

“Believe It or Not, I Actually Enjoy It”: An Interview with Blaine Courtney

Naomi Norquay

In November 2014, I sat down with Blaine Courtney in the boardroom at Grey Roots Museum & Archives. Since the Emancipation Festival now organizes the Black History Event and the Journal launches the new volume at that event, we thought we should interview the person at the Festival helm. (And believe it or not ... he really enjoys what he does!)

Naomi Norquay: Blaine, thanks for doing this. I’m not sure I even know what your official title is, in relation to the Emancipation Festival? Who are you?

Blaine Courtney: I am the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Owen Sound Emancipation Festival.

NN: And how long have you been doing this?

BC: Four years now. And prior to that I had four or five years where I served on the Board in a miscellaneous position, or just helped out on committee work. So I’ve been involved for nine or ten years now.

NN: So what does your job entail now?

BC: That’s a toughie, because it has a tendency to change depending on the project. Basically we look at our core activities to start with, and that’s the Picnic and the Speaker’s



Blaine Courtney receiving the Province of Ontario's Newcomer Champion Award from Michael Chan, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade, September 24, 2014

Forum, and then, we work with the different parties and volunteers to make sure we can pull that together in a fashion that people want to be part of. I think that we've returned a little bit towards the family picnic approach for the afternoon at Harrison Park. We've been very fortunate with the people that we work with and have seen the Speaker's Forum grow. We've been able to include the Art Show on several occasions during that evening, which just adds another element to it that people can enjoy. I think the other thing that I find very interesting about the position is to try to facilitate all the different opportunities that exist, or that we want to create to tell our stories.

NN: So what are some of those opportunities?

BC: Well, I'm involved with the Heritage Fair now.

NN: This is the one for kids?

BC: Yes. This is the one hosted by Grey Roots and I find it very interesting. What's really nice about it is that there aren't many Black kids that are involved because there aren't very many Blacks kids in the area, but each year we have three or four projects, and I think last year we maybe had five different projects that were done on local Black history. Some of them are repetitive because they're kids, and they tend to focus on just a couple of areas like the Underground Railroad, and everyone knows that story. But again, I think it's a good start. So we do that. We also have a table, and we partner with the folks here at Grey Roots at the One World Festival, which is a new project that involves a day of inclusivity and oneness activities. I like it because it brings all the kids from the public schools together.

NN: What do they do at it?

BC: Every diverse group that wants to can have a table, whether it's the Gay Pride groups, or us with our Black history, or our Aboriginal peoples doing something, or maybe just somebody with their native foods. The Women's Shelter and the men's program also have a presence at the day.

NN: And when does The One World Festival happen?

BC: It happens in early May and it's hosted down in the Market place behind the City Hall. I think we're coming up on year four. Again, that's a great opportunity for us and for everybody in the community to get out there and interact with the kids and let everybody know what we're about. On a regular basis I get to do the Open Line on CFOS or go on with Rogers Cable and talk about events coming up. They're very generous with their time. This year was the third year for our Ancestors' Breakfast which is a new element we've added to the Emancipation Festival. I found that people didn't want to do a lot of the formal activities at the picnic. We found it very hard to get their attention and keep it for any length of time to do anything like that. Quite honestly, I got tired of trying! [Laughter]

NN: People wanted to gather and talk.

BC: That's right and I understand that. I appreciate that. So, we started the breakfast and each year that grows and our attendance is up. Our program over at the Cairn after the breakfast each year expands to the point that this year - it was the tenth anniversary of the Cairn - so of course we did something special there and handed out certificates to the original committee members and had a special ancestors' reading and several other presentations. And then we were really busy getting ready for those that were going to show up for the picnic in the afternoon. We're trying to get the kids' essay contest going; something that we've talked about for a number of years now. How do we get in and have some kind of input or influence on the curriculum within the schools?

NN: Can you just remind me a little about what you've asked the students for in the essay contest?

