

Black students reflect upon their experience at Dalhousie, and call for a change

Unheard voices

BY TIM BARDOUILLE

Welcome to the beef session. This is what happens when Black people from all walks of life come together to voice their opinions. It may sound like a rare occurrence to the uninformed, but this happens everyday in our neck of the woods.

Like the Langston Hughes character Simple says, "with Black people, every topic comes back to the race problem". It plays such a major role in our lives that we can't sit and talk about anything without coming back to it.

Well, today's your lucky day.

It's not every day that we let the other side sit in on one of these sessions. Black people are generally private people, and we tend to let our business remain our business. But now, it's time you got a taste of what we've got to say.

We've been here since the start of this whole Dalhousie experience. We helped build the oldest buildings around here. And just like yesterday, and just like tomorrow, it's time our voice was heard.

Orientation Week

The Dalhousie majority has a tendency to forget about its minorities. We get lost in the shuffle when events are organized for the student body. The perfect example is the Orientation Week experience. For the majority of Dal students, frosh week is a great way to get acquainted with others when arriving at a new school. Generally, students meet lots of new people and realize how much they have in common, and how much they fit in to this often intimidating environment.

But what if you don't share these common experiences and ideas?

Robert, a student from Zimbabwe, remembers Orientation week as "one of the most traumatic experiences of [his] life". He recalls the attitude of others towards him was, "I am the shit, and you are not. And if you're different, there's something wrong with you."

This is the experience for many Black students — especially those who are coming from far away.

Often, the result is not so drastic, but there is usually a sense of alienation and rejection when students attempt to impose their cultural biases on others.

Tracy is a great example of this. She's a 2nd-year student from St. Lucia. She remembers hiding in her residence room to avoid orientation events.

"The music and shows didn't appeal to me, so I stayed away... in the Caribbean, they do have their orientation week, and their parties, but I found [the Dal frosh week] degrading. That's why I didn't participate."

The cultural issue surrounding frosh week involvement spreads like a virus to campus life in general. Black people feel a combination of not enough representation and too much misrepresentation. But, since there is only a small minority to complain about it, a change never occurs.

Dalhousie Administration
Frustration with Dal societies and administration, in general,

"Who's responsibility does it become to make everyone at Dal want to [learn about other cultures]?"

abounds among Black students. However, the infrastructure has been laid down, and that is a big step in the right direction.

For example, the Black Student Advising Centre (BSAC), located in the SUB, offers assistance to Black students at Dal in almost every aspect of student life.

This is probably the most effective venture so far.

Laura, a 4th-year student from Toronto, recalls that she "had a

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Black student advisor, and that [she] could apply for bursaries. [She] could [use the Centre] for help writing a resume and use the computers".

As in her case, these opportunities are not presented to most new students. However once they become aware, their options are greatly extended.

But even with these new choices, there exists the belief among many Black students that not enough is being done.

Marlon, a recently-graduated Dal student who was born and raised in Canada, puts it this way: "Everything is in place [at Dal] for an amazing Black experience, but it's all artificial... You've got the Black Student Advising Centre and all these societies. They're all band-aid solutions to give the appearance something's being done."

There is a common conception (which is often true) that, even among the structures in place to help us, there is fragmentation and resistance to change. This leads many students to give up and ignore the options given to them.

Andrew, another Toronto native who is new to Dal, feels like he's "walking around here as an individual". The sense of community which he is used to has

been replaced by a necessary self-reliance.

Marlon concurs.

"[Dal] was a huge letdown in terms of there not being [enough of] a Black organization or Black presence on campus," he says.

Black in Halifax

Many Black students come to Halifax with certain preconceived notions based on the size of the indigenous Black population.

This area boasts the largest Black population density in Canada, which suggests that our community would be well represented. However, the reality is that, similar to Dal campus, Black people are horribly under-represented and noticeably mistreated in the local community.

Coming from a region which places a large emphasis on race, or more particularly on skin colour, Robert makes a very powerful indictment of Halifax.

