

Black Urbanism Toronto (BUTO)

Anyika Mark

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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My name is Anyika Mark.

I'm here today on behalf of Black Urbanism TO and the Little Jamaica Community Land Trust. I will go into detail on both of these organizations in this presentation, but I would first like to thank the First Unitarian Congregation for inviting me to speak at today's service and their commitment to connecting with us, and other community groups in the neighborhood. To take this on as a responsibility is admirable and lets us know that true allies do exist.

I want to break this presentation down into four parts. The first part will be about the history and significance of our home, *Little Jamaica*. Next, I want to talk about the impact this enclave has had on my family tree and to myself a young Black woman in Toronto. I will then speak about Black Urbanism TO, an organization founded by my brothers Romain Baker and Dane Williams, two young Black men from the neighborhood with a determination to provide a space for Black communities to be the power brokers in the neighborhoods they call home. And lastly, I'm going to talk about the Little Jamaica Community Land Trust, the 1st and only Black-led, Black-serving and Black-focused land trust in Ontario.

Welcome to my presentation on *Pathways to Community Ownership, The Journey to the Little Jamaica Community Land Trust and the legacy of Black communities in Canada*

For the purposes of supporting continued documentation of the Black neighbourhood centred along Eglinton Avenue West, the neighbourhood will be referred to as "Little Jamaica". The area is primarily defined by the commercial businesses clustered along Eglinton Avenue West between Marlee and Oakwood Avenues. Though this strip may be considered the heart of Little Jamaica, there are no distinct boundaries as many of the Black-owned businesses continue south on Oakwood Avenue and west towards Keele Street.

Colloquially known as 'Eglinton' within Toronto's Black community, the neighbourhood has been a distinct ethnic and cultural hub for Caribbean and African immigrants for well over 50 years.

An excellent reference for further reading on the history of Little Jamaica is [The Erasure of Little Jamaica: Exploring the Role of Design in the Gentrification of Toronto's Eglinton Avenue West](#), a master's thesis by York University graduate Debbie Gordon, a body of work heavily cited in our report *The Black Business Conversation*.

The area around current-day Little Jamaica was largely agricultural land until after the first World War when Toronto's population grew rapidly around streetcar suburbs. Gordon writes that "between 1924 and 1946 the area around Dufferin Street, Oakwood Avenue and Vaughan Road began to add schools, libraries, parks, and other community features". By the 1950's Canada began to make changes to its discriminatory immigration policy that had previously favoured White immigrants while discouraging all others. These changes led to an increase in immigration from British

Commonwealth countries and gave rise to new Caribbean communities throughout Toronto. Early Jamaican enclaves included Kensington Market and a cluster of businesses along the north-west corner of Bathurst and Bloor Streets. This was followed by areas along Eglinton West (Little Jamaica) and later Rexdale, Jane and Finch, and many pockets of Scarborough. By the 1970's Little Jamaica had become not only the main Jamaican expatriate community in Toronto but one of the largest around the world; rivaling cities like London and New York.

Like many immigrant communities, Little Jamaica was filled with the scenes and spirit of the island homeland. Caribbean barbershops, hair salons, grocers, and restaurants made the area a destination, at a time when mainstream retailers and grocery stores in Toronto didn't sell Black hair care products or have an ethnic food aisle that catered to Caribbean cuisine. Beyond facilitating the everyday consumer needs of Caribbean immigrants, Little Jamaica became a musical hotspot in the 70's and 80's at a time when Reggae and later Dancehall were in their prime. Many of the world's most renowned Reggae stars recorded and performed in the neighbourhood, while others passed through when they had shows in Toronto. They included Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer, Jay Douglas, Gregory Isaacs, Carol Bown among many others.

In many ways the spirit of Eglinton was a reflection of the colourful street life in Jamaican cities like Kingston where patrons and residents would purchase their daily needs while others would leisurely gather over the smells of jerk chicken on open grills, and the soothing sounds of the latest reggae hit or dancehall riddim blasting from outdoor speakers. This spirit continued from the 1970's through to the early 2000's evidenced by the Junior Carnival Parade (also known as Kiddies Caribana) and the street celebrations during Jamaica's entry into the 1998 FIFA World Cup. However, recent decades have seen the community face the challenges of demographic change and gentrification, which has been exacerbated by the construction of Eglinton LRT.

When describing life coming to Canada from Jamaica, an elder in our community shared a story of the visceral hate she experienced as a young girl. While walking alongside Oakwood, a car window opened and spit flew in her and mother's direction with the N word following close behind. For her, and other Black community members, Little Jamaica was a reprieve from the harsh realities of life in the Western world and it was created in response to the violent white supremacist environment that made sure to remind us that we did not belong. Little Jamaica continues to serve that purpose of belonging for Black communities, and that's why I, and the rest of my team, are dedicated to ensuring its survival for generations of Black people to come. The work we do in Little Jamaica is about legacy- the theme of this presentation. It's about honouring the struggles and triumphs of creating such an influential cultural enclave for each other. And as someone with a family who built their life in this community from the Caribbean, this work is deep and personal to me.

