

TRUE COLOURS

THE BAD BLACK STEREOTYPE IS PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE AS TORONTO'S BLACK COMMUNITY FIGHTS FOR A BETTER FUTURE.

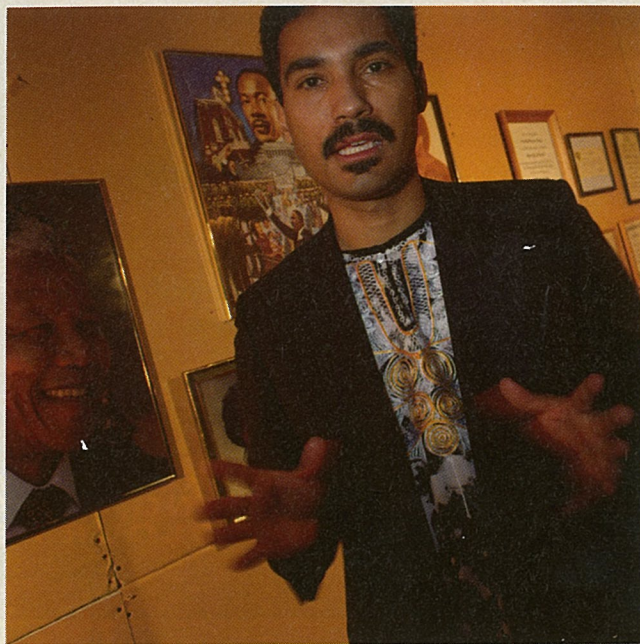
"First, you blame someone for writing you out, then you expect the same person to write you back in. You have to write yourself in." That's the message Akwatu Khenti wants to pound into the heads of angry young blacks ready to give up on the system.

Khenti, 31, is the project coordinator of an initiative called Facilitating the Academic Success of Black Children in Canada, an enterprise backed by at least three West Indian cultural associations, with help from two federal ministries. Like many leaders in Toronto's black community, Khenti believes that there is no lack of drive among blacks, just a surplus of impediments. And he's determined to remove them, one by one. Ask Khenti what's new in Toronto's black community and he'll take you on an intellectual roller-coaster ride, forcing you to look at the world in a new—and happy—light. Talk about positive thinking: Khenti should rewrite the book.

His upbeat mood belies a widely held perception that, after a series of shootings, sullen Toronto blacks have little on their minds these days other than bitter relations with the police. While no one dismisses the urgent need to resolve that confrontation, many blacks know there is a host of other, equally important issues facing the community.

For starters, Khenti cites an insensitive education system as a barrier to blacks. Others worry about Caribbean and African immigrants adjusting to an unfamiliar culture and environment, about raising capital for black business, and about combating the negative self-image of many young blacks. Focusing on the media is Hal Johnson, 34, who owns the TV production company, Double Play, and who believes the emphasis on police issues is creating a destructive mindset amongst black youth. "Many young blacks are concluding: if I'm black, I'm dangerous, I'm a criminal, I deal drugs, I am a member of the underworld," he says.

In an attempt to reverse the trend, Johnson has created a



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90-second Participaction TV spot seen coast to coast on network and cable TV; it shows a black man and white woman working out together to promote the idea that blacks and whites have common goals. Johnson says 43 corporations declined to sponsor the project—"they couldn't see the fit"—before Participaction backed him.

Barry Thomas, full-time executive director of the City of North York's race relations committee, also views television as a powerful influence. Black youths end up in jail after acting out the stereotype that infects much of the media, says Thomas. "No longer is it just an *image* of black kids in cars with stolen guns, selling drugs. It's now for real," he says.

Thomas says young blacks, particularly those with an immigrant background, don't have the experience to deal with and beat the justice system upon a first arrest the way many middle-class white youths can. Instead, a prison term enhances their street reputation and, in turn, increases their illicit earning power. But the pattern could be broken, Thomas insists, if the community itself had a chance to work with first offenders. He practices what he preaches: before becoming a civil servant Thomas worked at Tropicana Community Services, a counselling and recreational centre. When five young blacks were charged with credit card fraud in 1986, he helped them get a break and three are now attending university.

