively short-term goal, the benefits the database will bring to the Cultural Centre ? and to the community as a whole ? is anything but. Rather, it is long-term thinking they are keeping in mind as they look to hold a symposium this spring on diversity and inclusion, organize a ?Pride in the Park? event this June at Town Park to coincide with Pride month, and also in looking forward to re-establishing the Cultural Centre's place at Aurora Town Square when it opens next year.

?To have [this mandate] come to fruition as we open the new public square is tremendous, where we can reflect the changes that are

going on in the world and in our community and line that up with this opportunity to present that in a beautiful space,? says Mr. Marais. ?That is something we're really, really excited about. As we change, change always has resistance but the best way to deal with resistance is to be malleable. If you come at it with an equal opposition of force and say, ?No, we're right,' well, we've seen the results of that. Our approach is to listen, educate, and offer opportunities to engage with different cultures so we can all learn.

?Be a willow tree and not an oak tree. Be willing to listen to things that are uncomfortable to hear because sometimes people operate out of a place of ignorance; some people say to call someone ignorant is to be insulting, but it is not. It is really just a matter of fact that not everyone has been given the same opportunities to learn and to grow. I often find that if you're in the room with someone from a different culture, that's where you learn. You're not going to learn as much from a book or even seeing a movie; when you can talk to someone and see everybody is just like everybody else.

?That's where I think expanding and diversifying our programming can bring forth that kind of change and discourse where people are saying, ?Yeah, I went to this program and I learned a lot. I had a chance to speak with the artists, beautiful culture, beautiful people.' That's the idealistic goal so we'll see how it goes.?

For more, visit auroraculturalcentre.ca.

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