

Record-holding rapper to kick-start student's Black History Month programs

Oscar Peterson was hailed for the "sense of joy, and the powerful emotions" he brought to audiences as the world-renowned pianist's image was emblazoned on the back of a loonie just last year.

Peterson, who died more than 15 years ago considered one of the greatest jazz pianists of all time, blazed a trail for Black Canadian musicians while underscoring the unifying factor of music.

His music has inspired generations and stories like Peterson's will continue to inspire as award-winning and record-setting rapper Duane D.O. Gibson brings his annual Black Canadian History school tour to Aurora later this month.

A popular presentation, this year's tour is entitled Black Music 365, and will make a stop at Devin's Drive Public School on January 27.

Born in Saskatchewan and raised in Southern Ontario, Gibson is focusing on contributions made by musicians like Portia White, Maestro Fresh Wes, Drake, Jilly Black and Peterson to highlight Black Canadian achievements throughout our history.

"I think it's really key to know the contributions of Black musicians," says Gibson.

Gibson began his school presentations more than 20 years ago. Initially speaking about goal-setting and delivering an anti-bullying message, when February came around, he asked schools if he could delve deeper into Black History.

"One thing I started noticing a few years later is things weren't seeming to change; when I went into a school and started asking kids about Black History, the number-one thing they would say is, 'I know who Martin Luther King is,' or 'I know who Rosa Parks is' that's great to know, but I saw this was being repeated again and again."

Gibson's father hails from Cape Breton, a place with a rich Black history. It was there he first learned about Viola Desmond, a Black business owner in Nova Scotia who challenged racial segregation when denied a seat in a Whites-Only section of a movie theatre.

"I wanted to share these stories with kids," he recalls. "When I first started talking about Viola Desmond, so many kids were just shocked that they had never heard of it, and even more so how many teachers and principals were like, 'I have never heard this story.' It was something kids could relate to because every kid can relate to going to the movie theatre and getting popcorn. It doesn't matter if you're a kindergarten kid, you can relate to that."

"When I say a Black woman was told she couldn't sit in the main area, but had to sit in the balcony, does that make any sense? All the kids are immediately like, 'No,' but that's how they can click and get what racism is because I think it is very difficult for kids to understand a world, especially in the greater Toronto area, where we have so much diversity, what racism really meant at that point." Canadian culture, he notes, relies "so much on American media" that some of our own homegrown stories are overpowered.

"I grew up listening and idolizing American musicians so as we've seen a shift over the last 10 or 15 years, that with an artist like Drake who is the biggest rapper in the world or The Weeknd, we started to kind of accept ourselves a little bit more. I think once you learn that these stories do exist you can't help but want to learn more. We're a country that loves hockey, so when I talk about the Coloured Hockey League and a Black Canadian is credited with creating the slap shot, or the Coloured Hockey League was created 22 years before the NHL, I think these are important things for kids to hear about, especially when we read in the news about problems with Hockey Canada, problems with diversity, and problems with racism in hockey in Canada, I think it is really helpful for kids to get that background that it is not a newish thing for a Black person to play hockey. Blacks have been playing hockey in Canada for literally over 100 years."

The strong desire to learn, he says, always wins the day and he's often impressed by kids as young as kindergarteners who are

engaged as well.

His rap name, 'D.O.' stands for 'Defying the Odds' and that helps create another conversation that underscores the main message, whether he's talking about Black History, leadership, or anti-bullying.

'For a student who might be an average White kid, I want them to still be able to identify with what it means to be in this position. I think kids can understand that by knowing what it's like to have people say, 'You can't do this,' when I talk about Jackie Robinson wanting to play professional sports and the reason why they couldn't at the time was simply because of their skin colour, they really had to defy the odds. Now I want them, regardless of the community they're in' to know that it is important to be kind to one another and have that background just to be kind to others.

'I think it is going to be a very interesting year because as everyone is familiar with George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter' the interesting thing at the time is when we were in the middle of the pandemic, I found that over the last two years of doing these presentations virtually it was great to be able to connect with students. As soon as Spring came last year and I was back in schools, I just saw how that message carried on, that kids are still aware of racism and racial issues, and I think this generation is more of an active generation that really wants to stomp out racism, call it out when they see it, know that it is not acceptable and not to let things pass.

By Brock Weir
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