

Weekend Profile

■ By Wilma Blokhuis
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

Making a difference

Long-time CCAH president is looking to pass the reins to new leadership

Veronica Tyrrell is making no bones about it — she wants to reclaim her basement and garage. Over the years, this space in her garage has been taken over by the Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton (CCAHL) of which she's been president for seven years.

"I've been president too long," she laughs. "It's time for some new blood. People tell me they don't have time because they work, but I did it. I would drive from work to meetings."

Tyrrell, who worked as a nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital in Toronto from 1985 until last year, made time for CCAH.

"People tell me, 'You're retired, you've got the time,'" in expressing her desire to have someone take over as president, "but when I first became president, I wasn't retired."

She is in her fourth two-year term of president, having served three consecutive terms, taken a break to be CCAH's entertainment chair, before returning to the president's position. Her current term expires in November.

"I'm glad to be able to give back to the community."

It's a big job. "As president, I do the executive director's job." This includes everything from organizing fundraising events — CCAH doesn't receive government funding — to public relations. "The only funds we have are the funds we raise."

"I don't even have a computer!" She's hoping somebody will be able to donate a computer to the local cultural organization, as well as office space — either free or low rent. "We need office space where we can put up our shingle."

Tyrrell would dearly love to move the steel drums out of her basement, plus the bookcases filled with reports and files, and the equipment that is used set up whenever the CCAH hosts musical and dance performances.

One of her goals was recently met and is in the process of becoming a reality.

In the spring of 2003, CCAH in partnership with the Halton Multicultural Council and Community Development Halton, and funded by Canadian Heritage's multiculturalism department, hired Margaret Brown to survey the town's black youth. Her report titled "Growing Up Black in Oakville," contained several recommendations aimed at making these youths feel part of the community.

"One thing that came out of that survey was that the youth wanted a place to meet to talk and do whatever young people do," Tyrrell approached the Oakville Youth Development Centre, a project CCAH supported, to find out if the facility could be made available for black youth to meet. She was told yes and now the logistics are being worked out.

Preserving and understanding the Caribbean culture while at the same time assimilating into Canadian society is her major objective.

Tyrrell has been a volunteer with CCAH for 20 of its 23 years. "I was living in Burlington



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: OAKVILLE BEAVER

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY: Veronica Tyrrell has headed up the Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton for nearly eight years.

when I got involved, after some friends told me about the organization, and I've been involved since."

"Originally, we helped newcomers," said Tyrrell. "The Halton Multicultural Council (HMC) was formed three years after us, and its first president Bill Allison came from our group." Tyrrell explained HMC assists new immigrants in settling here, "helping them find housing, schools, churches, employment...but newcomers still come to us — HMC directs them."

She explained new Caribbean arrivals are referred to CCAH by HMC so they can be put in contact with people of their own culture. The kids become withdrawn, but when they connect with people from their culture, they feel more comfortable.

Tyrrell has sat on the HMC's board for four

to five years, was also on its race relation committee.

The organization, which as a nine-member board of directors, has between 50 and 60 paid-up members, but well over 100 people show up at our big events. Sometimes we have over 200 people." Membership costs \$10 a year for singles and \$15 for couples.

Five years ago, CCAH became a registered charity. "Before then, we operated as a non-profit organization. One of our goals was to have our charitable status implemented — that was a lot of work."

The next "big thing" is Oakville's Black History Month celebration at the Town Hall. The opening ceremony for this month-long event is Wednesday Feb. 9 from 6 — 9 p.m.

The two keynote speakers will be Dr. Andrew Aiken, a University of Windsor professor who

wrote the resource material on African history that CCAH uses for its teacher workshops, and Winston LaRose, executive director of the Jane-Finch Concerned Citizens Organization.

Entertainment will include steel drummers, an interpretive dancer, gospel singers Glenn and Lystra Hamilton, and storyteller Shirley Smith.

Also, The Oakville Museum's display, Oakville's Black History, illustrating the town's role in the Underground Railroad, will be on display at Town Hall during February.

"Oakville can be proud of this," said Tyrrell. "The Town's diversity consultant, Charal Wigg, is doing a tremendous job promoting cultural diversity."

This celebration is open to the public, free of charge.

"We're also putting up posters in schools and giving presentations to students about creating awareness," said Tyrrell. "We also hold teacher workshops to assist and give them the resources and the tools to enable them to integrate black history into the curriculum as part of their African Heritage Studies." Similarly, parent workshops are held.

Tyrrell thanks Rick MacDonald, Superintendent of Education Services for the Halton District Catholic School Board and Suzanne Muir, diversity coordinator for the Halton District School Board. "Without their support, we wouldn't be able to get into the schools — the two school boards are very supportive," she said.

"We've also run a workshop series for youth in partnership with the Halton Multicultural Council (HMC) in community building and leadership for three years in a row. Hopefully we can run more of these workshops if we can get the funding." Deborah Bradley was hired as workshop leader for this series that ended last year. The funding came from the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Promoting understanding cultural awareness goes hand in hand with keeping Caribbean performing arts alive. "We're working with the Oakville Arts Council to fund performing arts such as drumming and steel pan music, and by offering classes."

Tyrrell admits to "playing a little steel drums myself."

"We try to get youth involved in their culture and to share their culture," said Tyrrell. "It's a cross cultural thing."

"Right now we have 14 people in our class of which five are Canadian."

She is hoping the arts council will fund a folk dance and steel drum performance group. "We have a group who have been playing drums for about a year towards developing into a performance group for non-profits and to demonstrate our music."

This group will be playing at the first annual For the Love of Arts Festival organized by Music and Art Shared Space, on Sunday Feb. 13 from 1 — 6 p.m. at Town Hall. CCAH will be

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Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton

30th
Anniversary

Halton
Multicultural Council