BC: We've asked them to pick a Black-related historic topic and to write an essay on it – a researched essay. We've got grades five and six, grades seven and eight, and then the high school grades. So we've got three categories and we've got some prize money available for the winners. And we're very fortunate, and this is one of the things that I just love about Owen Sound, is that whenever you have a project and you need support, you can always find somebody to do it. I've been very fortunate over the years that I've been able to approach new people - or the same generous people - to act as sponsors. We often partner up with the *Sun Times* and Grey Roots here with the journal. Actually, *Mosaic* has offered to work with us on this too next year to help print some of the winners, or just some of the essays depending on how many we get. So we're offering an opportunity for students in each category to win a prize, to learn a little bit about their own local Black history, which is something that is not taught right now in the schools, but we look at this as sort of our foot in the door. And I would think that at the end of the day – (this is sort of 'pie in the sky') – but if we had a hundred and twenty kids write essays, what great fodder to write to the school board and say "Look. Look at all the interest that's here! Maybe we need to make this part of a standard curriculum." And so, hopefully this is a foot in the door, just baby steps, and we'll see what happens. Obviously we'll give it a few years to see if it's going to fly. So I'm quite enthused about that.¹

NN: Okay! What else is your committee doing?

BC: There are other groups that come in. They call us and want to come in, whether they want to be down at the Park or they want to be here at Grey Roots, and we partner up again with the Grey Roots staff and whatever we have to do to make them comfortable and to offer them an opportunity to learn about Owen Sound, and obviously the part of Owen Sound that's

¹ Since this interview, the Festival had to withdraw the contest and will use the lessons learned in 2014 to re-launch this contest in 2015.

most prominent is the Underground Railroad and being the Northern Terminus. But there are other elements that I think we're obliged to start putting to the forefront and offering to people. Because you know, as important as the Underground Railroad story is, it's just one story in the whole history that we have available to share.

NN: And the schools do get kind of fixated on that. It's really just the beginning of the story.

BC: As do a lot of interviewers.

NN: Right! Not this one!

BC: Thank you very much! [Laughter]

NN: I know that the picnic's more than 150 years old, what number was it this year in 2014?

BC: This past year it was 152.

NN: One hundred and fifty-two! So, how many have you attended, would you think, in your lifetime? Or is that giving away your age?

BC: No. No. I'll be 63 at the end of the month. So it's right out there. As a kid I remember going at times. Growing up in the family situation, a mixed marriage, the picnic wasn't something that we did all of the time. And probably as a kid growing up we spent more time associating with my mom's side of the family than with my dad's side. There wasn't any focused effort to do that, but that's just the way it was. I do remember attending. And I often tell the story of how I'd get there, and even though I'm Black, to see that many Black people gathered together, and being too young to fully understand why they were getting together and a lot of the meaning behind it. To me it was more like a family reunion, which it was, for a lot of people. And I was always amazed at how many of these people my dad knew. We never saw too many family members on my dad's side at other times, or any of his friends. And I used to go home and just marvel at how many people seemed to like him. He would be laughing and joking and running around. People would ask "Is Frank here? Is Frank here?" and I felt a sense of pride, but I wasn't just sure why I should, or why I did. But it was quite a unique experience. Then there was a whole period in there, probably in my early adulthood and raising a family, even though I was in Owen Sound and Owen Sound area, I just never seemed to be involved. I wasn't raised as a Black person. I was just raised as a part of a family, who was part of a community. I feel blessed that I was able to do that. I think that in some ways that's helped me to be more receptive and sensitive to both sides of the story, so to speak, when there are two sides to a story that might come up. But it's also why I'm also so keen to learn now, because I didn't know anything before, if that makes sense.

NN: It makes sense.

BC: Our family has never, at least on my dad's side, (the Courtneys), have never been ones that liked to get together a lot. It's kind of hard to do that. In my dad's generation there were 17 or 18 brothers and sisters. So there's a huge family.

NN: That's a big family!

BC: And then, when you take all of those, and all the cousins, and then you start taking those cousins for a couple of generations, all of a sudden there's so many people! That's why I'm glad they invented the word 'cuz'. I can never remember all the names! Off and on I would go to the picnic and then I was actually approached by Denny Scott about ten years ago. It was after the passing of Jimmy Wayner. Jimmy had done a lot of stuff with the websites, which I can't even touch, and he did a lot of other stuff with the organization – for the Picnic and some of the other activities. They were looking for someone to step in, and it just seemed to come at the right time in my life. I was no longer coaching. I had coached for a number of years, and I was getting a little too old to be a jock all the time. And my kids were old enough now that I wasn't sort of scooting around with them all the time. They were sort of out on their own. And so everything just sort of lined up and I said "Sure!" It's kind of funny because I thought I had big plans of how I could influence this little Festival. The more I found out and learned about the Festival and the local Black history, the more I realized how little I knew about how much was already out there. And that was probably one of the biggest surprises as I grew in the role, as a member of the committee and then certainly a lot more as Chairman. I learned just how much has already been done to record the stories and to tell the stories. And then, by the same token, how much more there is still to do. It's an interesting struggle between: do we focus on learning more? Or do we focus on telling what we know now and sharing that? I like to think that I can facilitate opportunities for both of those things to happen. I don't think that I have to be the "knowledgeable one". But I feel that I need to be able to recognize the needs that exist to support both the telling, or the recording, *and* the discovery of stories. As well as whatever you have to do, whether it's to put two people together, book a venue, organize an event, or whatever. And that's where I think my strength is.

