

Black people do belong here

BY KRISTEN KOWLESSAR

FEBRUARY is upon us and I am spending yet another Black History Month away from Thunder Bay. I find myself feeling particularly reflective on what this month means to me. Of course, we know that Black History Month has been celebrated in Canada since 1995, and that Black History in Canada is something that we are still learning about in 2022 — and I do encourage us all to keep learning together.

However, today I am thinking more about my Black history in Thunder Bay.

I am the proud daughter of one of the longest-standing families of the Caribbean African Multi-cultural Association of Thunder Bay (CAMAT), and as such, was lucky enough to be raised in a small but mighty Black community that has since grown exponentially in our city.

Today, I treasure memories of our once-small community reading stories of Anansi, crafting, dancing, and sampling staples of Caribbean cuisine in the city's libraries every Saturday in February. I have fond memories of movie nights, of dancing and cooking at the Folklore Festival, and of course, our little community growing into the proud and vibrant people who host the annual Black History Month Gala.

I can't say that growing up Black in Thunder Bay was without its challenges, and indeed contributed to my current position as an emerging critical race scholar pursuing my PhD in Ottawa.

However, I want to set the record straight. I study Thunder Bay, but I do not hate Thunder Bay. In fact, I still consider it my home, and I always will.



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

Thunder Bay can rise to challenge of creating a better future

When I think about Thunder Bay, I think about the incredible Black community I was raised in. The community of people who taught me resilience, empathy, and to always help others in need. The community who always reminded me to hold my head high and be proud of who I am and where I am from. The community I want to raise my children in.

I would not be the passionate and outspoken person I am if I didn't have strong Black role models to follow in my youth. Living elsewhere, I've realized how crucial that representation and celebration of our Blackness is, and that no one does it quite like Thunder Bay's Black diaspora.

The Thunder Bay that I see now is one where Black people are not just living but thriving here; Black people are knowing that their place is not only where

it is deemed palatable, but anywhere that they dare and dream to be because we belong in this community.

If you had asked me even a few years ago if I thought that Thunder Bay could be this, I would have laughed. And that gives me hope.

Change is hard, and generally unwelcome at first, but this change has only done good things for our community. I have dedicated my life to bettering Thunder Bay, and I have hope that we can continue on this path that we've started.

It will be a challenge: It will mean letting our youth be unapologetically themselves. It will mean elevating the voices of those who have been talked over or left out. It will take an explicit commitment to decolonization, anti-racism, and equity. It will mean holding each other accountable; educating ourselves and unlearning harmful truths that have impacted generations of people in our city and beyond.

But if there is one thing I know from my lifetime in this city, it is that Thunder Bay can rise to the challenge. Put simply, understanding our past and using it to work toward a better future is what Black History Month means to me.

Kristen Kowlessar is a Thunder Bay-raised scholar and community advocate for social justice. Currently a PhD student in Ottawa, Kristen received her honours bachelor of arts, and master of arts degrees from Lakehead University. She looks forward to returning to Thunder Bay on completing her studies. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.