SPOTLIGHT ON: Across Boundaries supporting mental wellness in the Black community

Across Boundaries accept the award for Accreditation Canada’s, ‘Accreditation with Commendation’ award (2019-2024)

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By Tijuana Turner
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“Reaching out for help is an important part of our mental well-being.”

HISTORY

Across Boundaries (AB) has been providing mental health supports for members of racialized communities in the G-TA for over 25 years.

In 1995, a group of individuals came together to develop a service to address the gap in mental health services for Black people and other racialized groups.

Executive Director, Aseefa Sarang was one of those people.

Sarang says they applied for funding from the Ministry of Health and were given approval for 4 staff members. Today they have 40 staff members and over 800 people use their services annually.

SERVICES

Across Boundaries focuses primarily on counselling support for individuals age 16 and older.

They have programs to support clients with mental health and addiction issues as well as those experiencing homelessness and members of the LGBTQ2S+ community. They also support individuals who have had contact with the criminal justice system by helping them address their issues, find housing and divert from the system.

Sarang says while their programs are similar to other agencies, they anchor their services in an anti-oppressive and anti-racism lens.

“We recognize our clients experience racism and other forms of discrimination daily and their mental health is impacted greatly. So when we offer our supports we recognize mental health, racism and discrimination are all intertwined,” she said.

Sarang adds, to address one without acknowledging the others would be a great disservice to those who use their service, especially given the stigma surrounding mental health.

"We’re breaking that stigma. It’s not negative to need mental health services. Mental illness is a part of our life and reaching out for support is normal."

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In light of the pandemic, most services have been moved online but in-person services will resume when it’s safe to do so.

IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

Across Boundaries prides itself on the fact that its Board of Directors, staff, and clients are all from racialized communities. Sarang says it was a conscious decision. “We wanted to make sure the lived experiences of the service users would be shared by the staff and board. That way all the programs developed, services offered, and decisions are made with an anti-oppressive lens in mind,” she said.

Sarang says clients see AB as a safe space where their experiences are validated and addressed, allowing them to put those experiences aside and focus on their recovery.

SPOTLIGHT ON: Black Legal Action Centre’s commitment to fighting anti-Black racism

Across Boundaries also participates in justice reform and advocacy work to address issues affecting the Black community. In 2015 when Andrew Loku, a Black man, was shot and killed by a Toronto Police officer, Across Boundaries stood with his family to demand justice.
Sarang says Loku, who had a history of mental illness, was a client of Across Boundaries.

"We asked for an inquest, we volunteered to be present at the inquest and we were instrumental in making sure the role of anti-Black racism was heard and understood by the jurors. We made sure anti-Black racism and mental illness played a role in the recommendations from the jury."

Across Boundaries is also a part of the City of Toronto's board on police reform. Sarang says they keep a watchful eye on how recommendations are implemented by organizations, to ensure the changes help to dismantle systemic barriers and make the community safe for racialized groups.

She adds the organization does not receive compensation for advocacy work but it's important that the systemic barriers that the community face are addressed at many different tables.

If you or someone you know are struggling with your mental health, reach out to someone.

And if you would like to support Across Boundaries, you can make a donation on their website or contact them for more ways to get involved.

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