NN: So, when you came back - you kind of remember the festival from when you were a kid - but when you came back, what was it like in terms of the events? Was it just a picnic? Do you remember?

BC: I realize that Denny and Lisa had been looking after things to that point for seven or eight years. And they had been invited to help, to take over the organization of the event because it was down to 50 or 60 people attending. That's just the story that I hear. There was a need to infuse it with something new. And they managed to do that wonderfully. And I think a big part of what they did was with bringing in the music. We still had the picnic, kids' races, and vendors. And of course all that added a lot more than had been prior, and then the music came into play. It was very fortunate at that time, that besides hard work, there was the availability of funds – significant grants were available to support those sorts of things. But, you know, it wasn't just the grants, it was the hard work that was behind all of that too, and the organizing

afterwards. And we grew to the point that, I'm going to say that there was probably about a thousand people the year of Homecoming, which was in 2007, I believe. I think what happened, if I can be a little critical after all that, I think that a lot of people began to think that the picnic-family aspect of it started to disappear a little bit. The Picnic was the reason to have a big music-fest as opposed to the other way around. The music-fest was supposed to be a part of this very traditional celebration. We can get bogged down in tradition sometimes, I think, but by the same token, we have to appreciate that it exists. And that creates some real issues whenever you want to try to go against that.

NN: It's also got such a long, important history.

BC: Yes. So I think at that time we maybe started to get away from basic things that we should have been addressing. We started to have some issues. I'm not saying within the Board itself, but just people in general were becoming a little disgruntled. I think partly because they didn't fully understand just what a big financial thing this was. A lot of families had been going when there were just a few volunteers to sing, play guitar or something, and it was more of a reunion type of thing. And there wasn't a lot of focus on even the reason for the Picnic. For a time there, it was just a gathering of families, of Black families, and their friends.

NN: Could have just been the Courtney brothers and sisters!

BC: Yep. But I think that we're moving back to trying to focus on the reason and still offer the opportunity for that family time and everything else. And we're back to using volunteers for the music and a lot of that is based on the fact that the large grants just aren't available anymore. So you can't spend five or six thousand dollars to bring in entertainment for a late afternoon, early evening performance and things like that now. But we're certainly very appreciative of Bobby Dean Blackburn in organizing what he does to bring in the local volunteers. And so I think with what we're doing, it's working out.

NN: Okay!

BC: A little aside here – I got an email from someone named Paulette Pierol at Owen Sound Tourism, who had been approached after some "Tweet" – I don't really understand that stuff! There was a group that had asked a question, had been directed to the website, and after they went to the website, they seemed very keen on coming and bringing students to the Owen Sound area to study and to learn about what's going on here. So, actually next week, I think, we're sitting down – Paulette, myself, along with Susan Martin, and Laura Arnold at Grey Roots, and we're going to see if there's anything we can put together and offer in February for students for bus tours and related activities.

NN: Nice! Good! That's great. There's that education piece starting in that way too. I do also want to ask you about Owen Sound as the Northern Terminus, as it is known. I always have to remind myself that it wasn't only a terminus for the Underground Railroad, it was the home and

the community for all kinds of people, many of whom may have come on the Underground Railroad. What do you know about your family's history?

BC: I know that my great-grandfather Abraham Courtney was a runaway slave from the Courtney plantation in either North or South Carolina - one of the Carolinas, and that he appears on one of the censuses in – I'm going to say 1876.

NN: Might be 1871. The census was every ten years on the first year in the decade.

