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## Frankson talks diversity

**TOP STORY** - By Stacey Bowman, Assistant News Editor


**Greg Frankson spoke Tuesday night about being black at Queen's, his term as AMS president in 1996 and diversity issues.**

When Greg Frankson walked into a classroom in Kingston Hall for the SOAR 1993 orientation, he looked around him and realized he might be the only black person in the room. So he started scanning the faces before him, and locked eyes with another black student.

"It was like radar ... 'Oh my god, that's a black person,'" he said as he explained his first experience of the Queen's community—an experience that would stay with him and shape his mission during his six years at Queen's as a concurrent education student.

That mission would come to fruition during his term as the first black AMS president in 1996.

Frankson, Arts '98 and Ed '99 and a first-generation Canadian born to Jamaican parents, was raised by his mother in Scarborough. He used an analogy to explain what it was like to be part of a small visible minority on campus.

"It's like you went to the hairdresser to get a cut and style, but somebody gave you a cutting instrument you've never seen before. And somebody gave you a comb that looks like a brillo pad and said, you got to fix your hair with that, and we're going to watch you closely," he said. "It's the knowledge that if I'm careful and if I focus, I can probably get it right. But there's a lot of pressure."

Frankson came to Queen's to prove to himself, and everyone else, that he belonged in a first-class university, he said.

"That's what we're always taught at home—you got to work twice as hard. Because first you got to work hard to get the basics. You got to work harder in order to prove to people that you belong," he said. "I had to prove that I belonged. I felt that from the moment I got here until the moment I graduated."

Frankson now works Health Canada and is a writer, spoken word artist and social commentator. As part of Black History Month Kingston—aided by the Committee Against Racial and Ethnic Discrimination—he drove from his home in Ottawa to speak Tuesday night to approximately 40 students, faculty, staff and community members in the Robert Sutherland room of the JDUC about his time at Queen's, diversity and the challenges facing black youth in Canada.

The naming of that room was his personal project as AMS president, he said. Robert Sutherland was the first black university graduate in Upper Canada—graduating from Queen's in 1852.

Sutherland was involved in the creation of the Dialectic Society, which grew into the AMS in 1858.

He went on to earn his law degree at Osgoode Hall and became the first black man called to the bar in Upper Canada. When he died, he bequeathed his entire estate—totaling more than \$12,000—to the University, which was helped out of financial mire because of his donation, Frankson said.

What concerned Frankson when he was a student at Queen's was that for all the buildings on campus named after benefactors, there had never been anything done to commemorate Sutherland's achievements and contributions.

The year he was elected AMS President, Frankson took a trip to Toronto to visit Sutherland's grave.

"I swore that the University would never forget the name of Robert Sutherland again," Frankson said. "If they can't forget him, they can't forget me, and people who look like me."

Frankson succeeded in getting the billiards room in the third floor of the JDUC transformed into the Robert Sutherland Room, where black speakers have addressed audiences on a semi-annual basis for the last nine years. The room was officially dedicated in 1998 in a ceremony with Frankson and then- Principal William Leggett.

"We were a social activist group," Frankson said of the AMS executive team he headed, supported by Annette Paul, VP (university affairs), and Chris Lefavre, VP (operations). "We all had social credentials and agendas. When I got elected, my agenda was to get something on campus named after Robert Sutherland—I did it."

Initially, however, Frankson wanted to have the Fireside Reading Room in Stauffer Library, which was under construction at the time, named after Sutherland.

"It was this big comfy room—it looked like a slave-owner's lounge room," Frankson told the audience with a smile.

But the development department responsible for dedications "freaked out" Frankson said, because they wanted to maintain the space as a prime naming opportunity for new benefactors thinking of donating ever larger sums to the University to offset the cost of the new library.

During his term, Frankson's executive team focused on accessibility and was successful in saving the Bus-It system—which was threatened at the time—opening the AMS Food Bank, and paving the way for the UBS exchange.

"For 12 months we ran a truly socially activist government," Frankson said, despite those who doubted his team's ability to win.

