



IMAGE COURTESY OF URBAN ALLIANCE ON RACE RELATIONS

## PROFILE

# Unapologetic voices for racial justice

More than 40 years in, the Urban Alliance on Race Relations is a mainstay of Toronto activism

BY URBI KHAN

**THE MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITIES** are often those who are marginalized and racialized. In a growing, diverse, and multicultural city such as Toronto this reality makes activist and advocacy groups integral to the city. The Toronto-based Urban Alliance on Race Relations (U.A.R.R.) started in 1975 and exists to educate, protect, and advocate for the rights and freedoms of racialized and marginalized people.

“On the grassroots level... we try to change people’s beliefs, attitudes, and learned behaviour that might have shaped how they behave around other racialized communities and people who they consider ‘other,’” says Neethan Shan, the executive director of U.A.R.R. “We are more concerned beyond that to

build ground power among racialized groups and allies to effect policy changes.”

Shan says that U.A.R.R. aims to enact policy changes in all levels of government. Policy issues that concern the organization include education, policing and employment. One example is addressing and enacting policy changes when it comes to racial profiling in the justice system.

“Right now, we are bringing together groups of people from different backgrounds, from different faiths, from different parts of the world, and creating a sense of belonging for them here in Toronto, the province of Ontario, and in Canada,” says Nigel Barriffe, the president of U.A.R.R. “We are primarily

focused on police civilian oversight. But lately we've been fighting against white supremacy, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia."

Barriffe says that their work is governance focused; the organization works to address changes at a systematic level.

U.A.R.R.'s work can only be done when they have the support of the communities they advocate for. The organization fundraises through an annual awards dinner where they honour community members who have advocated for their communities through different fields, such as media, health and education. U.A.R.R. also raises funds while simultaneously supporting the communities it serves by holding job seminars and diversity training courses at various public and private organizations, including school boards.

One of U.A.R.R.'s main actions in recent years was calling on the Ontario government to declare January 29 the Day of Remembrance and Action on Islamophobia. This date in 2017 was when a shooter walked into a mosque in Quebec City and murdered six worshippers and injured 19 others during evening prayers.

U.A.R.R. brought together community organizations and spearheaded the United Against Islamophobia campaign to bring this to fruition by having Muslim leaders convene for a consultation with MPP Rima Berns McGown. U.A.R.R. brought together over 80 community partners who supported the call by sharing the #UnitedAgainstIslamophobia campaign among their constituents and sending letters to their members of provincial parliament, according to Sanaa Ali-Mohammed, a member of the organization's board of directors. Last April, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario passed Bill 83 declaring January 29 as the Day of Remembrance and Action on Islamophobia.

"U.A.R.R. offers different opportunities for there to be different advocates in different areas of anti-racism from different generations ... this is intergenerational," says Ali-Mohammed.

U.A.R.R. is "acting as the unapologetic voice on issues related to racial justice," she says, whether that's at the York Region District School Board, Peel District School Board, or elsewhere.

In the time of COVID-19, precarity and access to information are issues of concern. Frontline and essential workers in this pandemic include a majority of racialized and marginalized people. U.A.R.R. has planned courses of action to take place in order to benefit these communities.

Shan says that there is a three-part solution as to how U.A.R.R. plans to go about advocating for change during the pandemic. The first part is increasing access to information for racialized and underrepresented groups, as the organization recognizes that there is a barrier to information being disseminated in underrepresented communities—language barriers, in particular, being one that needs addressing. U.A.R.R. is working on providing COVID-19 webinars and virtual town halls, as well as by editing government information to be more accessible. They have been pushing for volunteers to translate information to languages other than English as well. The second step is addressing the racism that is currently being faced because of this virus: anti-Asian racism, and negative attitudes toward immigrants, refugees, and non-status people. The third step is to address the income disparity racialized people are dealing with during this time, particularly those working on the front lines.

U.A.R.R. started with a focus on addressing issues related to hate-motivated violence that faced African and South Asian communities in Toronto during the 1970s. From the start, U.A.R.R. had members who worked in both policy levels and community levels.

Shan says that U.A.R.R.'s history is unique in that leaders from different sectors, including faith and labour, have come together with community activists to form an alliance.

"It doesn't feel like an organization, it feels like a movement," says Ali-Mohammed.

## EASILY MISSED

### Bubble zone

New law creates protected area around abortion providers

"IT'S HAPPENING," SAYS MEGAN Boudreau, 28, as she watches what started off as her petition become Bill 242 on March 10. "Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye?" the Nova Scotia House Speaker asks. "Aye!" Boudreau declares in harmony with the house of assembly. Moments later, the first bill to prevent protestors or anyone interfering with a person entering an abortion facility in Nova Scotia became law. The vote was unanimous.

This law creates a safe-access zone, otherwise known as a "bubble zone," that prohibits protestors from entering

a 50-metre distance of hospitals, clinics, and doctors' offices that provide abortions. Alberta, Ontario, British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Quebec each have distinct bubble zone laws, ranging from 50 to 150 metres.

"I'm so happy that those involved with abortion (practitioners/patients, and even people walking/driving near these clinics/offices) can walk in and out of areas without feeling judged and ridiculed," says Boudreau.

The roots of this bill date back to the fall. When Boudreau was walking to the grocery store, bus stop, or Saint Mary's University library in Halifax, she