



Programs Resource Guide - Black History Month

What is Black History Month?

February marks Black History Month, a time to recognize and celebrate Black individuals who have made significant contributions to society. February is also a time to reflect upon the continued inequalities that exist for Black individuals and centre conversations around equity, and social justice. The City of Toronto was the first Canadian City to recognize Black History Month, established in 1978 through the work of the Ontario Black History Society. Nationwide, Black History Month was not recognized until 1995 when Jean Augustine, the first Black woman elected to parliament, introduced the motion to recognize February as Black History Month.

Why is Black History Month Important?

The National Museum of African American History and Culture says that “knowing the past opens the door to the future”. The celebration and recognition of Black History Month supports continued conversations about the important influences that Black individuals have had worldwide and supports an understanding of Black history from a Black perspective. As many of us know, history as we are taught in school is often taught in a white-centric manor. Centering Black individuals and increasing awareness about the importance of Black contributions is an important step in becoming more equitable.

Who are Some Important Black Canadian Figures?

Many conversations around Black History Month focus on famous civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X. However, it's important to recognize that Canada has a number of important individuals who should also be recognized during Black History Month. In fact, four of our Umbrella locations are named after prominent Black Canadians —Lincoln Alexander, Michaelle Jean, Ray Lewis and Viola Desmond.

Lincoln Alexander

Lincoln Alexander was a lawyer, member of parliament, cabinet minister and war veteran, but he is perhaps best known as the former lieutenant governor of Ontario. Alexander was the first person from a visible minority to take on the role, and the first black member of parliament in Canadian history.

Following his tenure as lieutenant governor, Alexander served as chancellor of the University of Guelph for 16 years. In 2006, he was named the 'Greatest Hamiltonian of All Time' by readers of the Hamilton Spectator. (Source- CBC).



Viola Desmond

Viola Davis Desmond was at the centre of one of Nova Scotia's most controversial episodes. In 1946, she refused to sit in the balcony of the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow, N.S. and sat on the floor reserved exclusively for white people instead. She was arrested and found guilty of not paying the full tax on a floor-seat ticket. She was jailed and fined.

She died in 1965 at the age of 50. In 2010, the government of Nova Scotia posthumously pardoned Desmond and apologized to her family. (Source- CBC).



Ray Lewis

Known as 'Rapid' Ray, he was the first Canadian born black athlete to win an Olympic medal when, as a member of the 4 x 400m relay, the team earned bronze at the 1932 Olympics. He was also a member of Canada's silver medal winning 4 x 440 yard relay at the 1934 British Empire Games (now the Commonwealth Games). (Source- Athletics Ontario).



Michaëlle Jean

Michaëlle Jean was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1957 and immigrated to Canada in 1968. On September 27, 2005, Michaëlle Jean became the 27th Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada. As Governor General she encouraged field initiatives from civil society, stimulating constructive synergies, advocating for the disadvantaged, paying special attention to youth. On January 12, 2010, a terrible earthquake devastated Haiti and in October 2010, with her mandate as Governor General coming to an end, Michaëlle Jean agreed to serve as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Special Envoy for Haiti. (Source- Canada.ca)



Jean Augustine

Jean Augustine is a trailblazing politician, social activist, and educator. She was the first African-Canadian woman to be elected to the House of Commons, the first African-Canadian woman to be appointed to the federal Cabinet, and the first Fairness Commissioner of the Government of Ontario. Augustine has received numerous awards and recognitions for her work, including being inducted as Member of the Order of Canada in 2007, appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, as well as receiving honorary degrees from the University of Toronto, University of Guelph, McGill University, and York University. (Source- Canada.ca)



Ginella Massa

Afro-Latina Muslim journalist Ginella Massa is a Canadian Screen Award-winner and is known as the host of Canada Tonight with Ginella Massa and a Special Correspondent for The National on CBC News Network. In 2015, Massa made history as the first television news reporter in Canada, and likely in North America, to wear a hijab on-air as a video journalist for CTV News in Kitchener, Ontario. She made international headlines again after anchoring the evening newscast at CityNews Toronto in 2016.

With over a decade of experience in news behind the scenes and on-air, Massa has worked for both local and national news outlets, in television and radio. Her on-air credits include CTV News, CityNews, Newstalk 1010, Rogers TV, and her writing has been published in the Globe and Mail, National Post, Chatelaine Magazine, and Refinery29 Canada.

In 2021, Massa received the Top 25 Canadian Immigrant Award. (Source- Canada.ca)



Elijah McCoy

Elijah McCoy was an African-Canadian mechanical engineer and inventor best known for his groundbreaking innovations in industrial lubrication. His parents escaped enslavement in Kentucky through the underground railroad to Canada. He settled in Colchester, Ontario. He is said to be responsible for the phrase “The Real McCoy” as the phrase became common parlance among mechanical engineers who refused to install knockoff lubricators onto their locomotives, demanding instead the original McCoy design. (The Canadian Encyclopedia).



For More Information:

Please see our guide titled [“An Introduction to the Canadian Black Community”](#) on the employee portal for tips and ideas to incorporate into your classroom.

Resources Used to Support the Development of this Guide:

[The Tamarack Institute](#)

[The David Suzuki Foundation](#)

[Black History in Canada- An Education Guide](#)

[The National Museum of African American History and Culture](#)

[CBC](#)

[Government of Canada](#)

[Athletics Ontario](#)

[The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)