"'You guys are going to run with a black person and an Asian person on the same slate? You're not going to win'—I had to deal with people telling me this," he said. "We said 'screw it.' We ran, and we won. We crushed them."

Frankson's team sailed to victory with 45 per cent of the vote. He now sits on the Queen's University Council and is president of the alumni association in Ottawa.

"They can't get rid of me now," he said.

But Frankson maintains there is still a big problem with the lack of black students at the University.

"I will never stop talking to raise awareness about issues of diversity, about accessibility on this campus that is being hampered by the financial policies of this University," he said. "You can't expect second best from your university—you can change this place."

The two biggest obstacles attracting black students to the University are the location and the school's reputation, Frankson said.

"Tuition plays into the geography of the issue, because black people will not come to Kingston if it's more expensive than to go to [a closer] university, an education that they're already finding it hard to afford while staying at home," Frankson told the Journal. "The Rae Report is talking about having higher financial assistance. Until that happens, Queen's can't really hope to attract those students who have high academic achievement but low economic means."

Even with financial assistance from Student Awards, Frankson said black students are turned off by the University's reputation.

"[The University is] talking about issues in a way that alienate those people who most need to come here," he said. "[Legget's campaign] was about deregulating tuition, it was about giving the University greater ability to set its tuition rates to meet its financial needs. Hitchcock [is] philosophically not all that different from Principal Leggett.

"It's going to be a continuation of that mindset. Of that particular voice," Frankson said.

"People aren't going to come to Queen's if they see that Queen's is at the forefront of making it more difficult for them to get to university."

Changing the University's reputation is the only way to attract more black students, Frankson said.

"You change reputation by changing the face of the University," he said, suggesting students and alumni from visible minorities should be among the recruiting teams at high schools and post-secondary fairs. "There are good things going on at this university. We've got to talk it up. We can't be afraid to target specific neighbourhoods and communities."

Frankson said a proactive approach, with active recruitment strategies geared toward attracting visible minorities, is needed.

"Queen's has to give up its arrogance about having the highest entrance average in the country," he said. "Simply sitting back and saying, 'all the best students are going to come here because we have the highest entry average in the country'—well what type of people are you attracting with that attitude?"

"And [is the administration] serious about changing the face of the University's population? If [they] are ... something needs to change and I think it's the University's approach that needs to change," Frankson said.

The next AMS executive can help make the University more inviting to black students and other visible minorities by continuing to fight for greater accessibility, Frankson said. He pointed to the fact that the provincial government is running a deficit, while the federal government is deciding how to spend their surplus.

"CASA [Canadian Alliance of Student Associations] has to be the next step for the AMS in order to get the funding to come down from the federal level for post-secondary funding," he said. "Another issue is to continue to look at the issue of poverty on this campus."

"The Food Bank ... is a crucial part of the environment. And why is that? And what are we doing as a university community to help those people who are having so much trouble meeting their costs that they are going to the local food bank in order to feed themselves?" he said.

After finding a niche in the Committee Against Ethnic and Racial Discrimination, Frankson was a key leader in protests in 1994 against the University's tolerance of the white supremacist group Heritage Front, who erected posters on campus.

After successfully lobbying the administration to ban the posters, Frankson went into hiding in his girlfriend's house for two weeks, during which skinheads were being spotted on campus.

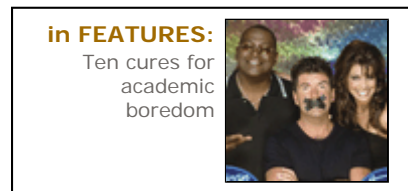
"I didn't go out very much during the day ... went out and got food once in a while, but just laid low. It was scary."

Frankson said it was the only time in his life that he felt like a target.

Despite those two weeks, Frankson's experience at Queen's was overwhelmingly positive, but he said that is unfortunately not always the case for black students.

"Some of them were unable to find that niche," Frankson said. "Some of them were discriminated against, some of them walked out, some cussed this place."

*Photo by Ian Babbitt*




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