"In Canada, which claims to

Another local student, John, points to the "ice cream cone effect". Due to the social conditions in Black neighbourhoods, there is a constant reduction of the number of Black youths in school at progressively higher grade levels. The decrease is so noticeable that very few youths out of this large community will ever see the inside of a post-secondary institution.

Those who do make it to Dal quickly realize the extent to which

their community has been ignored.

Miles explains that "we have a long history here. We have lost a lot, we've experienced a lot, and we still do. And none of that is being taught".

John, Miles, and Cathy (a 3rd-year student who also grew up in Nova Scotia) all agree that their Dal experiences have been very much coloured by their identity as Black Nova Scotians. Cathy says the lack of representation for local Blacks at Dal is disheartening.

"You have the African society

segregated. Also, when I did find the Black community and started to go there, I found rejection from the community at the same time. It's kind of a double-edged sword."

Dalhousie is home to so many different Black cultures that animosity often flares up between them. Groups feel their culture is being invaded, and their defence's are quickly in place.

Nicole, a 1st-year student from northeastern Africa, remembers experiences at a party where "you feel like we're all Black, like you're going to bond, but you feel uncomfortable... and having experienced it, you don't want to experience it again".

These divisions between various groups of Black students make it harder to project a united front when pushing for change.

Natasha compares her university experience to that of current students and notes that "the problem is all the divisions. If we can't get beyond that, then no wonder nobody's responding."

The power of one united voice demanding many changes is so much greater than many voices clamouring for recognition.

Making a Difference

The most common opinion is that the onus is on us to make a change.

Cathy believes that "the doors are there... it's just that we have to take the initiative [to open them]."

Laura, who has been very much involved in the Black community in Halifax, stresses that "all Black students on campus need to be participating in organizing events and making them what we want them to be."

Marlon also points out that another way to affect change is to demand it *en force*.

"If there's not a [Black] presence on campus saying there's a need for activities, [the administration] continue doing what they want to do," he says.

Laura believes that attitude has to extend to other campus institutions as well.

"We have to make sure that the Gazette is printing stories we want to hear, and that [Dal] has the shows at the Rebecca Cohn that we want to see," she says.

Others argue that, as students, it is not our responsibility to create this environment. Miles believes that "the DSU has a job to do and they're not doing it".

He, and many others, are of the opinion that onus falls on Dalhousie to recognize its own shortcomings, and make a change.

But the question posed by Natasha remains for us, as Dalhousie students of all backgrounds, to answer.

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and the Caribbean society, but what about the local blacks?"

Since this community is not visible on campus, there are few positive role models for younger people who have aspirations of a higher education.

So how do these young brothers and sisters maintain in such an oppressive community?

John believes that "this is the place that made you who you are... the best man that you can be."

Cathy counts her blessings: "Once you have [the opportunity], you'd better make it count."

As for Miles he plans to remain an actively positive Black Nova Scotian man. "I feel a responsibility to go back into the community and say 'Look. It can be done regardless of how the Dalhousie administration doesn't give a fuck about you. It can be done.'"

United We Stand...

One of the most immediate, and perhaps frightening, problems facing Black students at Dal is the segregation that exists within the city and within our own numbers. Marlon points to his early experiences in Halifax as testament to this.

"I came here seeking knowledge of Black Nova Scotian culture and found a society that's

be one of the most multicultural countries in the world... I have seen segregation. I've been to South Africa where apartheid has just died. I grew up in a society [in Zimbabwe] which had an apartheid system until very recently. And I find that Halifax is just as, if not more so, segregated economically and physically, than where I grew up."

The local Black community has been literally torn down and patched back together by the governing bodies in Nova Scotia. As a result, many Black youth are socially handicapped from birth.

Miles, a Black Nova Scotian student, notes that "you can go to a white community and you see Dal campaigns and recruitment programs... [But] you go to the Black community and you don't see anything to do with Dal."

Natasha is a Black woman from Nova Scotia who now works professionally in broadcasting. She says that the lack of social structures for displaced Blacks has led to a community where "you get a mother with a child, and her mother had her [as a single mother] and there's no father in the home. That's how it's been for generations." She goes on to suggest that this leads to "a lot of Black men in the city [who] are unconscious. They don't know who they are yet".