

STANDING TALL FOR US ALL

Alanna Doyle

Sinclair Secondary School,
Whitby, ON

\$500 Winner

Throughout our lives, we face trials that define who we are, and shape our character. Some trials pass quickly, leaving little to no evidence behind while others we endure throughout our entire life, and must constantly fight against. The Honourable Lincoln M. Alexander was no stranger to a fight; willing to put himself on the line for his convictions and beliefs. A pillar of justice, he epitomized what it means to be Canadian. Through his various philanthropic and professional works he helped to define, and protect Canada's heritage.

When one considers the leaders of African American communities in Canada, no individual can be credited solely with the responsibility for leading this group. The struggles faced by African Americans are too diverse, and longstanding to be tackled by one person. Nevertheless, every individual has the ability to address some aspect of this multifaceted issue, a message that Lincoln Alexander conveyed in his inaugural speech in parliament:

"I am not the spokesman for the Negro; that honour has not been given to me. Do not let me ever give anyone that impression. However, I want the record to show that I accept the responsibility of speaking for him and all others in this great nation who feel that they are the subjects of discrimination because of race, creed or colour."

This message was to characterize his time in parliament, and indeed his life. Being the first black Member of Parliament to be elected in Canada, he set a precedent that was difficult to follow. As a trailblazer, he was under constant scrutiny from the public and his peers, some of whom desperately wished for him to fail. Despite the pressure he faced daily, Lincoln Alexander did not bend, and he did not break. He stood tall in the face of adversity, an unmoving testament to the strength of man's character and his ability to overcome challenges for the good of a nation.

While his booming voice echoed throughout parliament, intimidating his opposition, Lincoln Alexander was in fact a very approachable man; an attribute that served him well in parliament. His friendly nature, and the fact that he was willing to overlook his pride in order to do what is right led him to becoming Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, a truly remarkable achievement. This among other achievements, and the fact that he was a well-respected man, gave Lincoln Alexander the ability to reach out to youth. In doing so, he protected and defined Canada's heritage.

It is the phrase that pervades our lives, "Children are our future". Repeated to the point that it has almost become inane, it remains an undeniable truth. Our children, and thus our future, are intrinsically linked to our heritage. Our heritage defines us, and we in turn define our nation. For years minorities, such as African Americans, were ignored and we lost many great minds due to this, a tragedy that Lincoln Alexander lamented: "I wonder how many men of such calibre we have lost because of the deliberate rejection of people because of colour." When we ignore any segment of our population based on prejudice, we lose our most valuable assets; the minds of individuals in our society.

Lincoln Alexander was the son of a railway porter and a maid. His mother taught him to aspire to loftier ambitions, through education. This instilled in him the firm belief that regardless of where you came from, in Canada you had the opportunity to be more. He recognised the need to empower youth through education, and to show them that they could achieve their dreams. During his time as Lieutenant-Governor, he visited hundreds of schools, and at each one he would ask children to repeat the phrase, "He did. I can. I will." A simple statement, but one that held the power to change how these children viewed themselves, and encourage them to pursue more than what they were told they must accept.

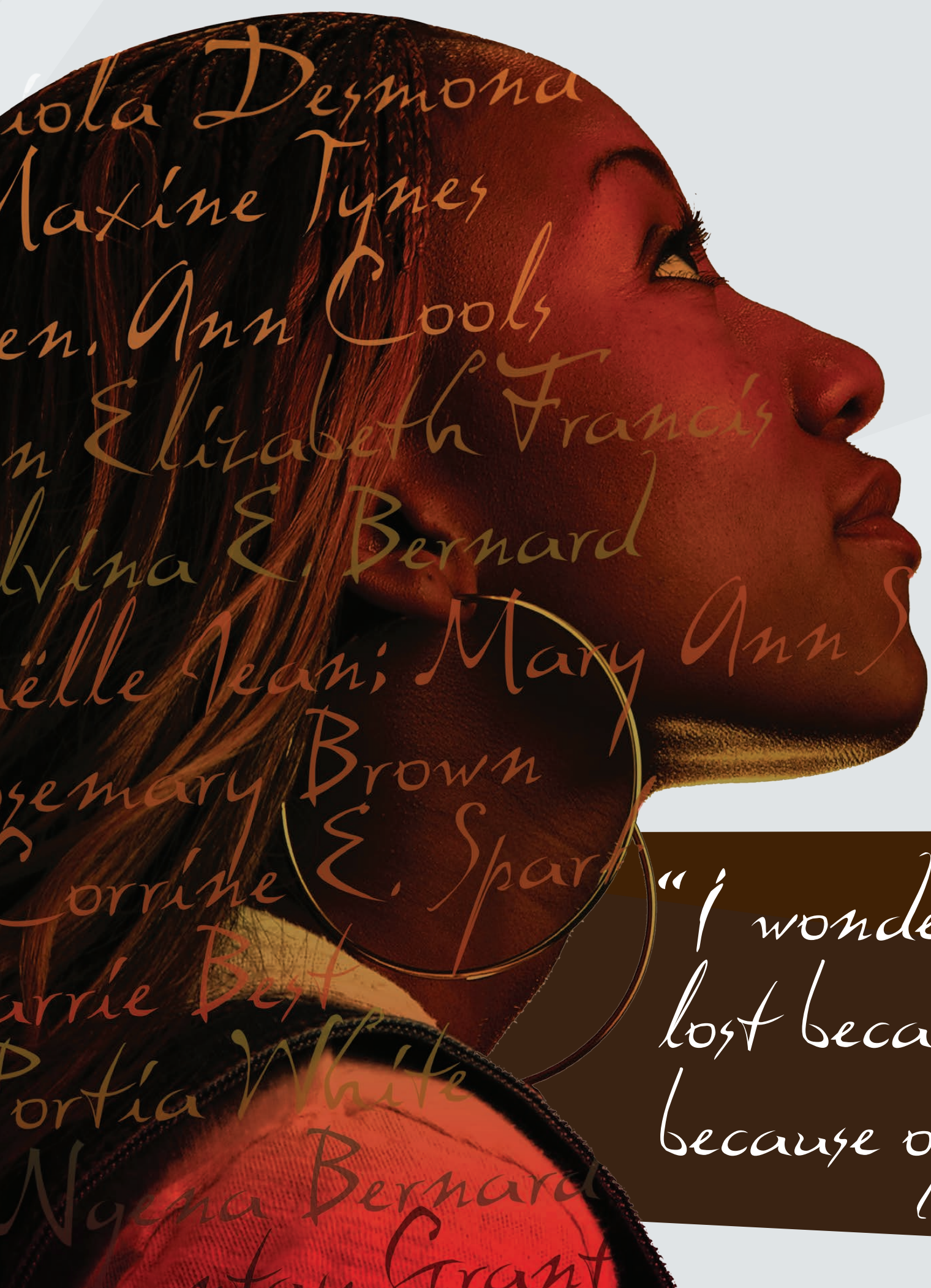
As a nation, we are proud to say that the rights of an individual, regardless of his race, beliefs or sexual orientation are protected. However, this was not always the case, and this put our heritage in jeopardy. Lincoln Alexander emerged as a role model for all Canadians, demonstrating that when we ignore and exclude specific groups in our society, the society as a whole suffers. By reaching out to those he met, Lincoln Alexander was able to change how we as a nation viewed African Americans, and thus protected our heritage.

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