

Recognizing Black History Month

Leaders across multiple industries and sectors highlight continued efforts that support Black success across Canada.



◀ Nico Taylor & Queen Kukoyi

Executive Director of Communications & Executive Director of Operations, Black Speculative Arts Movement Canada

As a Toronto-based cultural arts non-profit and a collective of multidisciplinary artists and art educators, the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) Canada is interested in changing how society connects, relates, and engages with public art and space. It's an organization that truly values community participation in its art-making practice and believes that it should be more of a focus in arts and cultural spaces. BSAM Canada's approach to speculative art involves the ability to reimagine constructions of race that place limits on our participation in Canadian society and to envision alternative worlds where we set the foundation for the society we would like to live in. The BSAM Canada team believes Black History month and Black Future month, and every day of the year, should elevate the way that public art can speak to the processes of establishing a more equitable city while expanding the imagination through creating art that discovers other narratives and reverberates joy. ■

▶ Andrine Ormsby

Director of Professional Practice and Quality, Across Boundaries

Across Boundaries believes that Black mental health matters this month and every month. The organization is helping Black people who use its services to create Black history. Across Boundaries is a mental health centre providing support for Black and racialized people since 1995. It recognizes that systematic racism impacts the physical and mental health of Black and racialized people, and offers a diverse spectrum of mental health services based on anti-racism, anti-Black racism, and anti-oppression frameworks. It provides a wide range of holistic programs to enhance the mind-body connection, including meditation, yoga, nutrition, employment, and much more. They're all free and available online for Black and racialized people. Across Boundaries is not only creating change from within — it also recently hired a new Anti-Oppression/Anti-Racism Training Manager who will begin educating outside groups on how to combat anti-Black racism in their workplaces. ■



▶ Gamesha Cox

Founding Director, The Reading Partnership

There have always been Black advocates and leaders responding to and addressing the challenges Black communities face with ingenuity and creativity. During Black History Month and beyond, it's important to acknowledge and support Black leaders and their initiatives to ensure sustainability and growth. For a decade, The Reading Partnership's work has been shaped by Black women educators who have worked collectively to develop evidence-based programs to address local issues of literacy. The organization is proud to see these initiatives, incubated in East Scarborough, being scaled nationally to serve children and families in need of support across the country. This is Black Girl Magic at its best! ■



▶ Meagan Bennett

Founder, The Black Outreach Collective

Strong identities enhance personal character, and an enhanced character can allow one to pursue their purpose. As a born leader growing up in one of the most marginalized communities in Canada known as Jane and Finch, I was a part of a generation of Black youth and young adults who needed to be equipped with the right mindset to thrive in this country. I started the Black Outreach Collective, a Black young adult-led non-profit organization with a mission to reach, enhance, and educate Black youth and young adults aged 18 to 35. We provide Afrocentric socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical education and tools of radical knowledge via our digital platforms. Black history and culture are relevant to who we are. To become community catalysts, we must act with a full understanding of the past, our history, the present social interface, and an equitable future. It starts by navigating with knowledge that revolutionizes our nation. ■





Two and a Half Decades On, Nova Scotia's Black Business Initiative Is Going Strong

The success of Nova Scotia's Black business community is integral to the prosperity of Nova Scotia as a whole. And for 25 years, the Black Business Initiative has been the steward of that success.

D.F. McCourt



Rustum Southwell,
CEO & Founding
Member,
Black Business
Initiative

The 1990s in Canada were an era of change and opportunity. For the Black business community in Nova Scotia, it was a moment to ensure that Black voices and Black potential could help fulfill the promises of Canada's future. It was time for the labours and innovation of the province's Black population to be explicitly recognized and grown within that community fostered. It was time for the Black Business Initiative (BBI).

The Black business community has always been an intrinsic part of the broader business landscape of Nova Scotia, but the challenges faced by Black businesses and Black entrepreneurs are not always the same as those faced by other businesses and entrepreneurs. In 1995, a cadre of enterprising Black leaders formed a task force to organize that community in an official capacity for the first time and address those challenges head on. One year later, the BBI was born.

"There have always been attempts to be more inclusive of the large historic African Nova Scotian communities and get them engaged in the economy," says Rustum Southwell, CEO and founding member of the BBI. "In the environment and political climate of the '90s, the community and many groups started conversations about what business development and, by extension, economic development, could look like. The mission and vision was to foster a vibrant and dynamic Black presence within the business community, meaning the mainstream community. In the first five years, we set out to start 60 new companies, which we did."

