

## Community 'family meeting' urged

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Leave the egos and agendas outside the room-Grange



**Julian Falconer**

By **RON FANFAIR**

Media practitioner and diversity specialist Hamlin Grange has issued an urgent call to action to radically empower the Black community, charging Tropicana Community Services Organization (TCSO) - which has served a broad cross section of the city for the past three decades - with convening a forum to address the troubling issues facing the community.

TCSO is Canada's largest Black social service delivery agency.

"It's time for a family meeting and I believe Tropicana is perfectly positioned because it's in every community and it understands this city and community," Grange said in the keynote address at the organization's 18th annual Caribbean Ball last Saturday night. "There's no need for a large gathering. We just need a few key individuals to have some plain talk about the way forward. I know we have tried before with limited success, but we can't give up. This time, let's leave the egos and agendas outside the room."

Grange said the Black community has been ignored for far too long while other communities are courted, enticed, pursued and even stalked by politicians.

"I say we should no longer be ignored when our kids are dropping out of school in record numbers, when we earn less although we have the same or higher levels of education and when so many of our people are living in sub-standard housing," said Grange, a founding member and former president of the Canadian Association of Black Journalists.

"That's why I think it's time for a family meeting because, during the last federal election, it seemed our community was not valued by anyone.

"As a community, we have played by the rules. Integrate they tell us and fight to be included. We have fought to be included and we are everywhere, yet we are nowhere...The rules seemed to have changed along the way because other communities that have a different view of integration are moving ahead...

"We, especially Black males, continue to earn less than any other racialized group in this country. How is that possible? ...We are nearly invisible on corporate boards and too few of us serve on public agencies, boards and commissions. I believe we have lost our sense of purpose while others are moving ahead by leaps and bounds.

"We need a new paradigm, I think, and a new way to think about our Caribbean and Black communities and our place in this city, province and country. We need to re-assert ourselves.

"Let us set some bold and audacious goals for our community in politics, education, business and community development...We need to stand on the shoulders of people like Donald Moore, Harry Gairey, Bromley Armstrong and even Dudley Laws who was engaged and committed in community and who paid a price for that in many ways. We need to start making some noise."

TCSO was set up in 1980 as a non-profit agency to serve disadvantaged youth and their families. Through its myriad diverse programs, the agency aims to increase the rate of self-employment for youth, improve access to culturally-appropriate counseling services and reduce the school dropout rate among Black students.

The agency served close to 22,000 clients last year which represents a 62 per cent increase from 2009.

In spite of its relevance, Tropicana was one of 10 agencies whose funding was slashed by the federal government last year. The organization was forced to cut three staff members when it lost the \$180,000 it received annually over the past 12 years to run the Immigration Settlement & Adaptation and Job Search Workshop programs.

Citizenship, Immigration & Multiculturalism Minister Jason Kenney , who justified the cuts, saying the number of immigrants settling in Ontario has dropped in the last five years from 145,000 to 106,000, made a brief appearance at last Saturday's Ball and acknowledged TCSO and its volunteers for the work they have done in the last 31 years.

"We count on community-based groups like Tropicana to do the practical work and to take the folks who need a hand-up and a little bit of navigation through the system in Canada and give them a solid start so they can realize their dreams," he said.

Human rights lawyer and bencher Julian Falconer, who was admitted to the Bar in 1987, was presented with TCSO's Community Builder award.

In his acceptance speech, he paid tribute to Leonard Braithwaite, the first African-Canadian elected to the Ontario legislature and the first Black bencher, and his Jamaican-born father Dr. Errol Falconer who came to Canada in 1948 on a scholarship to study Chemistry at McGill University. (He graduated three years later as the top student in his class and went on to earn a PhD.)

"These are very accomplished individuals for whom I believe the term dignitary is entirely appropriate," said Falconer who praised TCSO for the amazing programs it runs for newcomers, families and youth, including those with mental disabilities.

Falconer represented the family of teenager Ashley Smith who choked herself to death in an Ontario prison. The family settled its wrongful death lawsuit against the federal government and an inquest into her death is set to resume shortly.

He said Smith's case represents one of the most extreme examples of the fall out of the mentally troubled youth.

"Her only crime was that she was mentally ill," said Falconer, who has built his reputation by arguing issues of human rights, racism and public interest. "Her case is a lesson to all of us that we have horribly, horribly failed in trying to help those who are most deserving of help...In our schools, we don't yet understand the importance of child counselors and psychologists and how many of them we need. We fail youth in part because we find issues of mental health very difficult to grapple with."

Community worker Robert Brown, who died in 2004, established Tropicana, which became United Way's first Black member agency in 1984. While enrolled at the University of Toronto in the 1970s, Brown and a few other students were assigned a project that involved the preparation of a needs assessment survey of a community in southern Ontario. The group chose the then Borough of Scarborough and, in conducting the survey, discovered that young people in the area faced serious challenges. Determined to act, the team quickly moved to prepare an audited report of its findings and solicit broad support for the disadvantaged youths.