

MEDIA RELEASE

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For Immediate Release

EOC TV Programme: Carnival Unites Us.

Does carnival have the power to unify us as a nation? Are we already experiencing unity during the carnival season? What is the genesis of this unity? The Equal Opportunity Commission brought together a panel of speakers from the carnival industry to discuss just this on its television programme, “The Hard Conversations: Let’s Talk Equality.”

The topic, *The Unifying Power of Carnival* was discussed by Terri Lyons, calypsonian, soca artiste, entrepreneur and actress; Rubadiri Victor, Multi-media Artist; and Paige De Leon, Advocate for the Trinidad and Tobago Promoter’s Association (TTPA). They shared their unique perspectives based on their experience in the industries, challenges and areas for improvement. The programme was hosted by Dike Rostant on TTT on Wednesday 15th March.

During the panel discussion, a passionate Lyons pointed to the cultural inclinations of people of Trinidad and Tobago to be welcoming, compared to some places in the world where she does not necessarily feel the warmth in everyday interactions. She said something as simple as saying good morning when you enter a shared space is received differently outside of the country. Lyons described the experience as a culture shock.

She made the connection between carnival and unity, pointing out that when there is a carnival in these said places, “for that moment, we are our brother’s keeper and that accentuates even outside of Trinidad and Tobago. I will go anywhere in the world and once there is a carnival, that’s where the most unity lies.”

Lyons stressed that it is not enough for this unity to exist during the carnival season only. She said, “that unifying bond is a cultural thing and it is something that we are supposed to pay a lot of attention to so that it can resonate even outside of carnival because we really need it. We are seeing it in schools and outside of Trinidad. We need it to reach a diaspora of people for them to understand and just feel that unity because it feels so good knowing that you have somebody watching your back, even on the road; even if you don’t know them. [...] You will walk down the road by yourself in a costume. You wouldn’t do that on a normal day.”

She drove the point home by saying, “I think that carnival is very important to us and this part of carnival is important for us to teach and keep reminding people that it’s not about the soca and the wining, it’s a sense of unity that we should just keep throughout the year.”

TTPA’s Paige De Leon offered a refreshing take on unity and how reframing the idea of unity is key to achieving it. She said, “we can start by reframing what unity is and where it comes from. I think it lies unfortunately in the narrow words of political actors in our society and if we reframe what unity is, we have a much better understanding of how to achieve it. Unity is with us all the time. It is in the music that we listen to. It’s in the arts that we look at, it’s in those beautiful scenes that we see at carnival and the concern we have about whether we have achieved unity is strange to me because I think it’s already there and if I were to start from there, then perhaps the conversation changes. If we reframe the argument about what unity actually is.

Rubadiri Victor spoke about the anthropology of carnival and how understanding our origins can help us to understand our powerful bonds, which are cemented in the DNA of the land. He asked the panel and viewers, “what is it that Trinidad and Tobago carnival has that makes it this compelling thing? It is probably the most magnetic festival on planet earth. The contagious and magnetic festival; easily over 15 million people taking part in any given year.”

He said the answer originates in the arrival of the festival tribes from people around the world that came to Trinidad and eventually collaborated and created the festival of carnival. He said, “that is the source of the unity energy that permeates it (carnival) and has made it this phenomenal thing.”

He shared that there are 300 Trinidad style carnivals around the world and at their height, over four (4) million people are on the streets. He said, “that was no public or private sector that did that. That was the people of Trinidad and Tobago, the power of the people of Trinidad and Tobago that did that.”

Victor lamented that despite the unity that carnival brings, there are class and inclusion issues. He said, “Unfortunately, we are in a period where the mardi gras is in ascendancy. Where the middle class and upper-class elements and the mardi gras energy has taken over most of the footprint and the resources of the carnival at the expense of the working class black and brown Kambule. If the carnival has to match the ideals of its origin, as its inclusive, powerful, equal opportunity thing, then we have to deal with that.”

The Hard Conversations: Let’s Talk Equality was the last episode in the series, which had been running since November, 2022. It is a collaboration between the EOC and TTT Ltd, which sought to provide a platform for various communities to speak about their personal experiences with discrimination and share solutions and positive messages.

Previous episodes included, ‘*An in-depth look at geographical stereotypes and its link to discrimination in employment*’. Speakers shared personal accounts of how stigma and prejudice is ascribed to a broad community and the obstacles they face in employment. The second episode was entitled, ‘*Different in Ability, Not Capability*’, which was meant to provide a platform to

people with disabilities and advocates for the community to share their experiences and voice their concerns to inspire a change in behaviours and attitudes toward persons with disabilities.

The EOC is committed to working towards the elimination of discrimination and the promotion of equality and good relations between persons of different statuses.

It is unlawful under the Equal Opportunity Act to discriminate against someone based on their origin under four categories: employment, education, provision of goods and services and provision of accommodation. Under the Act, persons are entitled to equality and fair treatment, despite their status. The seven status grounds covered by the Act are race, ethnicity, religion, marital status, origin including geographical origin, disability and sex.

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