

# Legacy Project Shines Light On Six Black Activists

By Neil Armstrong  
PRIDE Contributing Writer

**TORONTO, Ontario** -- Five filmmakers have produced five short films on six Black activists, who are no longer alive, but whose work created lasting change in Toronto.

Their work will premiere at the inaugural Akua Benjamin Public Lecture at Ryerson University on February 18 that focuses on fifty years of black activism and resistance in Toronto.

Sarah Michelle Brown, Sonia Godding-Togobo, Laurie Townsend, Ngardy Conteh George and Ella Cooper have high-lighted the legacies of Gwen and Lenny Johnston of the Third World Bookstore, Rosie Douglas, Charles Roach, Dudley Laws and Marlene Green. The lecture and documentaries are part of the Akua Benjamin Legacy Project, a five-year project in the School of Social Work that is made possible by a donation from former Ryerson president, Sheldon Levy.

Veteran filmmaker, Alison Duke, executive director of the documentary project, said, Benjamin chose the activists who are all people who were her friends.

"She marched with them and she engaged in various programs of activism with them, and so they are her friends, comrades, and they are no longer here."

Duke said this project came out of one that she was a part of approximately 12 years ago called "The Fifty Years of Black Activism Project" which involved a committee studying black activism in Toronto from the late 60s to the present.

"I think with Akua Benjamin just being awarded this very high honour at Ryerson University to do a legacy project to pay tribute to the people of the Black Canadian activist movement and honour them, and also to sort of like rebuild and reimagine the history because a lot of them are no longer here."

Duke said when Benjamin brought her back after those 12 years to make films of six people whom she wanted to honour



From L to R: Ngardy Conteh George, Sonia Godding Tobogo, Sarah Michelle Brown, Alison Duke, Ella Cooper and Laurie Townsend. Photo credit: Patrick Nichols.

this year, given the deadline and scope of what needed to be done, she decided to get "five pairs of hands" to do that.

She was also inspired by African American filmmaker, Ava DuVernay, and her celebration of black women in film, so Duke decided to select five black women who make documentaries, who are new voices in the documentary industry, and whose work she has seen and they are established.

Brown is the director of the short film, "Book of Love," about the legacy of Gwen and Lenny Johnston of the Third World Bookstore.

She said each filmmaker was sent the list of activists to choose from and articles about them which prompted further research.

"I was reading some of the articles on the Johnstons and as I was reading one of them, there was a quote by somebody who was saying that the Johnstons had a huge impact on them. As I'm reading the name of the person who was speaking, it was Althea Prince, my aunt."

Brown was also reading the *Torontoist* and a quote from Lenny struck a chord in her to make a film about the couple. It read: "All through my life the schools avoided me and they ignored my history, my culture, my music - now I'm trying

to educate."

She didn't want the film to be something that is in the past.

"I don't want this to be just something that we're talking about that people passed away and it's not relevant. One thing that was so important to me was let's make it relevant today."

Drawing from the negative reference of black people in a geography book belonging to her father, Brown, who is biracial, decided to personalize the story of the Johnstons and "really treating the work that they did with the respect and reverence that it deserves" - something that fuelled her passion for the project.

Dub poet, Clifton Joseph, and singer, Alana Bridgewater, play an important part in the 6-minute film.

Brown feels that the Johnstons were the grandparents of the community who in creating the bookstore in the late 60s not only ran a business but provided a positive role model to people who needed some positivity to counter the overt discrimination in Toronto at the time.

Godding-Togobo, director of "Rosie: The Fearless Rebel," was fascinated with, "as Akua Benjamin said, how brazen he was."

"I read everything I could about him on the net, talked to a few people who knew

him and I just tried to get a sense of who the man was personally."

She tried to reflect the essence of who he was in the 4-minute film, noting that it was very challenging because "we're complicated people and somebody like Rosie, I think, is even more complicated than probably most people."

"He's complicated, just ambitious and fearless and there are so many layers to him and what he was able to accomplish here in this country and for the Caribbean, in general."

Lennox Farrell, a friend of Douglas, and Benjamin, who worked with him directly, helped in the storytelling.

Godding-Togobo says she felt honoured to do this because one of the reasons she became a filmmaker was because she wanted to "bring to light the stories that I wasn't seeing."

She says Douglas was such a magnetic, dynamic presence that she feels is needed right now where "the world is changing and the consciousness of black activism is at a height."

"I think Rosie, what he represents is a fearlessness, he represents a strength in voice, a fearlessness in voice, a fearless to speak up against injustice no matter what. He took on the Canadian State fearlessly and I feel like that is an ultimate reflection of strength of character," said Godding-Togobo who hopes that there is a young Douglas somewhere who needs to see it.

Townsend, director of "Charley," said the biggest challenge was to tell a bit about Charles Roach.

"How do you condense the life of a person who was called a Renaissance Man, how do you condense the life of a man like Charles Roach into a 3-minute, 4-minute, 5-minute documentary," asked Townsend, noting that he had a hand in everything, from being one of the co-founders of Caribana to all the high profile

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