Origin, Thomas adds, is another factor often ignored by whites working with the black community. Caribbean, African, and indigenous Canadian blacks all have different cultures, different ways of socializing, and different expectations. Worse, Thomas says, is the persistent misconception among whites that black families are in a shambles. "The algebra of the white family is easy. The algebra of the black family is endless." While whites tidily divorce and divide up the assets and the responsibilities, black families often reconstitute, ending

up with a complex division of responsibility for raising children. Families within the setup can flourish, but it confounds outsiders if problems arise.

Also at work are subtle subdivisions of discrimination. Blacks who try to join the mainstream are often caught between two worlds. Yvonne Barrow and Adrienne Annikie, a pair of determined and ambitious 30-year-olds, born here of Caribbean heritage, are just starting a wedding reception business. But while they find themselves referred to by whites as "those two black girls", they're equally discouraged by their own community, the attitude being, "Why are you even bothering?"

Carl James, from Antigua, teaches sociology at both Sheridan College and York University and is the author of a book called *Making It: Black Youth, Racism and Career Aspirations in a Big City*. "Black youth is just as motivated, with aspirations just as high as the rest," he says. "The problem is they are tempted to turn their backs when they discover they have to work twice as hard just to prove themselves."

It's useful to break down the barriers facing blacks into three areas: economic, educational, and social.

On the economic front, there's Roy Williams, a member of the Metro Toronto Police Services Board, a professor at Ryerson's School of Management, and the director of its Centre of Entrepreneurship. Together with a group of black businessmen in the city, Williams is establishing the Caribbean-African Chamber of Commerce to set a black economic agenda, to encourage black entrepreneurs, to develop black capital, and to have black business taken seriously by mainstream investors.

Looking to education, Akwatu Khenti and his coalition (the National Council of Jamaicans, the National Council of Trinidad and Tobago Associations in Canada, and the National Council of Barbadian Organizations in Canada) ran a three-day conference at the downtown Holiday Inn in April to examine how the school system fails the black community. Khenti believes one problem stems from the expectations of those from the Caribbean (Khenti is from Trinidad), where education follows the British model of a highly structured school system in which academic achievement comes before sports. Yet those expectations are dashed and parents become

confused when the local system expects them to "become involved" and to help set the curriculum.

But, for Khenti, stereotyping is the main enemy. He reasons that educators, like the rest of us, are conditioned to believe, from music and videos, that young blacks are all style and no content, and, from the media, that young blacks are shiftless troublemakers prone to violence. It's like, man, black kids are cool, they hang out and play basketball. So, when young blacks cut class and wait in the corridors for the game to start, they're tolerated by a system that is choosing the path of least resistance. Another reason Khenti believes young blacks cut classes is course content. Not only do many reject a curriculum geared to careers that probably won't be open to them, the curriculum itself is rooted in European history and has little to say about where they came from and how they fit into this society.

Khenti does not promote the politically correct solution of African studies at the expense of other subjects. But he does believe that the history of black achievement in science, art, and govern-

ment is integral to all human history. "We want our kids to be proud and to succeed and to be part of the mainstream. But for that to happen the mainstream has to reflect society, rather than force individuals to fit its own narrow definitions," Khenti says.

As for social change, Barry Thomas knows it will take more than a few token blacks on corporate or government boards. It will take large numbers of blacks motivated and trained to work in organizations and institutions where day-to-day decisions are made, where the real power is dispensed. And blacks have to work for change in their own communities, instead of just responding to government demands or contributing to policies that others administer.

The choice is simple. As the South African-born Thomas explains, we can have a form of sophisticated apartheid as in New York, where blacks do their thing in one community and whites do theirs in another, with constant war at the border. Or we can negotiate peace now, before it's too late. ♦

Colin Vaughan reports on politics for Citytv.

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