

Ontario carpenters celebrate Black History Month with a focus on equity, diversity

Ontario Construction Report staff writer
Special Feature

As we celebrate Black History Month in Ontario, the Carpenters District Council is reflecting on their successful efforts to increase diversity in the trade.

At the same time, carpenters are looking for new ways to reach Black youth, men and women and encourage them to give the trades a try.

Calls for equity among construction labourers in Ontario started decades ago, with African-Canadian carpenters and their allies protesting the exclusion of Black workers from trades unions and construction companies in the early '70s.

Chris Campbell is the Carpenters' District Council of Ontario's first Equity and Diversity Representative. He works to change the culture of silence around workplace discrimination in the construction industry.

An active member in the Jamaican Canadian Association and other Black community organizations, Campbell went on to become a Local 27 Toronto Carpenters' Union rep prior to his current appointment. He is the bridge between that earlier wave of immigrant workers (mostly from the Caribbean) and the NextGen/youth now entering the trades.

"Having a policy of equity, diversity and inclusion is a great start," Campbell says. "It makes the issues more blatant and it forces people to have the difficult conversations because we have finally acknowledged that something good is happening."

With work well underway on diversion and equity programs across the carpenter' union in Ontario, Campbell is now hoping to expand the initiative to worksites across Toronto.

"We are currently working on a charter for the City of Toronto that would be for all contractors to sign off on when they are pricing jobs," he said. "The equity, diversion and inclu-



The local 27 delegates to the 2019 CBTU conference held in Atlanta, Georgia.
Front row from left: Desiree Smith, Mulisius Joe (MJ) Back row: Sean Blake, Errol John, Clifton Donegal, Chris Campbell and Mike Yorke

sivity committee has started the conversation and we are looking for ways to build on that."

Mayor John Tory has been key to the success of this initiative at city hall.

Today programs target at-risk and under-represented groups and training program focus on creating safe workplaces for all.

Desiree T. Smith is a founding committee member of the Ontario Building & Construction Tradeswomen and a delegate member of the Carpenters Union Local 27 Member of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.

She is also a Member of Coalition of Black Trade Unionist (CBTU), Volunteer Carpenter for the New Dawn Moravian Church Affiliated and she works to encourage more Black women to consider trade careers.

For Desiree, it was the urging of her 16-year-old son that convinced

her to sign up for the Women in Skilled Trades – Enhance Carpentry Program a few years ago.

"If only given a chance, the youths of the less privileged group of people, who are hungry and thirsty for that golden opportunity, would hold on so very tight as to not let it pass them by," she said

"I challenge the construction trades unions to open its doors wide and invite the youths and others from the less privileged communities and give them a fair chance to contribute to the development of their community and beyond and their own financial well-being."

He believes more equity, diversity and inclusion groups within the industry would help bridge the gap, educate, inform and foster a healthy relationship to promote unity among all.

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Carpenters' District Council of Ontario

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"In construction trades, we work as a unit known as the familyhood. We refer to each other as 'my brother and my sister'. Let's keep the familyhood free from all toxin and pollution so we can work to achieve our goals and go back safely home to our love ones, at the end of a workday."

Desiree is preparing for her Red Seal certification in 2021 and to become a Certified Health and Safety Inspector Business Representative with Local 27

Many in the industry are working even harder to build equity, after the racist incidents this past summer, when several nooses were found hanging at GTA construction sites. One worker was arrested in connection to the incidents.

The Carpenters' District Council of Ontario represents more than 30,000 workers across 16 affiliated trades unions. Campbell completed his apprenticeship in the early '90s and became a project supervisor at various sites across the GTA before teaching at the College of Carpenters and Allied Trades, based in Woodbridge.

Mulisius Joe joined marches following the death of George Floyd in the U.S. last summer and commended the union for making their efforts.

"It feels good, because as a woman on site, and also as a Black person, I'm always the minority," she said.



She got into the trades after attending a job fair and peaking with a rep from Local 27. Through the SCAS program she was able to join local 27 and begin my apprenticeship.

"I would like to see more financial support for individuals trying to get started out in the trades and mentorship throughout their apprenticeships. I think it needs more visible minorities in leading positions or upper management would make the difference in diversifying the trades."

Professional associations and developers such as Tridel and Ellis Don have launched anti-racism campaigns in response to the incidents this past summer, including quarterly roundtable discussions with 21 industry partners, spearheaded by the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON). The group is meeting for the second time this month.

The collective launched the Construction Against Racism Everyone (CARE) Campaign, distributing more than 2,000 hardhat stickers for workers to show their solidarity, while launching educational webinars and subcommittees to tackle education, communication and training within the industry. As well, local 27 rank and file members designed a Black Lives Matter hardhat sticker which has proven extremely popular out on the jobsites.

Campbell is hopeful that initiatives are putting respect and dignity for all at the forefront on construction sites across Ontario.

"We work hard to create a mosaic work environment," he said. "I'd like to say Happy Black History Month to everyone."

Construction thrives

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Sales across the GTA were up 24.3 per cent across the GTA compared to the same timeframe in 2019, according to the Toronto Real Estate Board.

"It's official, despite all the challenges, 2020 was a record year for Canadian resale housing activity," stated Costa Pouloupoulos, Chair of CREA.

"While momentum continues into 2021, surging COVID cases and a return to April-like lockdowns in some provinces means we'll be revisiting some of those virtual technology solutions to process deals in the first few months of the year. Hopefully we'll have the current wave more under control by the time the spring market rolls around, which is shaping up to be a very active one."

All those resales likely drove renovations in 2020, which saw an increase from the previous year, according to the MPAC. It all added up to a busy year for builders and renovators. The corporation recorded 32,806 permits for renovation work in 2020, totalling \$3,630,673,414, compared with 28,406 in 2019, and a total value of \$2,610,916,044.

The average permit value of closed permits in 2019 came in at \$91,914.25, and in 2020 at \$110,671.02. Alterations and renovations of homes led the way, followed by: additions, garages, shed, porch covers, decks, and swimming pools.

"With people spending more time at home this year, we saw an increase in building permits as people invested in making improvements to their homes," said Carmelo Lipsi, MPAC's Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer.

"We reported over 50 per cent increase in the total assessed value of renovation permits in 2020 compared to 2019, with over 19,529 permits completed, an increase of over 30 per cent compared to the previous year."

When reviewing the year, an analysis may say it didn't live up to pre-pandemic expectations, but it ended better than it might have.