My grandmother Joyce Coard was 24 years old when she heard her name on the radio in her home country of Grenada being selected to come to Canada. While the immigration system had opened up in Canada, the demand across the islands to come to Western countries was high and so being chosen was a privilege. Upon arriving to Canada, my grandmother was brought to Montreal where she says, and I quote, 'I couldn't bother with the French French ting.' The bus took her back to Toronto, where she began to make a new life for herself. For the next couple of years, my grandmother worked in Richmond Hill as a nanny for white families. This was the only way that Black women from the Caribbean countries could enter Canada, as domestic workers. In her free

time, she tells me she spent her days hanging out with friends at Honest Ed's, Kensington Market and, of course, Eglinton West. Eventually, she was able to sponsor her boyfriend at the time, and my now grandfather, to come to Toronto. They then settled down and started their family at Oakwood and St. Clair. Sound familiar? My father and aunt were born and raised right at 161 Oakwood Avenue, both of them going to McMurrich Elementary School and then Oakwood Collegiate High School. Both of their graduation pictures are hanging outside in the hallway alongside my own, and my little sister. Legacy building, yet again.

My name, Anyika, originated in Nigeria and means 'strong community' or 'strong woman.' From a young age, I watched as my mother planned BBQs for our predominantly Black neighbourhood in Weston/Mount Dennis and would join my father as he travelled around the province hosting live-to-air for his then job at Flow 93.5, the first Black owned radio station in the country. My love for Black people was instilled early, and continued as I grew into a young woman with agency. While attending Oakwood, I joined the Afro-Can Club, the first student association in the Canadian school system to prioritize the needs of Black African Caribbean students. A club my father was heavily involved in at Oakwood as well... legacy building. As a leader of Afro-Can, I hosted and curated every Black History Month assembly, rallying the Black students in the school to showcase their hidden talents and honour Black Canadians who were trend-setters, go-getters and history makers.

Transitioning to the University of Toronto was a pivotal time in my life, a time that set me on the course I'm on today. I will never forget stepping into Convocation Hall for my first class of my post-secondary education: Sociology 101. For those who have never been to Convocation Hall, it is the largest and most prestigious building on campus, holding over 2,000 people at a time. Walking down the long hallway towards my seat, I could feel everyone's eyes on me. Looking around, I was one of three Black people. In a packed room, of 1,500 students. This had never happened to me before, I had always been surrounded by Black folks, whether that was my school peers, teachers, my neighbours, owners of my favourite stores, people I met through community programs etcetera etcetera. I hadn't ever experienced the feeling of complete isolation, of not having some nod in your direction or dap you up as a comrade. Of feeling like I don't belong. I had always been one of the smartest, one of the most social people in the room. Being at UofT, I felt like an outsider and a nobody. It was a culture shock that I didn't recover from in my first year. Halfway into my second year, things took a radical turn. I was studying in the back of the library by myself, my normal routine, when I felt someone tap me on my shoulder. I turned to see my now mentor and close friend Sasha Henry. "Why are you over here by yourself, come join us in the study room!" I looked past her to see that there were several Black students laughing and talking in a small room. Everyone welcomed me with open arms, and that was the day I met the Black Students Association.

My life completely changed and long story short, I had found my place of belonging. I became Political Director the following year, and then the President the next two years. We hosted Angela Davis on campus, booked an entire theatre at Yorkdale Mall for high-school students to watch the highly anticipated Black Panther movie, organized the 1st Black Musical on campus, DreamGirls, held the 1st Black Study Hall at UofT, protested anti-Blackness in program departments, travelled to Harvard with the first ever Black Canadian Policy Panel and so much more. I had recreated my home on campus, and it motivated me to continue building on that same work in my community.

And that's when I met Romain Baker, Co-Founder of Black Urbanism TO.

Romain Baker came to Canada from Jamaica as a young child. Like most immigrant children, he felt out of place. He had been in Toronto for over a year when his father drove him past Little Jamaica. And for the first time, he felt like we belonged somewhere. Later in life, he met his wife - also a Jamaican immigrant - and they started their family on Eglinton. Legacy. The organization's other Co-Founder, Dane Williams, grew up spending his summers with his grandmother, a Jamaica immigrant, who lived in the Oakwood area. Legacy. Since the age of 13, Dane would get his haircut from Martin, the owner of Pure Vibes Barbershop at the time. Dane leaned on Martin as a father figure and Martin still cuts Dane's hair to this day, their relationship growing stronger over the years. If you can believe it, Romain and Dane actually met in St. Catherines while attending Brock University. On campus, they were also involved in Black student organizing and became brothers. As they both travelled back to Toronto, they were excited to lime together in Little Jamaica. This was in 2017, and in 2017, Eglinton's Little Jamaica was being torn to shreds by the Eglinton LRT construction. Romain and Dane were disheartened and decided they would make a documentary about the history of the neighbourhood. However, while visiting Black businesses and talking with residents, it became clear that the Black culture of Little Jamaica hadn't left. It was just under attack. In 2018, they founded Black Urbanism TO, an organization with a mission to increase the participation of Black people in community development to advance our social, cultural and economic interests in neighbourhoods we call home. We began to do consultations, talk with people 1on1, and canvass businesses. This organization was about hearing what the people needed and bringing it to the forefront. To honour the resilience of Black people in the neighbourhood and take up the mantle of preserving this historic Black enclave. To continue building on Black legacies.

