GROWING UP BLACK IN OAKVILLE: The Impact of Community on Black Youth
Identity Formation and Civic Participation

----A Primer----

The report is divided into 4 sections.

Section 1   "Beginnings"

(i)   An interview with Oakville's Mayor Ann Mulvale. Mayor Mulvale acknowledges Oakville's growing diversity and cites herself as an example of an `outsider' who settled and thrived in the Town. (She is originally from Britain.) She draws the correlation between people who are singled out for negative treatment on the basis of factors such as race, with her children's experiences as targets of bullies when they were young. She says she sets out to serve all her people, but is open to any indication that people are feeling left out because of their race.

(ii)   The report author's personal experience with raising children in Oakville and her failed attempts to anchor their identity in Toronto.

(iii)   A brief history of Oakville as a town that was almost pre-destined by history to be above average in its socio-economic composition. The segment includes accounts of Oakville as a destination for slaves on the Underground Railroad.

(iv)   A demographic profile of Oakville's black community. Indicates high levels of schooling and income levels among youth.

Section 2   "As Others See Us: As we See Ourselves"

This section features the results of the interviews with the youth and adults. It is divided into 11 thematic segments, each titled with a quote by one of the youth. The section also draws on social science research on how social identity of youth in general and black youth in particular is affected by their interaction with their environment.

i)   "Why do I Have to be Perfect when No-one Else Is?"

The chapter discusses the concept of youth ending up in a "social pocket" when society brands them too early in life based on youthful indiscretions. It features the thought by most of the youth interviewed that society is more lenient to their non-black peers than it is towards them. In order to not fulfil popular negative stereotypes of blacks that lands them in the 'pocket' of societal distrust, they feel pressured to be 'twice as good in order to reach half as far'. This pressure is particularly strong in ambitious, upwardly mobile families.

ii)   *"A Situation Not of [Our] Own Making"*

This quote was made by a parent in describing the reasons black parents choose to raise their families in Oakville. The chapter also offers a glimpse of the inner struggle some youth face between wanting to remain in Oakville in order to enjoy its advantages and amenities and the desire to leave because they do not see themselves as a meaningful part of the Town's social landscape.

iii)   *"What's Race Got to Do with It?"*

Chapter 5 explores the controversial issue of whether black youth engage and react to their environment primarily as youth, or as blacks. Most of the youth say that as far as they are concerned, their color is only one aspect of who they are. It is an important element but it does not define them. They feel, however, that the world around them tends to categorize them according to race, as reflected in for example, jokes, comments and over-complimenting. The students struggle with their desire to be "just youth" hanging with their friends – many of whom are white, given Oakville's profile – and seeking out others like themselves for a sense of affirmation. They also talk about how their involvement in the local community is affected by this struggle.

iv)   *"It Looks Different on them than on Me"*

This chapter exposes the sense of bitterness some youth hold over misappropriation of their cultural symbols by non-blacks. To make matters worse, they feel that society tolerates other youth sporting the clothing, mannerisms and other paraphernalia associated with "BET culture" or "hip hop culture", but views blacks who wear them as thugs. Other youth disagree, saying that given the social profile of Oakville, black youth should not be sporting `thug wear' anyway.

v)   *"Are You Crazy? Man Those Guys Break the Law!"*

Another controversial chapter in which youth express their belief that white youth are responsible for the majority of anti-social behaviors in Oakville, such as drug use, but that due to negative stereotypes, black youth are viewed with more suspicion. This belief affects the extent of out of school fraternization, since blacks feel they would not get away with such behaviors. Fraternization is also affected by the youth's desire to share practices other blacks would understand (such as "buying hair") without having to explain and justify to peers. The chapter raises the question of whether black youth engage in 'reverse stereotyping' in their views of peers. It also offers a view of one of the reasons black youth resist certain negative social pressures – black parents who `take no guff'!

vi)   *"As a Black Person in Oakville Money Becomes an Issue"*

This chapter explores the delicate subject of the difference that money makes in the lives of black youth. Most youth interviewed did not respond to the question about family income, but of those that did most fell between $70,000 to more than $100,000 a year. The youth with below $50, 000 single parent incomes, however, spoke clearly about how this fact plus their race affects their comfort level among peers. The Social Planning Council notes that it is a myth that everyone in Oakville is wealthy and has published reports showing numbers of families living below community standard.

vii)   *"If I'm truly part of this Community Why Am I Being Singled Out?"*

The youth take on the notion that like other youth, they are simply members of their immediate community, whether their school or community at large. They cite experiences of name-calling, inappropriate comments and joking that seem to communicate to them that they are 'different' and even inferior. In some cases, after a while even they themselves begin to think that way about other blacks.

viii)   *I Know I Can Achieve like Anyone Else, But Will the System Let Me?"*

The black youth have high aspirations and many are doing well in school. But they often have lingering doubts as to whether school authorities believe in them in the same way that they do in others. They reject the notion by those in authority who say that they 'do not see race'.

ix)   *"Fit in While Remaining Unique? How Do I Do That?"*

An exposé of the dual messaging that youth in a middle class setting receive from parents with equally middle class aspirations. The struggle is deep and often contradictory. Parents in Oakville want their children to retain a strong sense of who they are as blacks, but they also want them to be full participants in the society around them. We see the youth's reaction to this ambivalence and we see the parents' own ambivalence about their place in Oakville.

xii)   *"Too Black to Be White, Too White to Be Black"*

Another explosive chapter in which the youth challenge the notion that all they have to do is 'fit in'. They wrestle with what they see as pre-made images that make fitting in difficult; they question the definition that Oakville has of itself and whether it includes them; and, they challenge the unspoken assumptions of those who say, albeit meaning well, that they are 'different' from other blacks. The young women from the all-female group taken on the issue of inter-racial dating, "white girls'" relationships with the young black men they thought were dating prospects and black male insecurity around black females' passion and ambition. The young black women roundly reject the notion that they have to automatically date "the new black guy", just because of his race, even as they wonder if young white males see them as beautiful and desirable.

xiii)   "I Am One Half of the Negotiating team"

While around a half of the youth do not see their future in Oakville, the others want to be full participants in determining their future in the Town. They reject a ready-made social construct within which they are expected to fit, rather they want their views, experiences and input to be part of a re-negotiated construct within which *everybody* fits.

Section 3   "Creating Community"

This section presents a format for creating a socially inclusive community in Oakville and Halton, in light of the demographic shift that is producing an increasingly diverse population. The section defines the concept of a healthy community, based on a model that is being developed by the Social Planning Network of Ontario. A socially inclusive community maintains a single social fabric that allows for individual group identity. It is a community where diverse people participate by `giving back' and where they are included at the ground level of *formatting* what that community looks like.

The section describes five keys to encouraging greater civic participation among black youth:

i)   Recognize the uniqueness of the 905 region relative to the GTA metropolis
ii)   Recognize the uniqueness of being black in the 905 region, compared to the GTA
iii)   Acknowledge the reality of race-based experiences
iv)   Recognize the `burden of the race' that black youth bear
v)   Create room for personal growth as part of community growth

Section 3 also features sector-specific recommendations. The recommendations are not listed in traditional report style. Rather, they are narrative and include action already being taken, an appeal to black youth and sector-specific comments made by black youth during the focus groups.

Section 4   Appendices

The appendices feature: the project development process; the advisory committee terms of reference; focus group interview forms; the partnership agreement and a model for engaging black youth in Oakville/Halton, based on the experience of doing the project.

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