

Black History will be celebrated Friday night

By Bill Rea

Black History Month is into its last week, and it's going to be celebrated tomorrow (Friday) night.

The celebration is planned for North Peel Community Church in Sandhill, and representatives of the church were at Tuesday's Caledon Council meeting to extend invitation. The celebration will start at 7:30 p.m.

Rev. Ron Kelly acknowledged the Town had issued a Black History Month proclamation, which noted the theme of this year's observances is "Black Canadian women: Stories of strength, courage and vision."

Black History Month has been marked in Canada since 1993, which was the 200th anniversary of legislation that prohibited the importation of slaves to Upper Canada. The proclamation also noted that the United Nations proclaimed 2015 to 2024 as the Decade of People of African Descent.

"It's important to recognize that black history is Canadian history," Kelly told councillors, observing the Church has been part of the Caledon community for decades, and has partnered with the Town on various projects.

He commented on the importance of reaching into the past during Black History Month, telling stories and teaching young people they can be successful, "and failure is not an option."

Youth Leader Nicole Jeffrey said there have been events held at the church every Friday during February, complete with music, food and fun. She added the young people spend time doing research and sharing the knowledge they have gained. They are also being empowered to believe that can be leaders.

The result, she said, has been success in the development of the young people, as they have actively taken part in community events. She added one member of the Church's Youth Group served as a page in the House of Commons.

Kevin Junior pointed out both Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Premier Kathleen Wynne have observed there are still challenges for black people in Canada. While steps are being taken to address these issues, he said it's important for local government to play a role in addressing them.

He also observed that during Black History Month, much of the attention is focused on the United States. Junior said there also needs to be a focus on Canadians, and there are plenty of examples that can be drawn upon from history.

He pointed to the No. 2 Construction Battalion, an all-black unit that had been commanded by white officers, except for the chaplain. The membership had to overcome government racism before they were allowed to spill their blood during the First World War. Junior also said a stamp was dedicated to the battalion in 2016.

He also pointed to the example of Viola Desmond, whose image is soon expected to be on the \$10 bills.

"She's known as the Canadian Rosa Parks," Junior said.

Parks was the civil rights activist who spurred the 381-day Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and Junior commented Desmond was experiencing racism in Nova Scotia before most people had heard of Parks.

He also spoke of Africville, a Canadian village just north of Halifax, and many of the settlers were former slaves from the United States. The community was demolished in the '60s, although he said the government later apologized.

"Apologizing isn't making it right," he observed.

Junior also had words of praise for Jean Augustine, the first African-Canadian woman elected to the House of Commons, Michael Tulloch, the first black judge appointed to the Ontario Court of Appeal, and Lincoln Alexander, who was the first black MP and federal cabinet minister. He was also Lieutenant governor of Ontario, making him the first black person to occupy a vice-regal position in Canada.

"When he spoke, people listened," Junior said.

He also commented on Michaëlle Jean, Canada's first black governor general, who emphasized freedom as part of the Canadian identity.

Junior also said the church is proposing a partnership with the Town to help celebrate Black History Month in 2019.

"I think we're there," he commented. "When ever you're ready, just let me know. Let us know."

Councillor Annette Groves observed one of Canada's strengths is in diversity, recognition and diversity.

She also said she doesn't think people she encounter on the job react to her colour.

"They don't see my colour," she said. "They see me."

Councillor Jennifer Innis said she represented Peel Regional Chair Frank Dale last year at the Black History Month observances at Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA), and she learned a lot about the No. 2 Construction Battalion.

"It's a rich history that we need to showcase," she said.