Black Men, Black Women, and Me

A meeting at the North Branch Library was advertised as a presentation on male and female relationships. It is more like a family argument

By Carol Johnstone

I feel dread. Reporting Group 2 has assigned me to write a news story about a meeting on black relationships, sponsored by the Black United Front (BUF), at the North Branch Library on Monday night, February 6. Most of the stories I've written so far for the *North End News* have been about the black community. It's worked out pretty well so far, but I have a feeling this story is going to be harder. It's going to involve racism and anger.

It's Friday morning. I call the North Branch Library. "Do they know what it's going to be about or anything? Or anybody I could call?

"That's not our program," he answers, sounding nervous. "Did you call the Black United Front?"

Not yet, no, I respond.

"No, no, we're just holding it here. It's their program. I think it would be best if you called them." Pause. "'Cause they never really... I don't have any, any further information."

I call BUF. The receptionist sounds perky. She says she'll see if she can get someone to call me back that afternoon. No one calls.

I call again Monday afternoon. After getting past the perky secretary, I get Debbie Glasgow, field services supervisor. I introduce myself, saying Fm a reporter and I'm going to be going tonight to the North Branch Library to the meeting about male and female relationships.

"Yeah?" she says. I can hear the challenge in her voice.

I wanted to know who would be talking and if BUF could give me a little background.

Tm sorry," she says, "I can't share that with you."

Oh? Why?

"Because, I'm instructed by my executive director that it's advertised in the Black History Month calendar."

I sound somewhat mystified.

"I don't know why the media would want that," she says, "but, I mean, it's, ah, gonna be at the North Branch Library. I mean, for details, I guess you'll just have to, ah, come and see."

I pack my tape recorder and camera and show up about 7:15, a little early, to look over the lay of the land. There are about 10 people here, some seated in the orange and brown plastic chairs and some milling around. One woman dressed in a traditional-looking African dress and colored turban, is setting up a table at the back with African bracelets, bags, and carvings on it There are home-baked cookies and cakes next to a large coffee pot on a table to the side.

I spot a fellow King's student and sit next to him in the front row. I turn on my camera and tape recorder.

Reverend Ogueri J. Ohanaka, executive director of BUF, dressed in an embroidered African-styled brimless hat shaped like an ice-cream vendor's hat, and yellow ochre and black tie-dyed tunic and pants, cheerfully introduces the panel of three women and three men. They're seated behind a table in front of microphones. A sign hangs down across the front of the table. It spells out "Black United Front" in large black letters.

On the left sits Debbie Glasgow, with whom I had spoken on the phone, dressed in a bright fuchsia dress. The Rev. says she is here as an individual and not representing BUF.

Next comes an older man with gray in his hair, Deacon Gary Lopes, who's raised two children — one a graduate of Saint Mary's and another at school in France. He was the chair of BUF when it was founded.

Next to him sits Tina Daye-Fraser, dynamic, with short brown hair, wearing large-beaded earrings that hang down to her shoulders. She's also worked for BUF, but is here in her role of a single mother of three.

Next to Tina is Archy Beals, a youngish man of portly build from North Preston, newly appointed coordinator of black studies at a community college.

Next to Archy is politico Wendell Thomas, president of the East Preston Ratepayers Association, who ran in the Tory spot in the last election as MLA for the Preston area.

The sixth panelist has gotten stuck in traffic and is replaced at the last minute by Leslie Daye who, at the request of Rev. Ohanaka, volunteers from the audience to be a panelist; she is young and confident She's dressed in a fur hat and coat, which she keeps on throughout the whole meeting, even though it seems to get quite warm in the room.

Rev. Ohanaka, his tan boots clicking across the floor, flourishes the microphone, and says: "The topic we want to discuss is the relationship between black males and black females in the black community. ... It's a controversial topic, but it's one that we want tonight to be very, very frank as we share it"

Not looking at me, he continues: "We've not allowed any cameras in. The only camera that you see is the one with BUF, just for study purposes and future reference."

My shoulders hunch up a little as, eyes front, expression as bland as I can make it, I turn off my flash. I glance down, not moving my head, to make sure my tape recorder, on my lap, is still working.

By this time, there are about a dozen black men (over half of whom are organizers of the event) and about 40 black women. For most of the meeting, I am the only white woman and my fellow student one of three white men. The other two sit together they look like they just came in to get out of the cold. They never speak, but look gleefully around and watch the emotions fly.

