

We have to 'honour our past' in order to move forward, says trailblazer Augustine



In order to represent the community, you need to be engaged.

That was the message delivered to a standing-room-only audience by trailblazing politician and community leader Jean Augustine on Friday night as the Aurora Black Community (ABC) Association and the Aurora Black Caucus came together to host a gala at Cornerstone Community Church.

Dr. Augustine, Canada's first female MP of African descent and the driving force behind the nation-wide observance of Black History Month, was a keynote speaker at the event, which brought together leaders from across York Region and members of the Aurora community, to celebrate both the Month and the evening's theme of 'Make Room & Opening Doors.'

'As we come together, as a people, as a Canadian society, we need to be conscious of our place in the world,' said Augustine, reflecting on her own work to bring Black History Month to fruition.

When she first came to Canada in 1960, there was no Charter of Rights & Freedoms, no Human Rights Commission, and 'no school board bringing parents in and talking with parents and ensuring there are trustees who look like the students,' said the former Toronto teacher.

'As I look around the room tonight, I see that we are building together, indeed, and that allies and friends and community-builders, and people who care about the education of their children, people who care about those issues that face us today, those people are in the room and are talking to each other and not at each other,' she said.

It is important for members of the Black community to tell their stories. They matter, they said, and it's up to each and every one of us to amplify them.

That idea is reflected in the overarching nationwide theme for Black History Month, which is 'Our Stories to Tell.'

'That theme reminds us of our duty to share the complete story of Canada, but it also alerts us to our own capacity to help write an

even greater story today and going forward," she said. "Each one of us has a story to tell and we must understand each other's story."

"Ours is a story of the Loyalists, the people of African descent who settled in the Maritimes after the American Revolution," she continued. "I urge [you] to accept and take ownership of your own stake in the stewardship of Canadian history because, my friends, the history of Black people, Black history, is Canadian history. It's all of our history and to be fully understood, for Canada to be fully understood, we must understand that history is all of our history. We have to recognize the sacrifices of those who came before us and carry the legacy forward in the most respectful and truthful way. By owning and telling our stories, we build capacity to identify and counteract systemic suppression and build connected, supportive communities."

If this was a gauntlet that was thrown down, it was certainly picked up by the community leaders who organized last week's gala, and by the elected community leaders who attended - including Ahmed Hussen, Canada's Minister of Housing, and of Diversity & Inclusion.

"By listening, it doesn't mean it's an event that you have one meeting, one discussion and that's the end of that; what it means is it is a process and that process evolves having the humility to know that you don't have all the answers," he said. "I have always said that the best way to make government policy in Ottawa is to understand and accept that you don't have all the answers. It is particularly true on issues of diversity and inclusion."

"For decades, Black Canadian organizations were telling their Federal Government from different parts, don't just give us program money, but invest in our capacity and our infrastructure because that's also important to preserve and expand Canadian history because Black history is Canadian history and we were one of the first governments to listen to that call."

"For the first time because we're listening more carefully and we're taking a nuanced approach, and we're acknowledging not just the Black Canadian community voice but the diversity within it, the intersectionality, the regional lens. Black Nova Scotians have a different history than Black Ontarians. We have to be smarter in how we do public policy in Canada and I can tell you by doing some of that work in Ottawa we're seeing amazing results on the ground, making Canada not just for Black Canadians, but making all Canadians stronger, more prosperous, and building amazing social cohesion."

Some of these themes were echoed by Mayor Tom Mrakas who said Aurora is "fully committed" to supporting initiatives led directly by Black community members that provide opportunities for our residents to learn about and celebrate the rich history of Black Canadians.

"I want to thank you for your continued efforts to strengthen our community, educate residents, and create a more inclusive, welcoming Town," said Mrakas, addressing the community groups in attendance. "Your work to inspire the next generation for initiatives is the type of leadership that changes lives and communities and it is not just Black History Month, which is a time for celebration, it is also a time for reflection. The reality is that Canada has a history of anti-Black racism and communities and individuals continue to face systemic racism today. It is incumbent on all of us to educate ourselves and take action if we are to be true allies. Oftentimes, battling racism requires us to look deeply within our own hearts and challenge ourselves, our family members, friends and colleagues. When we hear or see racism and hurtful stereotypes being used, or when we can identify barriers to inclusion, it is incumbent on all of us to speak up and stand up."

For Dr. Augustine, it's integral now and throughout the year to "go back to our roots in order to move forward."

"The stories are ours to tell," she concluded. "We need to reach back, we need to gather the best of what our past has to teach us. Black History Month honours the enormous contributions that Black people have made and continue to make. This is our Canada, it's a beautiful place full of wonderful people, but Canada remains a work in progress. We still have to deal with racism, Islamophobia, reconciliation with our Indigenous people, the LGBTQ community and I can go on and on. We realize that if we're to have a fair and just and inclusive and diversified society that we all have to ensure we know our past, we honour our past, we honour them. Not just on a special day. Black History Month is to begin the recognition and the celebration of who we are, but not to end it."

in Black History Month.?

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