BEING THE MESSENGER AND THE MESSAGE

THE HONOURABLE JEAN AUGUSTINE

Jean Augustine made history in 1993 as the first African-Canadian woman to be elected to Canada's House of Commons as the Member of Parliament from the Greater Toronto Area constituency of Etobicoke-Lakeshore. She was reelected in four consecutive elections, serving as Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and Minister of Multiculturalism and the Status of Women, and securing unanimous legislative support to pass a historic motion designating February as Black History Month in Canada. The Jean Augustine Chair in Education, Community and Diaspora, aiming to advance access, equity and inclusivity to education through community engagement and collaborative action was launched at York University in Toronto to honour her work and commitment. In 2007, Augustine was called on by the Government of Ontario to lead an initiative commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the 1807 British Slave Trade Act. Later that year, she was appointed the first-ever Fairness Commissioner for the Province of Ontario. In 2021, Ms. Augustine was Lifetime Achievement recipient for the Maclean's Parliamentarian of the Year Awards.

I came to Canada 60 years ago. Thank you for celebrating my 60th anniversary in this country with me. I am so very pleased to be part of this celebration of hope. I like the word "hope".

I left Grenada knowing that I would miss all the festivities and preparations for the 29th of June which is called the Feastday of St Peter and St Paul. In Grenada, this is commonly known as the Fishermen's birthday. It is a big celebration. The fishermen would bring their boats on shore and decorate them with colourful ribbons, flowers and medals of saints and good luck charms. There would a parade from the Roman Catholic Church to the beach where the priests would bless the boats with holy water and pray for the safety of the fishermen and for an excellent fishing season. It was really a big celebration; a fun time and I would be missing this time with my friends as we had always collected ribbons for our favourite fisherman.

I knew that I was going to miss such fun and festivities as the beach parties, the Shango celebrations the cultural foods and drinks such as the sorrel, mauby, ginger beer, and seamoss punch.

I got ready for my flight on TCA Trans Canada Airlines (the name was changed to Air Canada

later on). Securing my British passport and my Oxford and Cambridge Overseas School Certificate, I figured I was on my way to big things.

I arrived on what was called the Canada-Caribbean Domestic Scheme. It was a program that was set up by the Canadian government to assist young people in the Caribbean where there were large numbers of unemployed youth. Prior to 1960, Canada's involvement in the Caribbean was really in terms of assisting in the building of schools. A number of schools were built throughout the various islands with Canadian aid and Canadian assistance. Canada was very much engaged with the Caribbean as part of the Commonwealth. By the way, Grenada was ceded to Britain in 1763 in the same year as Canada was. Arriving here on the Canada-Caribbean Domestic Scheme, I had committed to work as a domestic in the home of a Canadian family for one year in exchange for Landed Immigrant Status. Fulfilling my obligation in a wonderful Canadian household, I started to get the feel and the taste for what Canadian life was like.

I went on to Toronto Teachers College. At the time, if you wanted to teach, you had to go to teachers' college. In Grenada, I had obtained what was called a pupil-teacher certificate and I wanted to parlay that into getting into teachers' college here. Upon completion, I started teaching with the Catholic School Board.

At the time, Toronto was a different place and Canada was a different place. We did not talk multiculturalism. We were still querying who we were as Canadians. Are we just English and French? There were a good number of Canadians who had come earlier especially from the Ukrainian and other communities out West who were saying, we are not just English and French. We are multicultural. Look around us. We are multiracial. We are multi-ethnic. We are multireligious. And so, the question that was being looked at the time drew me into the midst of all that discussion.

In 1960, we had no *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. In 1960 in Toronto and in Ontario, there was no Human Rights Commission/Code. Where did you complain when there were things that were done that you needed to have some investigation around? We had no Special Investigations Unit (SIU). The police were reporting to themselves. A number of things were happening in the community and we had to organize. Marches and demonstrations were the modus operandi to bring concerns and cries for change. And so, I became almost a closet activist. By that I mean, that I would use my penmanship to do the placards, I would do the research, make the phone calls, but I was not always at the front line of the marches. We were demonstrating and protesting and knocking on government doors for many many years.

Many of the changes that we see today that make me such a proud Canadian were due to the fact that we were able to get bureaucrats, politicians and institutions to listen. We made the point that there was no one in the media who had a brown or black face and looked like us. There was no representation at all in certain parts of society. The department stores put out back to school flyers with pictures of beautiful kids in which none of the kids looked like ours. And so, we were able to push institutions and corporate bodies for change. When I talk about being a proud Canadian, I talk about those things that we were able to do together to move the society

and to move things forward. I was given the ability and the opportunity to reach my full potential, to work in places, to be with individuals, to have my voice heard in many many areas.



Jean teaching social studies in the 1970s.

I was honoured with a YWCA woman of distinction award. I stood there with so many other women who were accomplishing things. I proudly felt that I was in a place where there was hope, a place where there was understanding, a place where there were people who could organize and who could tell the various and the varying stories of what Canada is and what Canada is about.

So, you can imagine after I was elected in 1993 as the first African Canadian Woman, I was so very pleased because as I knocked on doors, and as I asked people to support me, and my candidacy, I felt that there was an understanding that we had to begin to move the agenda. I found that there were so many of us who came in different ships but that were all in the same boat in the Canadian sea and that we all had to work together. I got lots of support and I'm not going to talk about the negatives because we're talking about hope today and we're talking about celebration.

> **"When I stood up to speak, I was a Canadian minister who was both the messenger and the message"**

When as a Member of Parliament and as a minister, I was able to travel the world on behalf of Canada, I felt that I was both bringing the message of Canada in my words and in my person. I felt that I myself was also the message. When I stood up to speak, I was a Canadian minister who was both the messenger and the message. When I talk about hope and when I talk about being a proud Canadian, I reflect on the fact that I raised two beautiful daughters and gave them all the opportunities there are in Canadian society, I enabled so many other young people to move forward and mentored so many



Jean elected as the first African-Canadian woman Member of Parliament in Etobicoke- Lakeshore in 2004.

young women. I headed various women's organizations and my record in helping women is well known.

So, I can say that Canada has given me the opportunity to reach my full potential. Growing up in Grenada and graduating from High School, I had about four avenues of employment open to me. I could be a nurse, I could be a teacher, I could be a civil servant, or I could be a housewife. I came to Canada and I was able to see choices, do many things and reach what I consider to be my full potential. Sure, there is prejudice, discrimination and anti-Black systemic racism in Canadian society. With hard work, one can move oneself in the society. There are allies and always supporters who can help to see the big picture.

What I am hoping today is that in 2020 we all can come together and recognize that we can talk about what Pierre Trudeau used to refer to as the just society. We can talk about the ability of each person to reach their full potential and what Martin Luther King Jr. said that we will be judged not by the colour of our skin but by the intelligence, the contribution and all that we have within us. So, I'm very pleased to hear all the Canadian stories of hope and celebration. These celebrate the immigrant story along with the thanks that we owe to the Indigenous peoples who accommodated and allowed us to share the land and to be here as immigrants enjoying the spoils of the society.