

# Black History Month: A time for learning

by Brian T. Wright

February was Black History Month in Canada. It was a time in which the contributions of black people, Canadians in particular, are remembered through art exhibits, poetry readings, lectures, plays and musical presentations. Blacks have been in Canada, at least since the 18th century. Today, black Canadians live in all parts of Canada, and because not all born here, they have different cultural backgrounds; from Africa not the West and East Indies, England, the United States and other countries.

Some people saw Black History Month as a time when blacks expressed their thoughts about the past and future, though there is more to black history than just singing and dancing. Both young and old can learn from and reflect on the past with a feeling of pride rather than shame.

Most importantly, they could learn about people like Harriet Tubman, a woman who helped over 200 slaves escape to North America in the mid-1800s; that the First Baptist Church in Toronto was established in 1826; that the Maroons were deported from Jamaica to Nova Scotia in 1796; that Abraham Shadd was the first Canadian black to be elected to public office in 1859; that a national newspaper called the *Canadian Negro* was established in Toronto in 1953; that between 1958-78 Mattawa, Ontario had a black mayor (Dr. Monestime) and that, in 1968, Lincoln Alexander of Hamilton, Ontario became the first black member of federal parliament. He later became Lieutenant Governor of Ontario.



Luther Brown

They could also become acquainted with heroes long discarded by the mainstream media; people like Paul Bogle, William Gordon and Marcus Garvey to name only a few.

In Toronto, there is a large black community. The 1980s has been a decade in which relationships between the police and members of the black community have been strained. Wade Lawson, a Mississauga youth, was shot in the back of the head in 1989 while driving a stolen car. Sophia Cook, a young black mother in her early 20s was shot by police while sitting in a car in the Jane and Finch area late in 1989, under what were called suspicious circumstances. Today, she is paralyzed from the waist down.

Various community groups spoke out against what they called police negligence and succeeded in having manslaughter charges laid against the officers in each of the incidents. Non-white members of the community might have thought they were merely "crying wolf" about racism. But whether their cries are justified or not, in 1990, blacks are more aware of who they are and realize that they, like any other ethnic group in Canada, face difficult struggles in the future.

Black History Month is an agent; it fills a community with pride, and nurses that belonging of a people who want to know where they really came from and about the women and men who were leaders in the struggle. Education is the key. Black History Month is important now especially. It will help to wipe out the stereotypical way in which blacks are viewed and give black people ideas on how to avoid being looked at in a stereotypical manner.

Still a dominant theme, and a topic of heated conversation, is the notion that blacks are not organized. The black Canadian existence is a combination of cultures. Is it realistic to expect all black people in Canada to come together under a united front? Because even though they share similar characteristics, everyone, as an individual, is different.

Educator and journalist Luther Brown believes that togetherness is the key, and that blacks are closer to being together, but also thinks that "we are still too different to be unified. But we can still work towards one goal; for instance if we want to eradicate drugs (from our neighbourhood), we can work towards that."

Brown also said February was a time in which communities, black and white, could learn about the rich black Canadian heritage. Clifton Joseph, a local poet and musician thinks blacks are unified, but that "we have to become more mature . . . a lot of [black] organizations are not living up to historical facts."

It is heartwarming to hear people actually talking about their blackness and dealing with this reality, but what about the future; what happens when Black History Month is over? Do blacks continue on with their "regular lives?" Is it simply a time when people take time out to be black, or to practise their culture? And is there enough being done to educate ethnic groups in Canada about their own culture?

If you walked into a classroom and asked a child about Zora Neale Hurston, the 20th century anthropologist and writer who studied the black folk culture, chances are there would not be too many hands raised in the air. However, names like Muhammed Ali, Reggie Jackson, Florence Griffith-Joyner, Angela Issajenko (formerly known as Angela Taylor) and Ben Johnson would surely ring a bell; they are all famous sports personalities. The names Michael Jackson, Prince, Bob Marley, Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson would also be familiar; these black people are famous musicians. Though it is good that they are in the public eye the question to be asked is, "Why do we just see black people, who hold high profiles, only singing and dancing?"

What about people like Phillis Wheatley, a female black poet who, in 1773, had a book published, the second (at that time) by an American woman? And Ida B. Wells-Barnett, an editor, civil rights leader and women's rights activist in the late 19th and early 20th century. Why are these names, together with the contributions of many fine black Canadian women and men, not mentioned in the classrooms today?

