

PROFILE

TERRY DOWNEY

TERRY is an African Canadian who was born in Nova Scotia. She was raised as an “army brat”, one of four children in the Maritimes. While her father was away on duty, Terry’s mom was the backbone of the family and she raised her daughter to be independent and to seek a good education. In her younger years she spent her time involved in various organizations such as girl guides and pioneer girls, the church choir at her Baptist church and many school sports and club activities. She also spent a lot of time reading and explored the roots of her heritage.

Her family was usually one of a few black families living on the military base and she knew very little about her black heritage until the family moved the Halifax in when she was in her late teens. Military families are raised much the same so it seemed colour did not appear to matter. However, as she got older she realized colour did matter until people got to know her. Terry’s racial experiences in Halifax shaped her path to the social activist she is today and her strong belief in human rights

Work life experiences began for Terry at age 13 years while on the military base she spent a lot of time baby sitting for neighbours and her first paid non-union job was as a recreational youth counselor. In her late teens she worked on the military base as a kitchen helper and later found employment at a fast food restaurant in Dartmouth. These experiences coupled with her mother’s urging motivated Terry to strive for a better life by pursuing a “good education”. Terry is a graduate of Dalhousie university where she received her bachelor’s social work degree. While going to university Terry worked full time as a ward clerk at the Victoria General hospital and was a single parent to her now 24 year-old daughter. Terry is now the mother of two girls the youngest being 15 years old.

Terry is a progressive community and labour activist and community activism is one of her priorities. She was

involved in her housing cooperative and many community groups. Three years ago she was instrumental in uniting her west Toronto neighbourhood after gruesome murder of 11-year-old Holly Jones and founded the Junction Triangle Action Committee that is committed to fostering community awareness, involvement and safety. Terry uses her leadership skills and serves as the co-chair of JTAC.

OPSEU was home for Terry and she was involved in the union for the 17 years. Terry has a background in human rights and has been employed since 1988 as a Human Rights Investigator at the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Terry has held many positions at the local union level. She began her activism as a steward in her former local 568 and she was also the local vice

president for many years. Terry remains involved at the local level and current serves as unit steward for the OHRC, Vice president of local 528 and MERC co-chair for the OHRC.

Terry’s provincial leadership in OPSEU began on the women’s committee, which led to her being elected to the OPSEU Executive Board in 1997. In 2001 Terry was elected the Toronto Regional Vice President and the first black women in her union to hold this position. Terry represented over 40,000 public sector workers and members of OPSEU in Toronto. Throughout Terry’s involvement in OPSEU as a leader she promoted the values of equity for all person and used her human rights training to improve the policies and practices of her union and help members seeking justice and fairness from employers.

Terry was elected Executive Vice-President of the Ontario Federation of Labour in November 2005 at the OFL Convention becoming the first African-Canadian to serve as an OFL executive officer. In her role as OFL Executive Vice-President Terry will be responsible for health care, education and special events.

