

February 2022 Speaker

Dr. Tanya (Toni) De Mello, Assistant Dean, Student Programming, Development and Equity at Lincoln Alexander School of Law, Ryerson University

“Unconscious Bias”

“Diversity is being invited to a party; inclusivity is being asked to dance to the kind of music I like,” Toni pithily said. “There are unconscious biases about race, gender, age, physical disabilities, income, status, appearance. Everyone has them; not Whites only.”

Toni, who has degrees in law, economics, political science and urban planning, has focused her career on the importance of “Inclusivity.” She has held her position at Ryerson’s law school since its opening in 2020. Previously, she was Director of Human Rights at Ryerson and did humanitarian work for the United Nations. Last year she received Princeton University’s Distinguished Alumnus Award for her “exemplary work with racialized people.” She has given more than five hundred “Inclusivity” training talks.

Lincoln Alexander (1922-2012), born in Toronto, was the first Black Canadian member of Parliament (1968), Black cabinet minister (1979), and Black Lieutenant Governor of Ontario (1985-1991), the first Black Canadian appointed a lieutenant governor in Canada. The school’s focus is on “under-represented groups;” about 60 percent of the 320 students are racialized/ Indigenous/ identify as women. Most of the faculty is racialized; 60 percent are Black.

Toni said, “Awareness is the most important way to reduce bias.” As a guide she asked us: “Who do you say hello to? Who do you sit beside on the bus? Who’s in your group? Where do you live? What restaurants do you go to? Who do you invite to your house? Why are people judged on their height? In the United States only 15 percent of the population is over six feet; yet 58 percent of the Fortune 500 CEOs are, and 80 percent of U.S. presidents have been. Why are the ‘500’ CEOs mainly men while receptionists are women? Why are tall women told to take off their high heels for group photos to make them look shorter than the men? Can you kiss your partner goodbye at the airport without getting looks of disapproval if you are LGBTQ2S+, inter-racial, markedly different in age? Why whether a woman, gay, Indigenous, Black is a ‘good fit’ regarded as more important than actual skills? Why do we make assumptions based on people’s names? People who believe they are “colour blind” –how would they feel if their son or daughter dated someone of a different race; if the people who move in next door aren’t like them?”

She cited the lack of courses at schools in Indigenous and black history as problematic.

“Start small. Relationships don’t happen overnight; they’re built over time,” she said. A number of members said what they’ve done. Linda Cooper: “I taught ESL to immigrants for 20 years. We celebrated each community’s special day with their type of food.” Rosemarie Goodchild: “I was a Long-Term Care recreation therapist for 20 years. My simply asking, ‘How are you?’ started a conversation. Something small can be the little spark to start a flame.” Cathy Gifford: “The mostly white neighbourhood in which I lived wondered how I could teach, survive at Central Tech ‘with all those nationalities.’ I loved it. Humour helped bring us together.” Barbara McNutt: “Pre-Covid I struck up conversations on the subway about the book a person was reading or the theatre program in their hand.”

Susan Goldenberg