BC: I just remember Terri Jackson showing me. And he wasn't here [in the 1871 census], but then, he was here in the 1881 census. He had kids that were five or six years old that had been registered as being born in Canada. So we just backed up and figured that he was here somewhere in the mid-1870s to have had kids born and have been registered in that census.

NN: But you don't know when he might have come.

BC: An actual year, no. We just sort of "guesstimated", based on the age of the children, that it had to be mid-1870s.

NN: So, is this knowledge that you gained as an adult, or was this part of your family story?

BC: It was probably part of the family story, and about the only part of the family story that we knew. There was another story about great-grandpa Abraham helping a white gentleman clear some land over Meaford way and it was supposed to be a 50-50 split after he was done. Needless to say, he was taken advantage of. And, like I said, I think those are the only two stories that I can really remember as a kid about my great-grandfather.

NN: Any stories about your great-grandmother? Do you know her background?

BC: No. No. Not a bit. At this point in my life, other than gathering little pieces when I hear other people talking about it, I haven't had the time to sort of investigate and start doing my own family tree. I've got several cousins who have done bits and pieces. Through Facebook and just chit-chats you get a little bit of information. But nothing that starts you at the beginning to their journey here and follows through with their experiences and everything else to Owen Sound and forward from there. The Courtney name – we seem to have been around for a long time, but I don't think there was anyone that stood out in the public eye, so to speak, that they were recorded in local history, other than on the census when it was taken.

NN: So, as a kid growing up in Owen Sound, did you know the stories of people like John "Daddy" Hall?

BC: I'm going to say probably not. I don't remember much of anything that related to the local Black history or the Underground Railroad. I knew that it existed and as a young teenager I

finally knew why we were gathering at Harrison Park [laughter] for reasons other than just to see a cousin and to eat ice cream. But there again, I knew very little. My dad told lots of stories, because he was a great storyteller. But all of his stories were mainly just family-related – as a family, as opposed to a “Black” family. Just a poor family – and here’s our story. I couldn’t believe that poor folks who were starving half the time could have that much fun! The stories were quite interesting. But again, there was not a lot of discussion as a kid growing up, whenever my dad’s side of the family came up, that dealt with being Black. It was just the way it was.

NN: And also, as kids, we live our lives in our families and we don’t have that bigger picture to kind of think about things.

BC: I was visiting friends and staying overnight when Martin Luther King gave his speech in Washington – his “I Have A Dream” speech – and of course it was on the only channel we could get and that’s probably why we were watching it. I think I was ten. I felt very emotional about it and that was mainly because of his presentation, as opposed to the subject matter. It was a white family I was visiting. It was really funny because I could sense everybody staring at me, expecting me to be able to explain what he was talking about.

NN: Or maybe just trying to register your response.

BC: And that could be too. At that time, I almost felt uncomfortable because I didn’t know. I was aware that there were race issues in the States, but again, I wasn’t old enough to appreciate what was happening there, and it really had no impact on my life at that point. You know, we grew up in a community where I was just Blaine, we were just the Courtneys. As an adult I look back and realize that - I’m not naïve enough to think that there weren’t issues - but I can’t remember too many specific ones that impacted my life because I was Black, other than, obviously, when I was invited to be part of the Festival! [laughter]

NN: So, as somebody in this really important role that you have, have people shared more stories with you about the history up here?

BC: Yes, people they do and probably one of the uncomfortable things about that is that when they start sharing stories they make the assumption that I know a lot already. And they’re always throwing out names, whether it’s while we’re talking, or - what’s really funny is I’ll get emails and I’ll make little notes and after I’m done I’ll “Google”! [laughter]. Why did they mention that person? So that’s how I learn. Again though, we’ve got Les MacKinnon, Terri Jackson, both with a great wealth of knowledge there.

NN: They’re gatherers.

BC: Yes. And I appreciate that. And I take advantage of that whenever I need to. I know that there are times when I’ve done shows where I knew that specific things were going to be part of

it, and especially with Terri, I would make a point of talking to her, and asking her questions, because Terri has all of these facts. I like to take her facts and turn them into stories - it's always a nice way to share.

NN: And the best way too because somebody can then take the story... which reminds me, someone, I think, told me a story that you had told them about someone coming here in a beer barrel?