In 2020, BUTO released their foundational report, A Black Business Conversation: On Planning For the Future of Black Businesses and Residents on Eglinton Ave West. This report not only highlighted the rich history of Little Jamaica but also outlined the ongoing challenges facing the community. Moreover, it offered essential recommendations aimed at shifting the trajectory in support of Black businesses and residents who maintained a vested interest in the neighborhood. The organization was interviewed by several news outlets and was asked to speak at a variety of conferences and community events.

The Black Business Conversation became the catalyst for municipal interest in retaining the heritage of the Little Jamaica community. In 2021, City Councillor for Ward 12, Josh Matlow, put forward a motion called Supporting Black-Owned and Operated Businesses and Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Eglinton Avenue West's "Little Jamaica". The motion was passed unanimously at Toronto's City Council on April 8th, 2021, and it directed city staff to begin surveying Little Jamaica as a Cultural Heritage Site. It also spoke to the creation of a Cultural District Plan, a city policy that had not ever been enacted for an ethnic enclave in Toronto, and would ensure the legacy of Little Jamaica continued not only through namesake but tangible actions such as economic development, public art and more.

With majority of the recommendations achieved from The Black Business Conversation and from our continued community engagement in Little Jamaica, BUTO heard time and time again that Little

Jamaica community members wanted to not only be at the table, but to build their own table to which they could become power brokers in the future of the community. On October 28th, 2021, BUTO launched their project, Pathways to Community Ownership that included 4 guest speakers and over 300 community members in attendance. During this webinar, BUTO spoke to the benefits of community ownership and the viability of a Little Jamaica Community Land Trust that would allow the community to invest in the neighbourhood. The event was a huge success, with a lot of positive feedback being shared with executive members and an enthusiasm for more to come.

To date, BUTO has released 5 reports: The Future of Housing In Little Jamaica & York South Weston, A Black Business Conversation, PlaceKeeping in Little Jamaica: Commercial Displacement Prevention Strategies, Waiving Supplier Diversity Certification Fees for Minority Owned Business Enterprises and most recently, Pathways to Community Ownership: Protecting the Economic Future of Little Jamaica.

As of November 2022, Black Urbanism TO incorporated the Little Jamaica Community Land Trust. Community land trusts are community based, nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations aimed at securing long-term affordability and community control over space by removing land from the speculative market and gentrification pressures. The first ever CLT is documented in Albany, Georgia by New Communities, a Black-led organization of farmers who were inspired by the civil rights movement.

CLT's can help protect against the continuous and historical displacement of Black communities in Canada and around the world. For communities like Little Jamaica, community ownership of land provides an opportunity to stay in place and the security needed to thrive.

The Little Jamaica Community Land Trust will ensure ongoing representation of African and Caribbean communities within the area, and as the 1st Black-led, Black focused and Black serving land trust in Ontario, the LJCLT is designed to anchor Black businesses, residents and culture in the one of the oldest Black enclaves in the country. We know that the LJCLT will serve as the perfect vehicle to which Black people can continue to build our legacy.

The Adkinra symbol on top of the coloured building in our logo, "Hye Wo Nhye" means, "Burn, you won't burn." It symbolizes endurance, resilience and imperishability. Not only does this speak to the spirit of Little Jamaica, but to the many incredible people in this neighbourhood who will never let it disappear.

So, how can you support us in this work? First, make it a point to shop in Little Jamaica. Of course, you can always get a patty from Kingston 12 or a rice & peas from Sheryl's or RAPS but do your groceries as well! Little Jamaica has 6 grocery stores that need this community's support to keep providing the culturally relevant food stuff we need. There are many barbers, many hair stylists that would love for you to book an appointment. Enjoy cultural events by Nia Centre for the Arts and Studio M. The list goes on and on. Black people have built an ecosystem from nothing but each other. By spending your money in Little Jamaica, you are helping them to thrive in this ecosystem and giving us precious time to preserve our home, our legacy.

Another way you can support the work is by connecting us with people who can provide tangible resources to our land trust. If you know owners in the neighbourhood, looking to selling properties, point them in our direction! We would love to let them know there is an outlet to which they can support the diverse fabric of this great community through affordable housing, commercial space, food spaces, youth space and much more.

And last, but not least, stay connected! Chat with me after the presentation today, I would love to know your names and memorize your faces! This work is going to take a village, and while the Little Jamaica Community Land Trust is Black-led, allies play a huge role in helping us achieve our goal. Follow our Instagram @blackurbanismto_to or littlejamaicactl, check out our website at www.blackurbanismto.com or our LinkedIn at Black Urbanism TO.

The Little Jamaica Community Land Trust is the legacy of our team, for me and Black communities across the world. the world. And my 1-year-old son, who is the next phase of this legacy.

My name is Anyika Mark, representing Black Urbanism TO and the Little Jamaica Community Land Trust within my whole heart and soul. Thank you again to First Unitarian and I look forward to working with you all again and again and again.