During the two-hour debate three of the panelists get somewhat short shrift. Debbie Glasgow is interrupted and listened to with bare patience when she wants to talk about incest It seems too personal, not of general interest Archy Beals seems young and says little. He says that "coming together in relationships is more than sex _. there's communication. If you can't talk to your partner, then there's no relationship." And Deacon Lopes seems to be dismissed as being from an older generation. A woman from the audience asks: "Could you tell me any black Nova Scotian man that is not conditioned to say, 'Oh well, if I have a white woman, Til be without a care in the world? Could you please tell me one?" Deacon Lopes says, "There are many of those black men here and in Nova Scotia and I'm considered one of them, at least I hope I am." She responds: "Older ones, older men, yes." And he says, "I can't help my age." And she says, "No." He then goes on to talk a little about his own history, but it seems to belong to a bygone age, and he doesn't speak again.

Through my mind flits a refrain: "Say it real lilty, I'm white and I'm guilty."

The main debate seems to involve Tina Daye-Fraser, Leslie Daye, and Wendell Thomas, and the audience. Right from the beginning, Tina Daye-Fraser is adamant about exactly what the problem is: "I don't see in this generation too many black mothers and fathers raising their children. When you see a complete family unit _ there's always one white person in there somewhere where they don't belong, as far as Fm *a.* cemed."

She brings out a theme that will ar is again and again throughout the debate: heard it said one time by some black mi that we can't help who you fall in love M -. but I just feel like when the numbers to the point where they are today, that v not just falling in love with whoever we in love with, we're desperately seeking S now."

I think, hah, now we get to it I shrin down in my chair a little more, very con scious of my skin color. No one ever loo! me, but I feel like Fm being watched oui the comer of a vast brown eye. Through mind flits a refrain: "Say it real lilty, Fm white and Fm guilty." This is an express, we used back in Berkeley, California, dui the mid-sixties to descri white man or woman, u ally a woman, who take: the "White Man's Burde of 400 years *of* black sla as a personal source of > and then either tries to become black, or goes b extreme efforts not to *a* offence to a black per so. Neither works very well; both come across as fals and insulting. I straight my posture, but tension zings softly through my muscles. I say nothing.

Wendell Thomas sees the problem differently: "We have to find a common group and it should start with respect and it's a two-way street The society has conditioi the black female to disrespect the black male

He is interrupted by an affronted choi from the women in the audience and Le.< Daye says, "I would hope that Wendell's I comment was strictly *for* debating purpc only."

Tina's position is: "Something has brc down this relationship between the black man and the blade woman. I think it's because the black man has said, 'Woe is i and thrown up his hands... a defeatist at tude. And the only one who comes along says to him, 'Oh honey, you're so sweet' < all of this, is that white woman."

"The sisters," a woman sitting behind says, "are resenting this man, because of what he's doing. I talked to a black male too long ago. For years „ he had black women and he had black children and th somehow, he had problems within his lif< He was gonna switch over because she m it very easy for him — white woman Fm talking about She sat there and she kept

house for him and she never asked anything."

This frustration seems to mingle with an alleged lack of respect and understanding on the part of black women for black men and vice versa.

At one point in the debate between Wendell and Leslie, who's sitting next to him, the Rev. asks: "What about the black female then? How do we bring them to a better understanding of what the black male is going through?"

"That's a really difficult thing," Leslie says, "because a lot of black females I know myself, I guess, are really trying to talk to these men and make some sense. It's an ongoing struggle." The women in the audience laugh in sympathy. She continues: "I know a lot of black females like myself are a little bit tired of it, but it's ..." Leslie stops because the audience erupts, and Wendell interjects: "Now she's telling me that she's real tired of the black male."

"But never wanting to give up. HI never give up. I'll never give up," Leslie says shaking her head, and Wendell says, quietly, "Let me tell you sister, ifs not your attitude you have to change, it's just your amplitude."

But nobody seems to hear him. A woman from the audience leaps up and expresses her pain about her 13-year-old daughter, a student at Oxford Elementary and who sits on the student council. While her young son looks around the room wide-eyed, the woman explains, her voice rising higher and higher: "When she comes home from dances she says, 'Mom, no black boy asked me to dance. All the white girls is warmer, and they just going to dance with the white girls. And I had one black boy invite me, but he was only shucking me for chocolate bars, and when the white girl gave him five dollars, he wouldn't even talk to me no more,' So what are we saying to her? What about my daughter?" Her voice breaks. "What about our young black women? Does my daughter have to graduate from high school and not have nobody to take her to the prom? Does she? Does my daughter have to graduate from college and not have no black man? And what about you black men that are siftin' here?" She's getting more emotional. She imitates a rough voice: " 'Its all right to sneak a little bit from the whitey?"