BC: Oh yes... I was at a house party and this white gentleman was telling me a story that his grandfather had told him that down on 3rd Avenue, down towards where the Bayshore Arena is, there used to be a set of steps that went up. And every day his grandfather would walk down, and then back up, and he would have these conversations with a Black gentleman. I believe it was a Scott, but I'm not sure. So one day they were just sitting there and this Black gentleman shared this story. And I'm pretty sure it was a "first person" story: they were working at a winery that was down there at the time on 3rd Avenue. I guess we had a lot of them! A ship came in and the Black crew that worked there went down with the wagons and the horses and loaded all the barrels that were coming off the ship and went back up. And the way the story is told is that it was quitting time, but nobody went home. Finally the boss, the white owner, said to these guys, "We're not paying overtime, so you guys might as well go home." So away they went and after the boss left, they snuck back and they had to search through all the barrels because apparently somebody had been smuggled into Owen Sound aboard a ship in one of these barrels and they had to go find him, but they didn't want to do it in front of their boss. Yeah, right! Which one is it, guys? And he said, "My grandfather told me that story numerous times." I actually told it to somebody else and they phoned me and I put them in touch with him. I don't know what happened from there. I guess they were really trying to authenticate the story.

NN: That's a Northern Terminus story.

BC: Oh yes, very much so.

NN: So, it would have been before the mid-1860s.

BC: Yes. It was kind of neat. It was just something he said. He was the gentleman who went home and got a book that he'd bought at a book sale. I've got it at home with some other stuff that's been building up because we've got nowhere else to put it but in Blaine's place in a box. So yeah, it was a kind of a nice little story.

NN: You've talked about how you want to support the gatherers and the storytellers. Does the Festival, aside from the Speakers' Forum, and maybe the Art Show, does the Festival, like the Picnic or the Ancestors' Breakfast, do they facilitate that kind of story making and telling?

BC: Well, at the Ancestors' Breakfast, on several occasions we've asked for stories. One year

it was Bonita Johnston, and I think the other thing is that we've got the Town Crier, who comes every year. Bruce Krueger is a storyteller. And I'm always amazed at the amount of work that he puts into his "cries". They've got lots of emotion involved, but there are also some very significant, historical facts he puts in there. So, I would think that that's offering somebody an opportunity to share, because there is a message in every one of them. He's not just running around going "Hear ye! Hear ye!" He's sharing a story. And so I think that's kind of special. I would like to think that we put our stamp of approval or our endorsement behind people who are doing things too – whether it's David Sereda or Janie Cooper-Wilson, for whom I have used the endorsement from the Festival at times to do things and for grant applications. Whoever comes to us, as long as I feel comfortable, will benefit from our support. It's not that I have a very strict policy about anything, but by the same token, I think that if we're going to do something, we should do it in a very informative, tasteful manner. I can't think of anything specific, but I do know that there have been a couple of times that I haven't pursued requests because I was a little doubtful about what the outcome would be. Mainly because our perspective in Owen Sound is significantly different than it would be further south in some of the bigger centres.

NN: Why do you say that?

BC: I had someone say to me one time, and I had realized this sometime before, that the Owen Sound Festival is rather unique in that it has turned into – and probably always has been – a community festival, where the entire community, Black and white, has always supported it. Based on that, I think that we have an obligation to make sure that we always remember that and whenever we tell stories, we tell stories that reflect that. Whereas, other centres, they have their festivals, and in a lot of cases it's strictly a Black event and the only white people who are there are people who are married into the Black families. But in Owen Sound that's not the case. And I don't think it ever has been. I remember reading something – I don't think it was Reverend Miller that said it – but it was at one of the early festivals. That person was being recognized and he stood up and one of his initial comments was he had never seen that many white folks gathered together with Black folks in his whole life. I wish I could remember who I should credit with saying that.

NN: We could probably ask Terri!

BC: I'm pretty sure it wasn't Reverend Miller, but an older Black gentleman in the community at that time, in the early stages of the Festival Picnics or the Emancipation Picnics. And that's probably a very unique evolution that's taken place there, too, because we started talking about the Emancipation Picnic and for 140 years that's what it was. But with the change in the format in what we did during the day, adding on the Speakers' Forum, and taking on the responsibility for that, and some other things, and becoming registered, we became "a festival". I've used the term "Emancipation Festival" at times with some of the families and they look at me like I've got three heads. And then someone will say: "Oh! You mean the Picnic!" So when we talk about it, if I can remember, I try to differentiate between some of the events and call

the afternoon the “Picnic”, because sometimes words are powerful things. If you call it the Picnic, then people appreciate that fact, more so than the “Festival afternoon”, or something to that effect. But yeah, I think we’re very unique in Owen Sound from that perspective.