Funding is just one ingredient in the recipe of success

In an environment where funding and lending were the two primary tools being used to promote growth, the BBI recognized that the true nature of the need was much broader. "Business is difficult," says Southwell. "It needs more than money. I always say that the problem is money, but money isn't the real problem."

Without funding, the deeper issues couldn't be resolved, but money alone also wouldn't solve them. And so, while the BBI did work diligently on the financial side of business advancement, it focused also on underserved domains like skills development, networking, and technology. The results within the Black business community of Nova Scotia were truly astounding. It wasn't just mom-and-pop businesses being empowered either — roughly 60 percent of these new businesses were creating new employment for the community as well. Word quickly spread that something amazing was

happening in the Atlantic province. "Once the StatCan report came out showing the scale of the impact, folks really stood up and took notice," says Southwell. "We started seeing folks coming out from Ontario to look at our model. People realized that there was merit in the work we were doing."

A new era of Black business

In the decades since, many things have changed in Canada, in Nova Scotia, and in the Black community. But, through it all, the BBI has continued to foster and support growth and innovation. "Our journey has not been a straight line upward," acknowledges Southwell. "It's been cyclical." But it's a cycle with a steady trajectory toward opportunity and prosperity.

Today, the work of the BBI remains as important as ever, though it exists in a dramatically different landscape. Southwell points to the proliferation of high-quality agencies and support structures that today's Black business community can lean on, and how encouraging this is compared to a few decades ago. He points to the incredible growth in the amount of capital controlled by Black organizations, and the positive implications that has for opportunity. He recalls that, in 1996, the budget of the BBI was just one million dollars per year for the entire province and he recognizes how much larger the funding envelopes have grown. But none of that means the work is done.

Black businesses and Black entrepreneurs still face an array of systemic barriers, and the initiatives of the BBI today are laser focused on the real needs of the community on the ground. After 25 years, it has gotten unbelievably good at identifying the optimal ways to create outsized change, such as with its Business is Jammin' (BIJ) youth entrepreneurial initiative. "I realized, when I was in my 40s, that if I wanted to change the culture, I probably needed to start with people younger than myself," says Southwell. "We need to get them as low as eight or nine years old because, in ten years, that kid could be the next Bill Gates. We see BIJ as one of the keys to changing the environment, and it's already doing so."

Other BBI initiatives include the Diversity Employment Network, the Supporting Black Canadian Communities Initiative, and the Black Entrepreneurship Program, each a carefully crafted key designed to unlock a specific gate to greater Black prosperity in Nova Scotia.

Because, from Southwell's perspective, Black prosperity in Nova Scotia is an on-ramp to Black prosperity nationwide. "The road to Black business development in Canada," he holds, "must and should go through Nova Scotia." ■

The road to Black business development in Canada must and should go through Nova Scotia.



As a small business, it can be challenging making connections and knowing whom to turn to when you need guidance. The BBI's support has made that challenge easier to manage.

The BBI has helped to discuss strategy and make introductions to key stakeholders, and has offered opportunities that increased my exposure, network, and revenue.

As a Black entrepreneur, it's important to have support where the people understand the barriers you face and I can happily say that the BBI has positively impacted Natural Butter Bar's journey.

Tiffani Young
Owner, Natural Butter Bar



We've been associated with the BBI since its inception in 1996. We've been impressed watching the organization grow, evolve, and succeed over the years in fostering a dynamic Black business presence in Nova Scotia.

We've benefited significantly from the opportunities that the BBI has presented to us over the years. The organization's efforts on our behalf, with promoting us to parastatal, financing, and business stakeholders locally and internationally, are commendable.

The investment our governments channel through the BBI has benefited the growth of Black entrepreneurship significantly more than any other support programs we've dealt with in the last 30 years.

