

Education and awareness not enough to tackle racism: Task Force

Growing up in Aurora, Keenan Hull says he experienced little racism in his youth but there came a point where the tide began to turn.

"I didn't see any aggressive racism until I got older, turning into a Black man instead of a Black boy," he said. "It was more microaggressions and [people] would just have those assumptions about me."

He saw those assumptions manifest themselves in many ways, including systemic, and it is that lived experience he has brought to the table as a member of Aurora's recently established Anti-Racism and Anti-Black Racism Task Force, which convened for the first time last Wednesday night.

"My goal [on the Task Force] is to make sure that people like me will be able to just live in Aurora and surrounding areas without having any fear of persecution from other people in the community that should be protecting us," he told the group.

Mr. Hull, who was one of the co-organizers of this spring's Solidarity Walk following the death of George Floyd, outlined his goals near the start of the November 25 meeting where he and his fellow Task Force members began the process of hammering their goals and priorities.

Although a list is still a work in progress, their initial message was clear: action rather than education is key to making a difference.

Aurora's Anti-Racism and Anti-Black Racism Task Force represents a cross-section of the community. Chaired by Noor El-Dassouki, joining her and Mr. Hull at the table are Tricia Wright, Phiona Durrant, Mark Lewis, Mae Khamissa and, representing Council, Councillor Harold Kim, who brought the idea to Council alongside Mayor Tom Mrakas.

Like Mr. Hull, Ms. El-Dassouki grew up in Aurora.

As a Muslim Arab woman, she told the Task Force she has experienced her "fair share of racism and discrimination" over the years, but she also recognizes "a lot of the privileges" in her life.

"I acknowledge the fact I am not the target of anti-Black racism or anti-Indigenous racism and I think it is really important to centre those experiences, especially Black and Indigenous people, in experiencing racism because their lives are the ones who have been most affected and most at risk because of systemic racism," she said. "I would like to see some real action and some actionable change, especially in the institutional racism of Aurora [in that] I hope we can work to kind of look at policies and practices that are embedded in institutions and understand how they are designed in a way that is inherently biased and racist. [It] might not be intentional, necessarily, but that is the way systems are designed in this country and a lot of areas around the world."

"The more effective way of bringing about change is to increase the implementation of anti-racist actions as opposed to just raising awareness of diversity and anti-racism and all of those items."

Added Ms. Durant: "From a leadership perspective, our community knows how our leaders feel about racism, about any form of discrimination, anything that makes anyone feel less than. As long as we know where they stand, it is easier for us to know how to move forward."

A native of Markham, Mr. Lewis says he experienced systemic racism every day as he watched his parents, teachers with the Toronto District School Board, "navigate racist constructs within our community and the education system while trying to provide a high quality of life for me and my siblings."

He moved to Aurora 17 years ago, choosing this community to raise his family as it reminded him of "Markham of the 1980s."

"I was not disappointed," he said. "Like any fast-growing municipality, I watched Aurora's growth drive more diversity among residents in our Town, which challenges the community to respond to growing racism, which has to be dealt with by both residents and business owners. For me, the biggest challenge as a father and a resident in Aurora is a little heartbreaking that my daughter is still experiencing the same [type and level] of racism that I experienced when I was her age so many years ago. It is time for us to make a positive impact and make Aurora a great place for all of us to raise our families."

Ms. Wright has lived in Aurora for 17 years as well, having come to Canada in her teens from a country where Black people are the majority.

"If I did experience racism [in Canada], I didn't take it that way, it was more that they didn't like me because of something else because that isn't necessarily what I grew up with," she shared. "I think my goal on this would be to really continue to sort of raise the awareness. I think the more people know, the less they become afraid of something, with lack of knowledge and lack of information there is huge fear. Bringing topics and displaying different cultures, I think that will be a huge part of breaking down any barriers."

While the Task Force is just getting off the ground, several directions are being explored. In addition to Council's recent efforts on workplace diversity within the municipal structure, Mr. Lewis suggested more can be done to examine diversity "within the construct of Aurora itself" ensuring the diversity of its suppliers in all aspects of the Town's business."

Members also pointed out there should be a concerted effort to ensure Indigenous voices are also represented at the table after this integral group was not represented amongst the applicants who came forward, as well as to clarify their mandate.

"I see a distinction between anti-racism and diversity and inclusion-related work," said El-Dassouki. "I think there is a little bit of a distinction to me and I think it would be important for us as a group to have a common understanding and identify kind of common goals around those terminologies to guide our work going forward."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter