PROMOTING BLACK HISTORY: A PERSONAL JOURNEY SHARED

ROSEMARY SADLIER

Rosemary Sadlier OOnt (Order of Ontario) is a social justice advocate, researcher, writer, consultant, and international speaker on Black History, anti-racism and women's issues. She is the past president, serving for 22 years as the unpaid leader of the Ontario Black History Society – being the driving force of the secured commemoration of February as Black History Month at all levels of government; she secured August 1st as Emancipation Day municipally in 1995 and provincially in 2008 with a national declaration pending. She saw to the creation of the national day for the Hon. Lincoln Alexander. She has given deputations to the UN Rapporteur on Race Relations, the Federal and Provincial Governments and on consultative work with the Royal Ontario Museum, The Ward heritage interpretative group, the Bi-National Study of the Underground Railroad and heritage conferences. Previously she served on the final selection committee of the national Mathieu Da Costa Challenge for Canadian Heritage and is now on the Canada Post Stamp Advisory Committee. An educator, she has developed or contributed to the African Canadian curriculum, national exhibits and she was an appointed member of the College of Early Childhood Educators. She was among the first Canadians designated a Global Defender of Human Rights (CTF & Robert Kennedy Center). An author, Sadlier has written 7 books on African Canadian history. Sadlier is dedicated to social justice and using the frame of Black History, seeks to educate and empower others.

Did you know that we almost did not have a Black History Month?

I was an at-home mom, still nursing my third child, and I found myself also serving as the newly elected president of the Ontario Black History Society (OBHS), the only Provincial Heritage Organization in Canada dedicated to Black History. Holding the position was a sacred trust, allowing me to support and reflect the Black experience. We realized a few weeks before February 1994 that we were required to formally request a petition from the City of Toronto for Black History Month. Luckily, we got it done, and I vowed to avoid last minute appeals in the future. I secured an annual, automatic proclamation from the City of Toronto, then with the Province of Ontario (through our contact with the Ministry: Daniel O'Brien), then with all the

provinces. After outreach to many in the Federal Government, I again approached Jean Augustine, at a fundraiser being held at Denham Jolly's home, to facilitate a national declaration. She agreed to do so, in the presence of Lloyd Perry, and the declaration was passed by December 1995. I was notified of the course of events and orchestrated a bus tour to Ottawa for the first national celebration of February as Black History Month. I was honoured to bring remarks, on behalf of the Black community, at that momentous occasion with the Prime Minister and the Black Caucus in February 1996. I had built upon the efforts of those who had gone before to raise awareness, to create an appetite for such a celebration: Carter G. Woodson the "father of Black History Month"; the Canadian Negro Women's Association (CANEWA); the founders of the OBHS. I had likely given over 2000 talks in schools and community settings between my first volunteer efforts with the OBHS and my tenure as President of the Board of Directors. Such was my commitment, my resilience and my hope for a more equitable society.

I felt that if Black and other racial/ethnic groups just learned more about the contributions, achievements and experiences of Black people in this country, it would help. I hoped that Black History education would roll out from Kindergarten to grade 12, inspired and supported by a now national declaration of February as Black History Month because Black History Month had so much to do with affirming our presence and connection to this place.

> **"Black History is Canadian History, a history that is not widely nor routinely shared. Black History is seminal anti-racist education."**



2014. Gala event in St. John, NB with fellow descendants of the Black Loyalists/Late Loyalists and Refugees of the War of 1812.

I was also the proponent for many other commemorations of people, places and events at all levels of government. In 1995, I advanced the commemoration of August 1st as Emancipation Day as proposed to me by a fellow public education activist from Trinidad and Tobago. This commemoration has been instituted by the City of Toronto, Metro Toronto and the City of Ottawa. It formed the first unanimous all-party supported Bill in Ontario. At the Federal level, it went to second reading twice in the House, twice in the Senate and most recently was given first reading back in the House*. As of this moment, with COVID-19 disruptions, it is still pending. Why do this? Because Black History is Canadian History, a history that is not widely nor

routinely shared. Black History is seminal anti-racist education.

We can connect the current (re) awakening about the presence of systemic racism to our history in this country. We share a history with the United States:

1. We too had slavery – the enslavement of "panis" [First Nations] and Africans. It started with the French and continued under British rule. The first named enslaved African was a child, named Olivier le Jeune about 1628/1629;

2. We too had race riots with one of the earliest and longest taking place in Shelburne, Nova Scotia in 1734;

3. While we were the free north for those on the Underground Railroad – the first freedom movement of the Americas, we too had segregation in schools, residences, restaurants, hotels, skating rinks, and ongoing restrictions denying entrance to professional schools and other workplaces;

4. We too had members and activity by the KKK;

5. We too have the over surveillance and overuse of charges and lethal force by the police.

OUR HOPE LIES IN OUR RESISTANCE.
BLACK LIVES MATTER.

Thank you so much to the organizers for bringing attention to the idea of hope.

Thank you to those who have chosen to watch for their efforts to isolate and social distance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I know how challenging this is for us all.

But it has given us time to reflect, time like we have not had for a very long time, time to consider those things that are important to us now and things that we hold dear. It has provided us with time to consider how we might take action as things open up to overcome the challenges that the murder, the public execution, of George Floyd has sparked globally. What is happening now, with the ongoing protests and the demands for anti-racist actions, is the manifestation of the hope, the resilience, the action of generations. People are calling for human rights, social justice, for economic rights—they are calling for the end of racism.

The land we now call Canada, and its institutions, were built upon the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the displacement and colonization of Inidgenous peoples. This is true even though the first-named African who came to Canada in 1604 acting as an interpreter for Samuel de Champlain was a free man. Indeed, from vital, functioning African civilizations (e.g. Mali, Songhai) people were captured, enslaved, and transported to the Caribbean, the United States, South America and Canada. The first being a young boy, Olivier le Jeune about 1628/1629. He had hoped that his conversion to Catholicism would make him free. It did not. Marie-Joseph Angelique hoped for her freedom but when it proved elusive, her escape ended up causing the burning of much of what was the city of Montreal. She was tortured and hanged for her audacity.

Many other documented situations exist where hope was dashed. Chloe Cooley resisted enslavement

and when bound and carried across the Niagara River to be sold, her story of stolen hope led the First Lieutenant Governor of Ontario to draft what would become the first anti-slavery legislation. It was compromise legislation because other slave-holding members of government were unwilling to see an end to their property rights over their enslaved Africans. The enslaved African Americans who supported the British during the American Revolutionary War hoped that their support to the British forces would be honoured with promised freedom in Canada. The thousands who came to Canada on the Underground Railroad following the passage of the *Slavery Abolition Act*, hoped for a life free from bondage. The "Exodusters", African Americans who hoped to claim land in Canada's west only to be "deemed unsuitable" for Canada or to be faced with exclusionary immigration laws, came anyways. And, in the 1950 and 60s, advocacy by Black people to amend the immigration laws opened the way for change in admission requirements.

> **"I am here because of the resilience, the actions, the hopes of generations of people of African descent in Canada."**

Hope was there even earlier, when Black men joined the war effort to defend this country from the American Revolutionary War, through to WWI and WWII. Many members of both sides of my family helped to defend this country, from women working in the "war plant" creating munitions through to all of the brothers in the Carty family (my cousins) serving. That they all came back was perhaps proof of hope, but what did they come back to?...

I am here because of the resilience, the actions, the hopes of generations of people of African descent in Canada.

I am the hope of the Black Loyalists.
I am the hope of the Late Loyalists.
I am the hope of the Refugees of the War of 1812.
I am the hope of the descendants of the Underground Railroad.

I am the hope of these first four major waves of migration to this place we call Canada because my presence here (our presence here) is built upon their agency, their survival, their perseverance and their hope. Their stories of hope. Black History is what I have worked to promote in order to affirm the Black community and to assist others in learning and understanding the long-term presence of Africans in Canada.

Black History is about hope since hope is about resilience, about action.

I am also the hope of my children and many years ago, when I saw that they were being negatively impacted by the colour of their skin, I was faced with an urgency and commitment to act.

Will you act??

---

*This bill went to second reading twice in the House with MP Deepak Obdrai and was supported by Preston Manning. I proposed this again with numerous members of the federal government and

senators in 2016 and I effected a Parliamentary Petition reaching the required number of signatures in short order. I submitted this to Parliament expecting that the head of the Black Caucus MP Greg Fergus would act upon it, but instead it was picked up by Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard. It went to second reading twice in The Senate. In March 2020 it was back in the House and was given first reading by MP Majid Jowhari. With COVID-19 interruptions and a delay in resuming the sitting of Parliament, I am unsure of the timing for the potential passage of this initiative. I offer it as an example of a story of hope. It has been in the works since 1995. It is not my paid position to "stay on top of this" even though it was my initiative. It is my hope that this will be passed and become a touchstone of freedom because of the further discussions it will facilitate in Black History, anti-racism and systemic racism.

Black Lives Matter.

How better to celebrate Canada in these times?