

CBC Metro Morning with Ismaila Alfa

First Black President of a GTA college or university embraces opportunity for community

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ISMAILA ALFA: George Brown College will have a new leader in time for the fall. Gervan Fearon will be the college's new president and when he takes over in August, he'll be the first Black president of a major college in the GTA. Now, Gervan grew up in Toronto and is returning to the city after eight years away after some time at Brandon University in Manitoba, then at Brock University in St. Catharines. He's also returning at a time when academic institutions are really facing some hard questions about racism and equity in education and starting to think about post-pandemic teaching. Gervan's on the line right now. Good morning.

GERVAN FEARON: Good morning. Thank you for having me.

ISMAILA ALFA: Great to have you here. Also nice to know we've both spent some time in some of the same places. As I understand you were with Brandon University in Manitoba for some time as well. What went through your mind when you heard about this opportunity at George Brown?

GERVAN FEARON: Well it's just an outstanding opportunity and it matches so many elements of items that I think are so important in terms of the education system and supporting students; being able to add to the competitiveness of industry and business; the linkage to community. All of those elements are basically core to what I think is so important to educational institutions. So George Brown College, I believe is a leading edge college in terms of what it's doing for the Toronto region and beyond actually.

ISMAILA ALFA: Now I, you know, having grown up in Toronto, you'd be very familiar with the large Black communities here and you being the first Black president of a major college in the GTA, I do wonder what you see as your role and how you would carry the weight of that responsibility?

GERVAN FEARON: Well, I think that there's always a sense of responsibility for any individual that's directly linked to communities and in my case directly linked to the Canadian Black community, the Black community in Toronto. But I also think that there is the case of being able to look at, especially at this time as we've seen through COVID, the impact of changes in the economy, impact of the pandemic on various communities and then being able to ask ourselves, how do we build an incredibly inclusive Toronto, inclusive Canada and the role of post-secondary educational institutions in doing that. I think George Brown College is uniquely positioned as a Toronto college, downtown Toronto uniquely so to be able to contribute to an incredibly vibrant and inclusive Toronto and in that sense I think I can be a part of that contribution as well.

ISMAILA ALFA: I know you would carry your experience though into your role as well. I was watching a video recently of you talking about your first experience with racism as a little boy or at the very least, the first experience that you remember with racism as a young boy and how that marked your life. Can you tell me -- tell us about that moment and what it means to you today?

GERVAN FEARON: Ah, sure. Well, in fact, some of you -- some of your listeners, they know I was actually born in the UK and as a young child, I can recall following a friend home from school. I was invited by him for lunch. I was supposed to stay in school but that invitation was enticing. When we got to the door, his parent let him in and then standing there, said to him that, "We don't let that into our house", referring to me inside the door. I ended up getting lost because I didn't know my way home from there and I ended up on a high way and the lights and got found by the police and taken home. Definitely a traumatic experience but it also taught me how important it is for all of us to think about the lessons we teach the next generation. I've often said -- I wondered what happened to him. I know I went on to really think about education, think about inclusive society, to think about the role of institutions and building great societies. And I think we all get different lessons and I don't think we have to be as individual, marked or defined by our experiences as much as informed by them. And for me, post-secondary education and what George Brown College is doing, it's important for Toronto, for Canada, particularly at this time and I hope that I'll be contributing to an outstanding institution and outstanding society as well.

ISMAILA ALFA: How you were informed by that situation though or that incident is what I'm most curious about here. What was the conversation with your parents like after that and what do you take from that conversation that you can pull into your role now?

GERVAN FEARON: Well maybe a couple of items. Ironically, my parents, less than a year later ended up leaving the UK and it was part of their journey to Canada -- my parents are Jamaican and so we ended up going to Jamaica for about three years then coming to Canada. And part of that journey for them was an emphasis on education and the role of education, the role of having choices in life and in some sense, my activities over the years in terms of education have been so much passion towards looking at education as a transformative opportunity for individuals, for communities, for society but it also taught me how important it is to build inclusive institutions. And what's wonderful about George Brown College is that it's been focused for years on having a sense of inclusion, having a sense of welcoming and access to all students and the employers and partners that it works with around the world. So in some sense, it really has led me to not only look for institutions with those kind of shared values but look for opportunities to make significant contributions as well.

ISMAILA ALFA: Just looking through your bio, there's just so much that you would bring into this position. I mean, your agricultural economics background when you were an undergrad. Just looking also at your involvement in government and that sort of thing. But to your personal life, when you grew up in Little Italy here in Toronto, what are some of your best memories of that neighbourhood?

GERVAN FEARON: Well, one of our -- when we first came to Canada, we lived on Grace Street and it was just incredible because there was so much -- a mixture. In fact, I think it represented Ontario, represented Toronto at the time and indeed was to go on to represent Canada, meaning that there were individuals from all over the world with a sense of a question of being able to become new citizens and new members of a society. We were all mixing each other's culture and the likes. And I think it defines the best of Canada in my mind in the sense that we all celebrate our backgrounds but we also celebrate what it means to be a member of a broader community -- Canadians, Torontonians. As you made mention, I've lived in a number of places across Canada and what I always find so fantastic in travelling across Canada is being able to talk about our backgrounds but at the same time, share in that common element of a great country. And I think post-secondary educational institutions are so much a part of bringing people together and bringing a sense of opportunity for the future. And when I take a look at what George Brown College is doing with employers, with careers for students, looking at that new element for Toronto as it recovers from COVID, I think all those kind of elements are items that were planted in me very early and it's great to see that there are important elements of it kind of taking on new roles in that respect.

ISMAILA ALFA: I do wonder, when, you know, years and years and years from now when you decide that this was -- that you want to move on to do something else or whatever your future decisions include, when you look at your time here at George Brown, what will be the indicator you've achieved what you wanted to do in your time here?

GERVAN FEARON: I'm not sure. Why don't I point to three elements in that context. I think the first one is being able to say that I made a meaningful contribution to students and in that regard, being able to kind of work collaboratively with faculty and staff in that core focus and being able to really meet student needs and students at George Brown College have such a wide range of individuals coming directly out of high school, there are individuals who may have done some post-secondary education before -- they're looking to round out their skill set. There are adults returning to college as well. Just interestingly enough, my mom went to college when we were actually older and I know the impact of college on her possibilities in our family. So that's the first one. I think the second one is typically at this point in the life cycle and the development of Toronto, being able to contribute to communities and bringing communities across Toronto together and being able to support their own quest forward as being meaningful contributors to Toronto and to society at a broad level. But also being able to contribute to an inclusive Toronto that's vibrant and that's an example of possibilities large and great cities, not just at a national level but at a global level. And then thirdly, the idea of being transformative for our businesses, for industry. As we see, the nature and even the location of work really change and being able to contribute to individuals who would like to be a part of its new economy as it changes and develop and be a part of that bridge for them and I think if I contribute those three elements by way of example and a part of that for George Brown College then I'll be very proud of my accomplishments and hopefully the individuals that I get a chance to touch their lives that they'll be proud of what I've done for them as well and with them.

ISMAILA ALFA: Gervan, congratulations again on the position and welcome back to Toronto.

GERVAN FEARON: Oh, thank you so much and I'm looking forward to meeting you in Toronto as well.

ISMAILA ALFA: Definitely. You take care. We'll talk soon. Bye-bye.

GERVAN FEARON: Bye-bye.

ISMAILA ALFA: Gervan Fearon will be the next President of George Brown College beginning in August. He is the first Black president of a major college in the GTA.