

BUILDING BETTER FUTURES

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Education is a gift that Canadians take for granted far too often. It lets us see the world in a new light and opens up our minds to the unimaginable. Education is the imperative foundation on which we build our lives. Young Canadians are among the most fortunate in the world to be exposed to an abundance of knowledge no matter their sex, race or religion. However, looking back into Canada’s history, equal opportunities for education have not always existed. Millions of intelligent black Canadians were denied the chance to explore their untapped potential because of people’s racist temperament and inability to accept diversity. It took courage and persistence, like that of Anderson Ruffin Abbott and Leonard Braithwaite, to change the mentality of Canadians and give people of African descent a chance to succeed. The diligent efforts of these two men, among countless other African-Canadian activists, have shaped Canada into the diverse and cohesive country it is today.

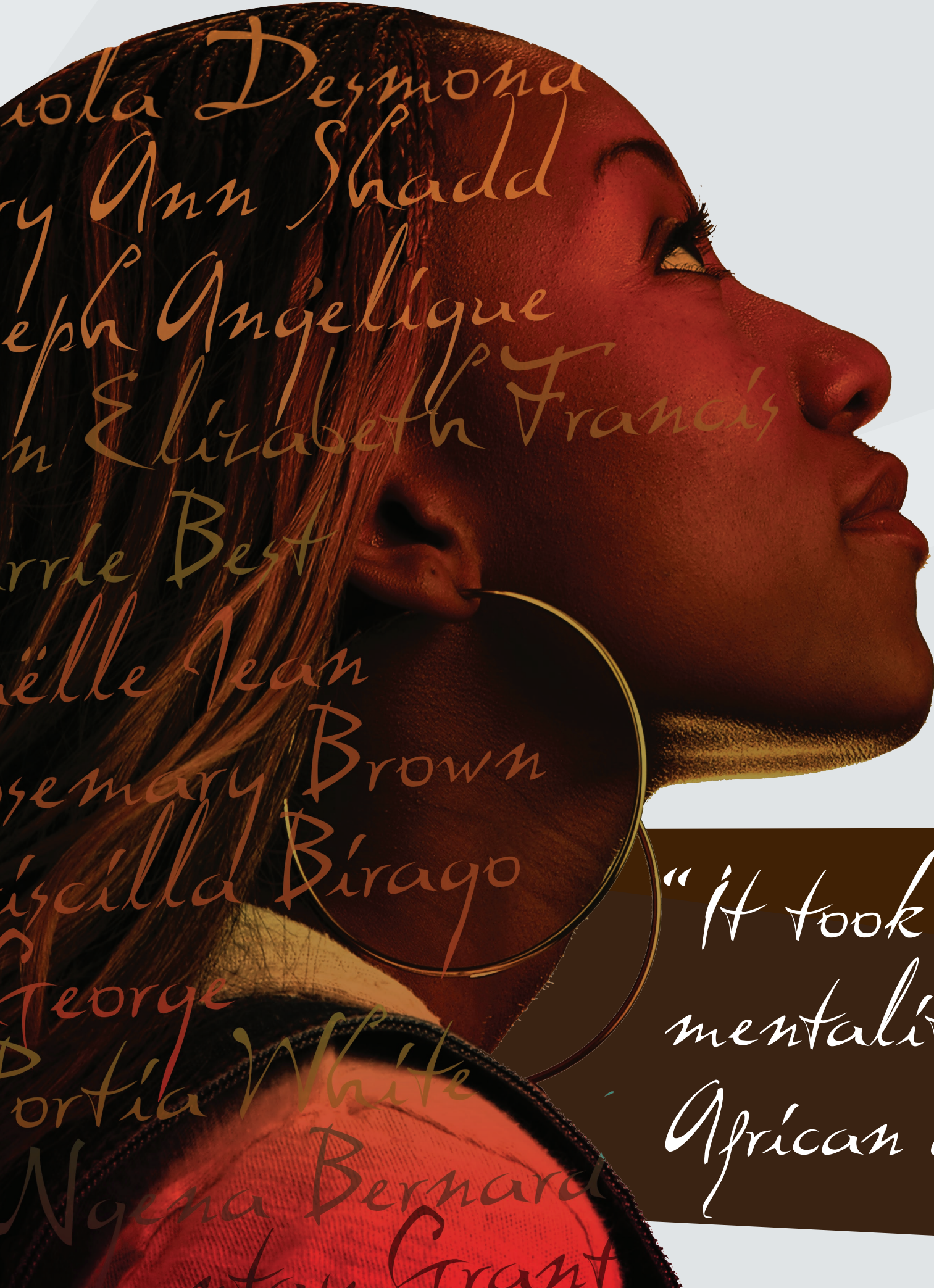
Anderson Ruffin Abbott was born on April 7, 1837 in Toronto. Being born into one of the more prominent black families, Abbott was on of the few African-Canadians of that time to receive an exceptional education. After attending Toronto Academy and Oberlin College in Ohio, Abbott completed his studies at the Toronto School of Medicine in 1857. Instead of completing his medical degree in university, he studied for four years under a black doctor by the name of Alexander Thomas August. In 1861, Abbott defied the odds and became the first Canadian born black doctor.

Achieving the goal of becoming a physician did not put an end to Abbott’s struggles. In 1863, he applied to be an assistant surgeon in the American Civil War but was turned down based on the colour of his skin. Reapplying for a “coloured regiment”, Abbott was later accepted into the military and from there worked his way up to greatness. He proved that race is only skin deep and that he was just as capable and hard working as anyone else. Abbott became a popular and commendable presence at his post in Washington, opening up peoples’ minds to the idea of equality in not only education, but every facet of life. In his later years, he continued to push the envelope of racial tension by fighting against racially segregated schools. Abbott opened the door to education for every African-Canadian who came after him.

Leonard Braithwaite is another notable African-Canadian in the fight for equal educational opportunities. He was born on October 23, 1923 in Toronto. Braithwaite graduated from Osgoode Hall Law School in 1958; a significant accomplishment for someone of African descent in his time. His career took him in the way of politics and in 1963 he was elected as a member of the Liberal Party. During his first speech at Queen Park on February 4, 1964, Leonard Braithwaite spoke out strongly and confidently against the Ontario Separate Schools Act that made racial segregation in public schools a legal practice. Braithwaite’s criticism of the outdated law is what initiated its abolishment soon after. With his strong will and determination, Braithwaite helped Canada take its first steps in providing equal opportunities for young African-Canadians, like myself.

My whole life I have lived in a town so small that it is impossible to pass someone on the street that you do not know. A small population, of course, translates to virtually no diversity among the population. All through school I have always been able to count the number of black kids on my fingers and that is just using one hand. As we got older and my peers learned their stereotypes, it became an amazement that I was doing so well in school. Even though I had an identical education to everyone sitting around me, the colour of my skin was supposed to inhibit my ability to succeed. The sad truth is, the “small town charm” does not exist but an underlying racist tone does.

Despite this, there is an abundance of hope for the future. The actions of activists like Abbott and Braithwaite are slowly but surely reaching every nook and cranny of our country. People of African descent are now regularly amongst Canada’s most successful doctors, lawyers and leaders. Young black students can finally be confident that they will reach their full potential no matter how many nay-sayers try to tell them otherwise. Black Canadians certainly left their mark in history and helped shape the country we are so proud to call home.



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