Dr. Abdullah Kirumira
President & CEO,
TheraPBios PHARMA LTD



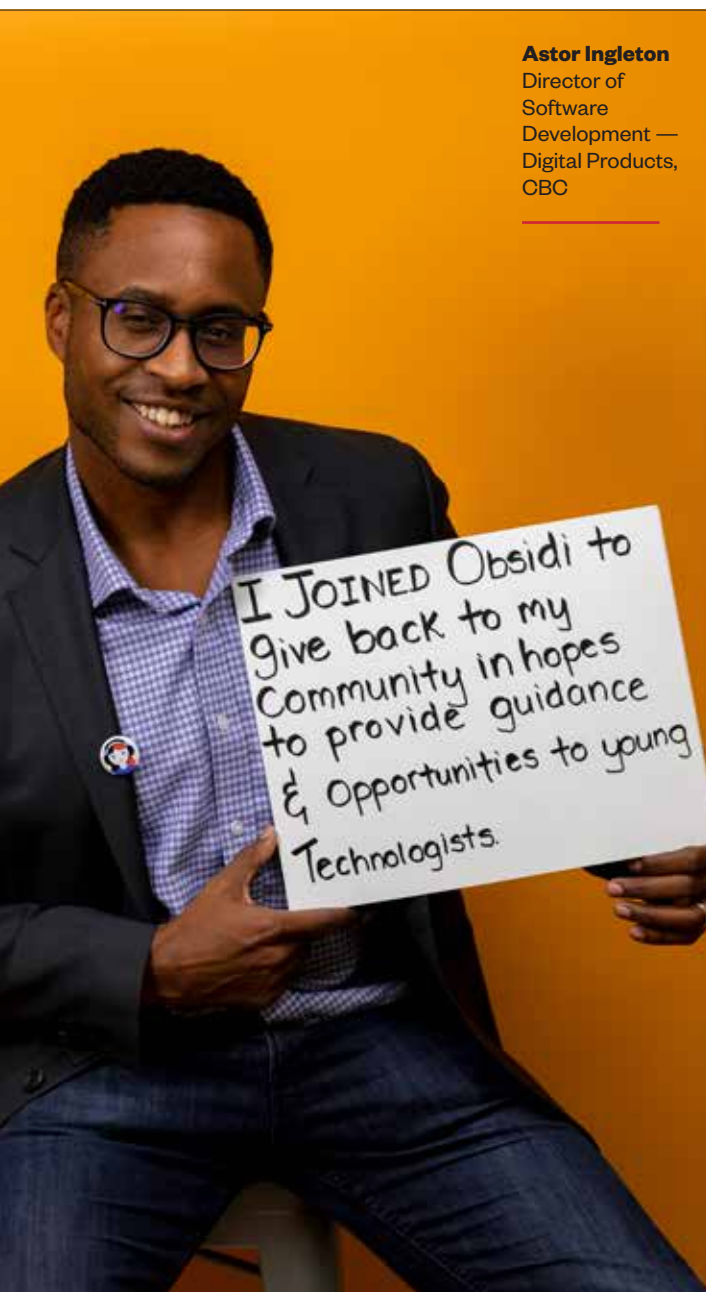
The BBI was my "go to" 11 years ago with my first business in event décor. And up until now with Eunoia, I count the BBI as that organization set aside to foster growth for Black entrepreneurs. It's again my first call for anything related to business resources to avail of. I'm grateful for the BBI's advocacy, leadership as an organization, and availability.

Cathy Akinkunmi
Owner, Eunoia Lifestyle Shop

Connect with the Black Business Initiative at [bbi.ca](https://www.bbi.ca).

This article was sponsored by the Black Business Initiative.





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It's Who You Know — The Network Gap Among Black Tech Professionals

Highly educated, brilliantly talented, relentlessly motivated Black professionals continue to face invisible barriers to advancement in the tech industry. Is the root of the problem a network gap?

D.F. McCourt

Four years ago, Lekan Olawoye, then an executive at MaRS Discovery District, was giving a talk in Toronto to a large group of tech professionals at LinkedIn Canada. After his session was finished, he was approached by four young Black attendees. They wanted to know how Olawoye had made it to the executive level in the tech industry, where Black career growth is so often glacially slow. All four related stories of trying to move up, of wanting to make an impact, but seeing their counterparts from other communities continuously accelerate past them.

“It just broke my heart,” says Olawoye. “These were amazing young professionals, talented folks, and they were just getting stuck.”

Over-credentialed and undernetworked

Within a few months, Olawoye had organized another session back at LinkedIn, specifically addressing the power of networking and connection for Black tech professionals. The session sold out completely, generating a waitlist over 100 people long. Black Professionals in Tech Network (BPTN) was born. Today, with Olawoye as CEO, the network has grown to over 50,000 members across North America.

The tremendous appetite for an organization to fill this space speaks clearly to a substantial void in the collective conversation up to that point. In trying to address a lack of representation, Olawoye holds, the tech industry had been too focused on symptoms and not enough on the underlying cause.

“The symptom is that we don't have enough Black tech talent, or that we can't retain Black talent,” says Olawoye. “There are more opportunities for Black professionals now, and there are a lot of companies actively looking for and wanting to hire Black professionals, but they aren't finding them. That's a symptom. The real problem is a network gap.”

