

## Technology

# Giving black inventors credit

Travelling museum reminds us how much we owe them

| Joseph Wilson

When black history month hits, students across Ontario are encouraged to reflect on the usual subjects - the Underground Railroad, the civil rights movement and even modern music or cultural events.

In technology, however, black contributions are still pretty marginalized.

Francis Jeffers wants to change that. A biochemist by trade, Jeffers (along with his wife, Denise Jeffers), curates the International African Inventors Museum (IAIM; [www.iaimuseum.org](http://www.iaimuseum.org)), a travelling exhibition highlighting the contributions of people of African descent in the fields of science and technology.

"The lab was getting a bit boring," he tells me. "I wanted to bring science to the people."

It distresses Jeffers that the media usually focuses on black success stories in music and sports. "I was in a classroom the other day," he says, "and 19 out of the 25 kids wanted to be basketball players."

He's trying to convince young black students through example that science and technology are viable career options.

"Less than 1 per cent of black students go into the sciences," he says. "And part of that is because there's a lack of role models. These kids are hungry to see themselves reflected in the sciences."

The confidence boost that many students feel when they see the exhibit is huge. "You can see them stand up straighter," says Jeffers.

He dreams of a day when he can provide this service to students of all minority groups, and has a goal to start a multicultural inventors museum. He sees this diversity as a crucial ingredient to success in a society that wants to remain innovative.

"It is good for science when people approach problems from a different angle," he says. "It's important for people to bring a bit of themselves into the thought process."

He inherited the exhibit a few years back from Lady Sala S. Shabazz, who started the similarly named Black Inventors Museum in 1988 in the United States. Jeffers has worked hard in the past few years to complement the American focus with an expanding section on Canadians.

"This is a way for us to celebrate Canada," he says. "There's a common sense of humanity in the Canadian stories."

Take William Peyton Hubbard, a well-respected alderman in the early days of Toronto's history and acting mayor in 1907. He not only invented the Hubbard oven, an efficient and state-of-the-art baking oven released at the turn of the 20th century, but led a committee that oversaw the development of one of the first publicly owned electrical utilities, Ontario Hydro.

This February, Jeffers estimates over 25,000 people walked through the IAIM. Visitors were treated to a monumental survey of over 200 black inventors, from the conception of the shoehorn to improvements on fibre optic cable (see sidebar).

Jeffers takes his exhibition all over the province to schools, churches and community centres, and feels rewarded when he overhears a student say "Wow, I didn't know there were so many."

These moments pushed Jeffers to work even more closely with underprivileged black students at community housing locations in a program called Visions Of Science. The after-school program is designed to pique young black students' interest in science by helping them conduct experiments, ask questions and create their own inventions.

Jeffers wants these kids to grow up with the integral skills of critical thinking that good scientists have. "It's important for the kids to see the inventors as more than just black scientists. They are part of the scientific community."

As Black History Month comes to a close, let's commit to including this community in our celebrations. Better yet, let's throw out our outdated textbooks and make an effort to investigate science and technology wherever it might pop up, all year round.