Brown says not enough is being done in the school system. He thinks that, although the North York Board is at the leading edge, making a concerted effort to promote the history of all ethnic Canadians, "Society is not doing enough." He adds that he is "optimistic due to the fact that Black History Month has been implemented into the system. Kids have a better sense of multicultural relationships."

Lillian Allen is a writer, and is also known as a dub poet. She has been writing and reading her special brand of poetry in Toronto and throughout Canada for a number of years. She says that not enough is being done in the schools (at all levels) to educate kids who come from ethnic groups. She feels that Black History Month is helpful, but that people should not have to take time out to remember their history. However she does feel that the entire month is a time for sharing information.

Joseph says, "Black History Month is a time set apart to look at black history. But it does not mean that that is the only time that blacks are alive. Every month is Black History Month." The "Dubz Poet at Large" (Joseph) also said that not much emphasis is placed on black history in the schools.

Gary Wright, a counsellor at Chigcousy Secondary school in Brampton, Ontario, says there is little emphasis on black history in the school system within which he works. Wright also says that "when Black History Month comes around, people tend to think of the contributions of black Americans rather than centering on the achievements of black Canadians." When asked if Black History Month is only for blacks, Wright said, "Of course not. Everyone can gain from it."

Charles Simon, former president of York University's Caribbean Students Association (CSA) agrees that "Black History Month is for everyone."

Melaine Brown, a mass communications student and an active CSA member, said she learned about black history primary through the Ujaama Young People's Association. She said she did not obtain any information about her culture while she was in grade school or high school. When asked if Black

History Month happened only once a year for some people, she says that it would be treated as a fad by those who do not understand its true purpose. She also feels that Black History Month concerns black people in Canada directly, but thinks that it involves Canadians as a whole as well.

Black History Month must surely become an intrinsic component of Canadian society. In the United States, blacks have been celebrating their culture since 1916 when it was then called Negro History Week. A large part of the reason ethnic groups make special efforts to promote their culture, and try to educate the rest of society, is because the mainstream media does not consider them part of the whole.

Daniel Zaretsky, station manager at CHRY community radio (105.5 FM) based in Vanier College, says "the black community is one of many underrepresented groups the station is trying to focus on." Pat Anderson, a programmer at the station says, "African people should be recognized because they are a part of the mainstream." Through CHRY and Toronto's two other community radio stations CKLN and CIUT, are devoting a large part of programming in February to Black History Month, Zaretsky points out that CHRY is committed to giving a voice to ethnic groups all year round.

T.V. commercials are a perfect example of what Zaretsky means. If blacks are seen at all, it is very little. Also, there are very few dramatic or comedy series actually dealing with the experience of black families or individuals in Canada. It is unfortunate, because people are filled with a great feeling of pride when they feel they are being equally represented. Black Canadians have a distinct and rich history, and it should not be something looked at at one particular time of the year. Blacks have been involved in every phase of Canada's development since before Confederation. This should be recognized. Otherwise it will always seem as though blacks lived in a completely different world of their own. In 1990, no group of people should have to fight for inclusion into a society that expects them to contribute.

At York, the CSA planned a variety of interesting events in celebration of black women. Earlier this month, community activist Lennox Farrell, along with Bernice Blackmon and Frankie Hall, spoke at the Senate Chamber in the Ross Building. And on February 20 Linda Caarthy and Angela Robertson discussed the topic of feminism. On the same topic, "Maids and Madam," a two-hour film was screened February 21 in the Senate Chamber.



Lillian Allen

It is important for people to realize that acquiring a knowledge and understanding of the history of any people is important for their growth as human beings. It goes without saying that a month dedicated to black history is aimed first at black people, but it is not meant to alienate non-blacks. After all, there are white Africans and whites from the Caribbean and Latin America.

Hopefully, there will be a time when Black History Month will not be a fight for blacks to be included into society, but a period in which they can be proud of being a large part of the majority. Since we are all human beings living on the same planet, and undergo all kinds of struggles regardless of colour, surely Black History Month is more than just a "side-kick-feel-good session," as Clifton Joseph would say, "more than just a black thing." Surely it involves everyone in communities who are concerned with the ongoing struggle for recognition of all people considered to be minorities purely because of the colour of their skin. The great teacher Marcus Garvey once said, "A people without knowledge of its past history is like a tree without roots." Let's hope that the months and years following the Black History Month will truly be, in the words of Lillian Allen, "a time for learning."