It's not a lack of people, but a lack of connections between them. There's a joke among People of Colour that a given White North American, the kind of person historically making hiring decisions in technology, is going to have exactly one Black friend. Today, social networking data has made clear just how much truth that jest holds, as well as its implications. “In technology, we hire people in our network,” says Olawoye. “We do business with people in our network. We fund people in our network. If your network isn't diverse, if it doesn't look like downtown Toronto or downtown Montreal, there's no way your company or your industry will ever be diverse.”

Business problem, tech solution, and social outcomes

Identifying the problem, of course, is only the first step to a solution. And when you have a problem as hairy as this one, it's hard to know where to step next. “You start to see the layers of complexity to the network

gap, for Black professionals, for White professionals, for everyone,” explains Olawoye. “These networks are built informally at different watering holes in industry, and if you aren't invited into those spaces, if you can't find them, how do you build your network? If we solve the network gap, we solve all the other things.”

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Harnessing some of the best minds in the tech sector, BPTN has come up with what Olawoye calls a “tech solution to a business problem with social outcomes.” That solution is obsidi.com, a platform that enables Black professionals to connect with other Black professionals, but also critically with companies and with other business communities at scale. For those making hiring decisions, it's a platform that turns that ‘one Black friend’ into a global network of Black professionals.

“We need to ensure that we're not siloing our networks, and this is where that happens,” says Olawoye. “obsidi.com is by Black people, but it's not just for Black people. It was created to solve the network gap for Black professionals, but the network gap exists because White professionals and other professionals aren't connected with the Black community. So if we create a space exclusive to Black people, we're not solving the problem. Instead, we've created a Black space, a house built by Black people, where everyone is welcome to come eat, sleep, and engage.”

“Like coming home”

It's an elegant outcome from an idea sparked at a LinkedIn session, to have seen so clearly through to how and why existing networking tools weren't meeting all the needs of the Black professional community. But obsidi.com isn't designed to replace the social networking tools people already use, but rather to augment them. “You should still be on your other platforms, where you can engage with the whole world,” says Olawoye. “But when you want to make a strategic connection or have a courageous conversation, you need to be on a neighbourhood scale. obsidi.com is like coming home. You come to obsidi.com and ask your tribe.”

For at the heart of the entire initiative is the idea that, despite all the practical concerns of industry, business connections are very human and very personal. We're tribal creatures after all. But our tribes are stories that we tell ourselves, and with the right tools we can rewrite them.

“When you sign up or sign in to obsidi.com, no matter who you are, you're helping shift the narrative of what professional networks look like,” says Olawoye. “And the moment you change the narrative, you change the world.” ■



Lekan Olawoye
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(Obsidi by BPTN)



Come home to
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BLK: AN ORIGIN STORY



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Uncovering the Deep Historic Impact of Remarkable Black Canadians

BLK: An Origin Story elevates the unsung heroes who substantially contributed to Canada's nation building and to Black Canadian history.

Tania Amardeil

Have you heard of the Black Loyalists, the Jamaican Maroons, or the Black Refugees? Descendants of these three epic migrations represent Canada's largest Black population today. How about John "Daddy" Hall, who fought in the war of 1812 and was captured and sold into slavery before making a daring escape and finding his way back to Canada 13 years later? Or have you heard of Hogan's Alley, once the heart of Vancouver's Black community?

It's high time that we start telling and learning the stories of the many remarkable Black Canadians who have largely been left out of our history books and our societal and cultural storytelling.

Black history is Canadian history

Every February, Canada celebrates Black History Month. There's no better time to learn more about the deep historic impact of Black presence in Canada. The legacy of Black contributions in Canada dates back to when explorer Mathieu de Costa first set foot on shore, over 400 years ago — and there's so much more to it than the Underground Railroad.

This Black History Month, The HISTORY Channel® is launching a new limited docu-series called *BLK: An Origin Story*. Premiering on Saturday, February 26, the four-episode series delves into the untold story of Black people in Canada and their legacy, revealing the deep historic impact of Black presence in Canada and elevating remarkable Black Canadians whose stories have previously been unacknowledged. From the west coast to the east coast, *BLK: An Origin Story* takes viewers across Canada and shares riveting, enduring, and multifaceted historical Black Canadian narratives.

