



BLACK INCLUSION ASSOCIATION

BIAMAZING

Ornela Thieba, February 25th 2022

In conclusion to our BIAmazing series for Black History Month 2022, our Head of Committees Ornela Thieba and Dieulita Datus, co-founfer of Ubuntu-Mobilizing Central Alberta, discuss the meaning of black excellence and upcoming initiatives.



Memories of Home

What are some of your favourite memories of Haiti?

Born in Haiti, and raised in The Bahamas, Dieulita's favourite memories always involve her family, food, and community spirit. She remembers playing games with her cousins and creating dolls out of mango pit fibres. These nostalgic memories are a testament to the creativity and ingenuity that many individuals share while growing up across the Black diaspora. Discussing our roots and treasured memories was a good way to start our conversation about where our passion for grassroots community work began, and how it continuously refuels our efforts towards fostering togetherness.

Validity in Your Unique Excellence

What does black excellence mean to you?

In today's society, Black Excellence as a mindset allows for black people everywhere in the diaspora to celebrate their collective achievements against the backdrop of a race-based society. Sadly, this same mindset can also be detrimental to ordinary black individuals by upholding unrealistic standards of achievements as a measure for personal worth .

To Dieulita, black excellence means: I am here, I am my ancestors' dream. She is reminded of her Haitian ancestors' strength in reclaiming their land and identities to ensure that future generations have access to better opportunities in life. To Dieulita, celebrating black success is synonymous to being joyful and mindful of the moment. Acknowledging the struggles without dwelling on them enables her to feel grateful for the momentum made by herself, her peers, and her predecessors.

Echoing Dieulita, I believe that all Black people are valuable by virtue of existing. For me, black excellence is centred in celebrating black joy and personal fulfillment.

Ubuntu Mobilizing Central Alberta: Sisterhood to Grassroots Community Organization

What inspired you to create Ubuntu? What does 'Ubuntu' mean and represent to you and your community?

Together, Dieulita Datus and Sadia Anwar co-founded Ubuntu Mobilizing Central Alberta. They identified the need for an organization such as Ubuntu in Red Deer (AB), here is the story of how a community grew from the gift of their sisterhood. Dieulita and Sadia became friends by being the only women of colour in the room at the events they attended. Because they could instantly relate to each other in this way, they formed a natural bond. While sharing their experiences with one another, they recognized the need to create a safe space for people like them.



Ornela Thieba

“ *AMIDST THE DUAL IMPLICATIONS OF BEING BLACK AND EXCELLENT, I THINK IT IS VITAL FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL TO EXPLORE THEIR OWN UNIQUE MEANINGS OF SUCCESS, AND BY VIRTUE, EXCELLENCE.* **”**
-ORNELA



Dieulita Datus

“ *IN OUR COMMUNITY, UBUNTU REPRESENTS THE UNPRECEDENTED PATH, THE JOURNEY, AND OUR HOPES FOR CENTRAL ALBERTA.* **”**
-DIEULITA

Ubuntu is a Bantu word that encapsulates the essential human virtues of compassion and humanity . “Ubuntu was created for us, by us,” says Dieulita. The organization’s name would be a lasting reminder of their mission. Ubuntu is essentially the blueprint, the spirit of the work that Dieulita, Sadia, and their team do. Ubuntu is also a reminder for them that the organization is community led. “We allow the community to lead us, we consult them on community needs and involve our youth” explains Dieulita. In practice,³ this underlines the importance of humanizing their endeavours . Therefore, in every interaction that happens, they are reminded to focus on the individuals behind each initiative and its corresponding context. Naturally, to Sadia and Dieulita, this also means that in any difficult conversation, they exert self-compassion, and give themselves the same grace as those they engage with.

Emerging Initiative: The Collective Alberta Project (CAP)

Can you share some of your proudest moments as the co-founder of Ubuntu? Tell us about some of your current initiatives.

Similarly to her favourite childhood memories, Dieulita’s proudest moments and cherished memories at Ubuntu involve the members of her organization; Sadia, the board of directors, the youth council, the volunteers, and their shared memories. Driving home with her co-founder after a successful event and laughing about how their native accents became obvious the more tired they grew, is one of Dieulita’s most cherished memories at Ubuntu. The work that goes behind the scenes of a non-for-profit organization is oftentimes difficult, however, Dieulita explains that it is the ripple effect of their initiatives that make her the proudest. Being seen and recognized by her community in Red Deer as agents of meaningful change is a source of profound encouragement. To the team behind Ubuntu, community affirmations are the motivation that continuously refuels their dedication toward mobilizing Central Alberta.

Ubuntu’s up-and-coming initiative: The Collective Alberta Project (CAP). Currently in its early stages, the CAP will bring together forty women-identifying, and non-binary individuals to discuss their community needs, and essentially, what they require to thrive in Central Alberta. Dieulita emphasizes the different needs and levels of care that should be afforded to everyone. Inspired by the Combahee River Collective, the Collective Alberta Project will formulate calls-for-actions that will be presented to municipal leaders in Central Alberta . Registration for the CAP will open in the coming weeks and will be hosted virtually.



Dieulita encourages people from all backgrounds and walks of life to join the collective; seniors, youth, new immigrants, business owners, religious leaders, community workers, etc, are all needed in order to foster an inclusive environment in Central Alberta.