It's all becoming very painful to listen to. We're now beginning to hear from the amen chorus and a real rhythm is building. The Rev. steps in and says: "Bear in mind that what we are trying to get to is what has caused this communication breakdown."

Nobody really answers, though another woman from the audience says: "I find the black women of today saying they know themselves. The black man isn't sure where he's at _. Therefore, he's intimidated by a strong black woman. _. But, we are there to stand by you and we have a lot to offer." ■

There are two dissenters, who come out at the very end, one black woman and one black man, who are willing to speak up for "love comes in many colors." The woman, who is sitting near the back, speaks first "Well, there's no black men here that will stand up and say, 'Well, this is the reason.' So, TH take it as to I am the black woman who had turned to the white man and I have two biracial children. This is all new to me _. I was brought up that love didn't come in any colors. I did not specifically go out there saying that I'm going to find myself a white man. I've had different relationships of all different nationalities, but I felt that I would go to where my heart was at Tm very happily married. But, in the same token, I do not disrespect, I do not forget where I came from. And as far as my children are concerned, they're very much strongly brought up with a lot of black culture; because, as far as I'm concerned, society will see them as being black. I feel that it's my children are going to get the worst time, than people like that, like myself."

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Before the man speaks, a professional-looking woman, who is later addressed by the Rev. as Dr. Ryan, stands up and says: "We spent a lot of time talking about black men being with white women, and I keep thinking that this is not what we're here to discuss. „ There are far more pressing issues than that _. How many black men go out with white women? I can guarantee you that the number is a lot smaller than what we're led to believe ....

"Now, we have spent all our time focusing on white women and we need to be focusing on drugs, we need to be focusing on incarceration, we need to be focusing on our own spirituality in the sense of what is our family. ... Why is it that men beat women? What about abuse? What about that? Why does that have to happen? What about sexism in our community? What about some of our sisters who aren't necessarily stretching to understand the parameters of our heritage and why our men behave the way they do?

"That doesn't mean, sisters, that you put up with shit Cause we won't do that We won't put up with no abuse. But I mean it has to be a two-way street but I keep thinking that we need to stop talking about interracial relationships."

The Rev. responds, walking back and forth between the panel and the audience, microphone in hand: "Thank you Dr. Ryan. I think we have to be reminded. If you notice what has happened — and we deliberately let this go — we have to really stop and think where we are focusing our attention.... We don't talk about the positive tilings that have built those [black] families that we can look at today and say, 'Yeah, that's a black family who can give us role modelling.' ...

"It's all part of the damage, that we're always looking for these troubles from exitside. Yes indeed. Those environments we might not change. But can we cope? Or how have we coped? Hie question boils down to, we have young black males and we have young black females. We are trying to bring them up. We've got an impasse. That impasse is leading to some frightening things to the community in the future. „ What can we propose tonight, as the beginning of trying to resolve that impasse?"

A momentum has been established, though. One woman from the amen chorus says, "We don't have a fair enough representation of black men here." And another adds, "And the ones that are here are not speaking."

So, finally, a black middle-aged man from the middle of the audience, who has not spoken, raises his hand to get attention and speaks.

"Most of you know my history. I slept white, married black. I don't have a problem

with that, but I appreciated black and went the whole shot I had a beautiful black family. Like this lady said, I also have two interracial kids. But if you're talking about relationships. ... First of all, what do you want in a relationship? — whether it's black or white.

We started off with love between us, as this gentleman [referring to Archy Beals] said, communication. It's not all physical. Because then you have to ask yourself what about feelings? What about honesty? Don't always say that the black man is sleeping or running with some white woman. Don't think that way. Let's be open minded. Womens are sly too „

"You know we can sit here and throw stones, throw stones at the black man. And, yesl There is a lot of things has happened to the black man, relationships, drugs, the whole shot I been there. The whole thing about it is: eliminate that and choose a relationship. What does the woman have to offer? What does the man have to offer? You may be a woman. You may be a doctor. I may be a cleaner. But if you love me for me who I am, and you love me for who you are, that shouldn't matter, should it?"