An award-winning team

BLK: An Origin Story is produced by award-winning production team Hungry Eyes Media in association with Corus Studios for The HISTORY Channel, and created by award-winning executive producers Jennifer Holness and Sudz Sutherland. The series features some of Canada's best-known and under-known experts of Black Canadian history, including authors, academics, musicians, historians, community leaders, activists, and elders.

"I think the world is going to be shocked at the erasure of Black Canadian stories," says Holness.

"They're going to learn that Canada, while an incredible country, has some of the same fundamental issues that we associate with the U.S. or even the U.K. What's unique about the series is that it's coming out of a post-George Floyd world. The lens through which people will look at this story is different. It also features contributors who are national treasures, like George Elliott Clarke, Charmaine Nelson, Isaac Saney, Oliver Jones, Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard, and Esi Edugyan."

"I think this docu-series has the potential to bring a lot of healing," says Sutherland. "Young, Black folks are trying to grow up, feel like they belong somewhere, and believe that their stories matter. I think the time is right for this kind of a series."

The HISTORY Channel is a Corus Entertainment Network and is available through all major TV distributors, including Shaw, Shaw Direct, Rogers, Bell, Videotron, Telus, Cogeco, Eastlink, SaskTel, and STACKTV, streaming exclusively on Amazon Prime Video Channels.

Don't miss this comprehensive, multi-layered, multi-disciplinary, and fundamental Canadian journey. It's truly essential viewing. ■

i *BLK: An Origin Story* on The HISTORY Channel airs Saturdays at 9 p.m. ET/PT, and catch the premiere on Saturday, February 26th, 2022.

This article was sponsored by **The HISTORY Channel.**



STRONGER TOGETHER!
NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US



Improving Economic Security for Black Canadians by Creating Opportunities in Banking and Finance

Through the Barriers to Employment and Anti-Black Racism toolkits, the Federation of Black Canadians advocates for and creates opportunities for Black Canadians in the financial sector.

Sabrina Seecharran

The Federation of Black Canadians' (FBC) mission is to advance the social, economic and political interests of Canadians of African descent. FBC is a national not-for-profit organization that operates through multiple community platforms, including their Provincial Hubs in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec. Since 2017, Hubs have supported over 5000 members by fostering a stable community for Black Canadians to connect, share opportunities, and engage with FBC's national projects.

The establishment of networks and coalitions through Hubs opened up opportunities to build partnerships with corporate and institutional organizations. These partnerships create more entry points for Black Canadians to not only pursue post-secondary education and secure employment but widen the range of options available.

FBC's national network in action

Partners in Principle (PIP) is FBC's national network of over 200 Black-led businesses and not-for-profits. This community allows FBC to pinpoint business needs, provide capacity-building support, increase awareness of its products and services, and collect valuable input for national projects. Anti-Black racism

is still prevalent throughout industries and reinforces systemic barriers that restrict Black Canadians from fully participating in society. PIP strengthens the visibility of Black Canadians and their contributions across sectors in Canada by cultivating a place to share ideas, enable change, achieve goals, and support each other in collective growth.

FBC actively identifies ways to tackle systemic barriers by holding discussions with PIPs. FBC's projects also allow them to partner with corporate and institutional partners through strategic alliances that output real solutions.

Toolkits for Black Canadians and corporate and institutional partners

Tangible results of FBC's mission include the Barriers to Employment Toolkit and the Anti-Black Racism Toolkit launching in March 2022. These are possible through the Workplace Opportunities: Removing Barriers to Equity grants and partnership with the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) and the University of Toronto (UofT).

Both toolkits are educational resources that tackle barriers to employment within the Black community by sharing their lived insights on the challenges to gain employment.

In addition to expressing the barriers Black Canadians currently face, the Barriers to Employment Toolkit showcases current and future employment opportunities for Black Canadians. The Anti-Black Racism Toolkit also includes resources such as best practice policies, testimonials, and statistics about workplace diversity.

Partnerships with RBC and UofT provide a landscape to conduct further research with employers and academia to continue to advance solutions relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Get involved with FBC

FBC's launch of the toolkits to dismantle anti-Black racism and advance opportunities for Black Canadians is only the beginning. Currently, FBC is working to identify barriers that Black Canadians face in the financial sector, but are aiming to expand this work into other sectors, beginning with the legal, communications and air transportation sectors. FBC hopes to actively work with companies within each industry to support change in HR, DEI, and workplace culture for Black Canadians. There is still much work to be done and FBC is committed to continuously expanding the interest of Black Canadians through strategic alliances across industries. ■

i To get involved, visit fbcfcn.ca.

This article was sponsored by **the Federation of Black Canadians.**