“ AS A COLLECTIVE WE CAN PROTECT AND ADVOCATE FOR EACH OTHER. WE WON’T BE THE ONLY ONES IN THE ROOM ANYMORE. WE WON’T COMPETE AGAINST EACH OTHER FOR SPACE OR RESOURCES. WE WILL UNITE AND AMPLIFY OUR VOICES. -DIEULITA ”

Redefining Anti-Racism Equity Diversity and Inclusion (AREDI)

What is the work to be done when it comes to equity, diversity and inclusion?

With the new wave of race-inequity consciousness, Anti-Racism Equity Diversity and Inclusion (AREDI), have become buzzwords. These buzzwords have erected tokens, and harboured blanket statements that have become trivial to the subject matter . Dieulita wishes to disassemble the AREDI jargon and start from scratch, “lets remove the titles and figure out what it means to be equitable and inclusive” explains Dieulita.

“Central Alberta is a diamond in the rough” says Dieulita, the process is not as easy as putting together an EDI council and calling it a day. First, “we start by demystifying what it means to be black in Central AB, reclaiming our narratives, owning our stories”. In Canada, black people are oftentimes confined to existing only through a coloured lens. However, Dieulita reminds us that it is important to humanize ourselves as black individuals; by allowing ourselves to exist and have meaning outside of the coloured box.

Black people have talents, hobbies, families, and dreams, just like everyone else. “There are countless ways to classify people in the diaspora,” says Dieulita. Intersectional identities take into account languages, sex, gender expression, age, class, education level, physical ability, etc. Ironically, buying into the mirage of the black monolith intensifies race division as it hinders social osmosis and prevents inclusion from penetrating into our institutions .

Way too often, I am referred to or being consulted on different issues because I am black, not because I am an expert on the situation at hand. Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s important to include people of all expertise levels in different subject matters. However, the problem resides in targeting people based on their monolithic identity, this unfortunately shifts the responsibility of AREDI to radicalized individuals. It is time we value people for their intersectional identities, not their monolithic identity. Otherwise we begin to commodify people, leading to issues such as stereotyping, tokenism, and superwoman syndrome .



Secondly, Dieulita emphasizes that we must remain consistent and avoid taking shortcuts when it comes to building an inclusive system. Generally, AREDI initiatives gain momentum when race issues surface in the mainstream media. We witness individuals, institutions, and corporations attempt to keep up with diversity trends and social media activism. Without concrete long-term commitments and actions towards AREDI, progress will be stalled. The movement will continue to lose its spark until the next public outrage against racism happens. When we think about the need for representation in all levels of our institutions, we must also consider the depth of our actions and how to maintain the inclusion of people in the long term goals. To illustrate, this means going deeper than just hiring people of colour in a workplace setting.

“ HOW DO YOU VALUE THEIR INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTIONS? HOW DO YOU PROVIDE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FREE OF MICRO-AGGRESSIONS? HOW DO YOU INCLUDE THEM IN SOCIAL GATHERINGS? HOW DO YOU GET TO KNOW THEM BEYOND THE SCOPE OF YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR EXISTENCE? MY POINT IS, REAL INCLUSION IS DIFFICULT ON BOTH ENDS, IT TAKES TIME AND IT REQUIRES SHAKING CURRENT CONVENTIONS. -ORNELA

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Notes to Younger Self

If you could tell one thing to your younger self, what would it be?

“Just do it, go for the opportunities and don’t give up too soon. Make space for yourself because it won’t be easy. You have it in you, you are as valid as anyone else.” Dieulita Datus

¹ Nicolas Adeleye, “The Good and Bad of ‘Black Excellence,’” AFRI 0090 S01 An Introduction to Africana Studies (Brown University, October 10, 2019), <https://blogs.brown.edu/afri-0090-s01-2019-fall/2019/10/10/the-good-and-bad-of-black-excellence/>.

² Andrew Thompson, “Understanding the Meaning of Ubuntu: A Proudly South African Philosophy” (The Culture Trip, June 11, 2020), <https://theculturetrip.com/africa/south-africa/articles/understanding-the-meaning-of-ubuntu-a-proudly-south-african-philosophy/>.

³ Valeria G. Harvell, “Afrocentric Humanism and African American Women’s Humanizing Activism,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 6 (2008): pp. 1052-1074, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708325380>.

⁴ Combahee River Collective and Jules Falquet, “Le Combahee River Collective, Pionnier Du Féminisme Noir,” *Les Cahiers Du CEDREF*, no. 14 (January 2006): pp. 69-104, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cedref.457>.

⁵ Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, “Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of ‘Happy Talk,’” *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 6 (2007): pp. 895-914, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200603>.

- ⁶ Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree, "Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities," *Sociological Theory* 28, no. 2 (2010): pp. 129-149, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2010.01370.x>.
- ⁷ Lauren N. Irwin and Zak Foste, "Service-Learning and Racial Capitalism: On the Commodification of People of Color for White Advancement," *The Review of Higher Education* 44, no. 4 (2021): pp. 419-446, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2021.0008>.
- ⁸ Thelma F Madzima and Gustavo C MacIntosh, "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Efforts in Professional Societies: Intention versus Reaction," *The Plant Cell* 33, no. 10 (2021): pp. 3189-3193, <https://doi.org/10.1093/plcell/koab186>.

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