"No, no," the amen chorus says.

"Be honest Our problem is we get caught up in who we are, what we are, what you got to give, or what can this person do for me. It's not what you can do for me, it's what we can do for each other."

"Do for each other," the amen chorus echoes.

"And bringing up the kids, you gotta bring the kids up with love. Now, me, like I said, my two interracial kids, we have become very close. They're going to be coming to some of this black history thing. Have to know their black history, but I don't dictate to them to marry black, white, green, or blue. My God didn't give me a color, he gave me—you see that's how I look at it"

Tina tries to interrupt, but he continues. "That's how I feel. That's my choice. Like I can't dictate to my kids what they're gonna do. My daughter, she's black, now she talks to me. She lives in Ottawa. My wife is black. My daughter choosed to have a black husband. I don't have a problem with that - She gotta accept that person for love, respect, honor, trust, the whole shot, and not about what the person can do for her, or what she can do for them. That's how it is. That's how I am."

The audience, which has been following all this with an intermittent chorus response, now applauds.

Tina gets her say. "Can I ask a question of the few black men that are here? I always wanted a black man to answer _. I don't understand why black men, when you're speaking of me, why isn't it important that your mate not come from where you come from? Or is that less important to you? I don't understand that from black men. They say that as if there's something wrong with _. that there's beauty in all races. Yes there is, but what's wrong with your own? I don't understand that"

The man from the audience, who has told his story, responds: "Here's the way I look at it How can you dictate to your child, how can you say this — 'God is love. You're supposed to love thy neighbor as thyself. You read the 10 commandments' — but yet you can tell your child, 'If you fell in love with your neighbor next door, and it's white or green, or black, you can't love it? ._ But I feel in my heart that that person has a right to make the choice. You have to make your own choices."

"I cannot express enough how much it pains my heart to hear black people in 1995 talk like this is a colorless world. "

Leslie, who quite agrees with Tina, says: "I cannot express enough, I cannot express enough how much it pains my heart to hear black people in 1995 talk like this is a colorless world. Would you please stop talking. How come white? How is it that racism can exist in every other element in society, except for relationships? Why all of a sudden is there no such thing as racism?"

And the amen chorus applauds.

There doesn't seem to be any more to be said on that topic. So, in a pause in the debate, a big bald man, who has earlier tried to steer the discussion in another direction, speaks. He's wearing a bright green and orange African tunic and heavy necklace. He is called Dr. Miller by some, Harvey by others, and Professor by himself. He wants to look at the problem from a more Afrocentric, academic point of view.

"I don't want to get into a sort of black-white battle .„ that could be pretty useless for us," he says. "We need to define what cor tutes a successful relationship with Afria people ._ in the context of North Americ the professor says, explaining further tha important for blacks to love themselves a cultural group, and understand themselv historically, economically, and politically, with a focus on the dynamics of what it means to survive as a black man or worn in the Nova Scotia context "It's not enou to be simply aware of your oppression. Yc must develop victorious thought Otherw we just continue complaining."

Rev. Ohanaka ends the debate with a eration of his introductory statements sa that this forum is just a prelude to a "ful fledged conference just to deal with this issue."

The crowd slowly breaks up with kno continuing conversation and debate. Sot mill around drinking coffee and eating home-made treats or buying African jew< and artifacts from the lady in the back.

I feel totally drained. This has been hr to sit through. I feel li I've been allowed to w ness a family argumei There are many thing could have said, want to say, to give another point of view, but I'm here as a reporter — I witness.

While peoph still won't give their names, answer my qu tions, or even look m< the eye, when I go up Rev. Ohanaka and poll ask if I can take a picture of the empty ta with Ure Black United Front banner acra the front for the North End News, he sur prises me by cheerfully calling all the par elists back to sit down in their places. He even writes all their names down on ash of paper for me. I feel honored, grateful, < too worn out to check spellings with indi uals.

I fiddle with my camera and take shots from various angles, while the panelists al look my way and smile. I'm quite anxious because I haven't mastered camera setting and I can't get the green light to come on indicating proper exposure. But I act like papparazzi anyway in gratitude for their indulgence. Then I stagger out into the night, go home, and drink half a bottle of wine.

Back at school, a fellow student deve ops the film. None of my pictures turn < They're all under-exposed. But, I do manage to write a 400-word story for paper.