NN: I think it’s the longest, consecutively-running festival.

BC: Yes, in North America.

NN: That is stunning. It’s really stunning.

BC: There are not too many others. There are some fall fairs and a few other things might beat us, but there are not too many Emancipation celebrations. Through wars, depressions, it’s always been held. Maybe not some big gatherings at times, but every year it’s been recognized.

NN: Every community ages. The young ones come along at the bottom and over time we lose the older generation and the elders. Has the Festival thought about preserving any of the history that might disappear?

BC: I think that we encourage people to share their stories. It’s amazing sometimes how uncooperative people can be when it comes to that sort of thing. I’m not sure why. I’d like to think it was just because they were shy, but I’m sure that’s not the case and I really don’t know what to put my finger on sometimes. But I do know that there are people that just don’t want to talk about it, or aren’t willing to share what they have. And there are people around that have a lot of history in their closets, whether it’s in letters or albums. And every once in a while you hear those nice little stories where someone has sort of opened up the door and given it to someone to do something with. All we can ever do is just encourage people. We did that this year with the Ancestors’ Breakfast. We sent out a plea to people that we wanted to honour our ancestors, so bring pictures. We put boards up that had white backgrounds so that people could post a picture and write a small story to go with it.

NN: And people did that?

BC: Not many, but it’s the first year and I think that as the breakfast grows and as the programs and things that we try to do at the breakfast grow, those kinds of things, people will say, “Oh yeah! Last year they did that. I must remember this year to dig Grandpa or Aunt Sally’s picture up and take it.” I don’t think we’re doing ourselves any favours, if we don’t give things a chance. Just because it appears to have bombed the first year – we recognize that it’s hard to communicate that, it’s hard to get people on board. But I feel blessed that most of the new things that we’ve tried to do over the years, that eventually we have got people on board. One of the other things is that the community is very supportive.

NN: Maybe the Picnic’s an anchor for them?

BC: Yes. I think that I've personally been very fortunate in that growing up in Owen Sound, I've always been active in Owen Sound, right from high school, right through with student council and sports, social activities and so on. I just haven't been sitting back waiting to become Chairman. I've been quite active, as was my father. And I think that's where I got the bug or sensed the responsibility that we have to do something like that if the opportunity exists. My dad had a grade 4 education, married at 20, raised a family and worked for himself, painting. There were five kids and he and my mother brought us all through. We always had clothes on our backs and food on the table, and through all of that he managed to educate himself. He was involved in the community, with the Children's Aid, with the Arc Industries - that's now Community Living, back in the day when there was no money and just a bunch of well-to-do fellows who thought there was a need to do something. They formed a committee and Dad was the chair and then he had his boxing club that he ran for years and years. He's actually in the Sports Hall of Fame here in Owen Sound as a "Builder". So we learnt, we had a fine example to follow.

NN: And that was really about giving back to the community.

BC: Oh, very much so. We had a mother who was very much supportive of the things we did. So, you're encouraged to be part of things. And if you have some positive experiences as a youth, it's that much easier to jump in there when the time's right and do it again. Anyway, my brother said it was my turn!

NN: Well, someday it might be the turn for another Courtney of another generation.

BC: I think that at this point, if I was able to make a plea, it would be a plea to people to step forward. Like, we've certainly asked enough times and offered enough opportunities. It's a small group. I think we've got one of the hardest-working, small core groups of people that you could ever want. I'm always making them aware of how appreciative I am of all the things that they do. We're more of a year-long activity, as opposed to just organizing a Picnic. It takes a lot of work by a few people to keep this rolling.

NN: And you don't want them to burn out. And *you* don't want to burn out.

BC: I think I'm a bit away from that. We do need that next generation, that younger generation to start stepping forward, and be involved, and gain an appreciation for what we do and why we do it. I think there are a lot of people who would like to step forward and just run the Picnic. But that's now just a small part of the whole picture. I think that's one of the things that Denny and Lisa, and now myself, can be very proud of. We've been able to extend and expand the influence that the Festival has on the community, in terms of the number of opportunities that are out there now to do things.

NN: Have you got plans for 2015 yet?

BC: Barry Penhale has already booked our key speaker.

NN: Of course, by the time the Journal comes out in April you'll probably already be starting to advertise.

BC: So, we're good to go. We've sent out our Ontario grant application. We'll see what happens there. We're starting to put feelers out about what we have to do to apply for additional grants to support the Black History event in April, or the Speakers' Forum, or the kids' races, or whatever – wherever funds are available to support what we're trying to do. We're getting ready to work on putting this thing together for February, if we can get that on the go. Some of the stuff we leave towards the end, just because it's the same thing every year. I've already started to work on our Ancestors' Breakfast program. I've sort of got the writing bug after writing the stuff we did this year, and I've started to make some notes on the presentation for the Ancestors' Breakfast presentation ceremony. And I'm getting people lined up to help.

NN: Sounds like that takes hours and hours. How much time do you put to this?

BC: Obviously the closer we get to the Festival Picnic weekend, the more time it takes. It's hard to say. Some weeks it's only a couple of hours because you're just answering emails. Other weeks, and I don't mind doing this, I've taken a day's holiday to go and be part of something, whether it's with a group here or the One World Festival down in the city square, or just other commitments like that. It can add up and of course it depends on how many programs we want going on. I remember for our 150th I used up two full weeks of holidays. And at the end of it all, I felt that it was needed and I was glad that I was able to, because there was a lot to do. We had a lot of extra stuff going on. It is a year-long activity and sure there are weeks when I maybe don't do anything other than check a couple of emails, but there's always people who are asking questions, or making suggestions, or correspondence that has to take place and different things. And of course awards ceremonies to go to and accept awards at! [Laughter]

NN: Yes! You need to get ready for those too!

BC: That was kind of nice. We can use that to our advantage next year or even for our grant application that we have to do in the spring. It's always nice to have an event that's recognized, whether as an event, or as the people that are involved in it. I think that'll bode well for us.

NN: This is great. I think we're going to have a nice little piece to run in the Journal. Anything else you want to say?

BC: From my perspective, I want people to know that I appreciate the efforts that go into things – the citizens and my friends who are supportive, and not so much because they're "keepers" on Black history, but because if I believe in something and work on it, then they're willing to step forward and be supportive for that reason alone. I take advantage of that on

numerous occasions. And they don't seem to mind. I actually remember asking one of my buddies one time and he said, "Blaine, you just keep doing what you're doing and we'll be there to help you whenever we can."

NN: That says a lot about you.

BC: I feel quite blessed that that's the position I'm in.

NN: Well, it's sure important work. It certainly is.

BC: It is and there's just so much more to do and I'm not planning on leaving at any time soon, but by the same token, life changes. There are other things that I would like to do. I know that Maryann Thomas at Ginger Press keeps urging me to write something for her to print. For now we sit around the table down at her place and tell stories. And I'm not sure if I could, write, but you never know, I keep thinking about it. I know that Bonita does the kids' books, and I've run through stuff in my mind that I think would be kind of neat for stories to go in a kids' book. It's not like you have to have reams and reams of research and information. It's more of a 'tell a story to teach a lesson' approach.

NN: You could tell your dad's boxing school story.

BC: There's interesting stuff there! Just throw some pictures in! I've got a brother who, if I twisted his arm, has enough artistic talent that he could do something along the lines of what Bonita does to go along with the book. There are all sorts of things.

NN: Well, we sure need more picture books and more stories – more ways for kids to engage and imagine Black history in particular, the Black community in particular.

BC: Yes. Yes. So, we'll see what happens, but for now we'll just carry on with what we're doing. Believe it or not, I actually enjoy it. Most of the time!

NN: Maybe I'll use that for the title – "Believe It or Not, I Actually Enjoy It"!

BC: There are times as you can imagine when it's not – especially when we did the 150th. Oh man, that was so devastating to have over a hundred people do their own thing and go to Harrison Park. And then to realize that caused a delay for us even more in getting out of the hole, because we had a significant debt. I'm pleased to say that we actually have money in the bank this year to the point that we know that we can pay our bills for another year without any more income coming in and still have a few bucks to put towards little things if we want to. Plus we've secured the sponsorship dollars for the kids' essay contest. So we better get some essays!

NN: Yes, indeed!

BC: I think, from that perspective, it's kind of nice that we've been able to clear those things up and rebuild some of those community partnerships that were suffering as a result of that.