

A man of many firsts: Stanley Grizzle

Park renamed after civil rights activist raised in the Annex

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It wasn't fate that propelled Stanley Grizzle to the forefront of the civil rights movement, it was the bandaged face of his taxi-cab driver father, escorted home by police after being attacked when he fell asleep, waiting for a fare in front of Union station.

"How could I forget that?" said Grizzle. "I was 10 years old."

Grizzle was honoured this week by Toronto East-York Community council, as councillors approved a park to be named after the man who became the first black Canadian Citizenship judge. The park is located at 21 Chisolm Ave., in East York where Grizzle spent a good portion of his adult life. The former Main Street Parkette will now be known as Stanley G. Grizzle Park. These days, Grizzle has returned to the Annex, where he and his six siblings were raised.

He first got the call when he was visiting Jamaica earlier this year, that the motion to rename the park was being put forward.

"How did I react?" he said. "I cried. But I'm a silly old man." At 89 years old, Grizzle has seen a Toronto that would cause many to hang their heads in shame. It was a city where the black community couldn't even find housing, and where the railways were the only place a black man could find employment. A place where his father, a former railway worker who saved up his money to buy a car to run his taxi business, was met with racial slurs by his white peers. A place where a young man attending school would come home so frequently to tell his father he had been called "a nigger" that his father grew weary of his laments.

Jewish landowners were the only ones who would rent to black families, said Grizzle. The family's first home was above the very first Sam the Record Man store, run by Sam Sniderman's grandfather at 714 College St.

After his father fell behind in rent, Grizzle dropped out of Harbord Collegiate, where he was in his third year of high school.

"I started looking for a job," he said. Everywhere he went he got the same response: 'Go down to the rail yards, they're hiring your people down there.' "You couldn't even get a job as a street cleaner, as a black man," he said, adding that all his Jamaican and West Indian brothers and sisters were mostly kept in service jobs.

"Domestics," said Grizzle. "The women would work in people's kitchens. The men were people's servants."

Grizzle worked on the passenger trains as a car porter, tidying up sleep cars and making beds. He's seen more of Canada than most Canadians.

"The scenery is absolutely unbelievable," he said. "I liked the job." He enjoyed his work, despite being only permitted three hours of sleep a night and being expected to eat the leftover food from train passengers.

It wasn't too long until Grizzle received an "invitation" to join the Royal Armed Forces.

"I didn't want to go," he said, adding that he was providing financial support to his family as the eldest of seven children. But he realized he didn't have a choice.

"I found out if I didn't answer the call, they would arrest me," said Grizzle. "I knew what the penalty would be."

But it didn't matter where he went; he was treated the same way. Even after enlisting to fight for the civil rights of the people in Germany, Grizzle was assigned "batman" duties, which involved shining shoes and polishing brass buttons.

"There was three of us black boys, one from Barbados, one from St. Kitt's, and me," he said, explaining that he and his fellow black men were relegated to "servant-type" duties. "I went on strike."

He told his commanding officer he wanted to be dismissed from the army on the grounds of racism.

"I said 'Sir, I realize that the only time you have seen a black man has been as a servant, but I don't think it's very democratic.'" He argued with his superior that the values they were fighting for were not being honoured in their camp.

After pondering his words for a couple of days, Grizzle was reassigned. Now he was responsible for delivering supplies and receiving and sorting mail. It was a step up.

When he returned from the war three years later he was a little shaken but none the worse for wear. He went back to working in the porter cars and quickly became a union head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first black union in Canada. He started to live and breathe the civil rights movement. He attended a union conference in New York and was captured by an impassioned speech given by trade union leader, and friend of Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph.

"I came back and was thinking like (Randolph)," Grizzle said. "That is how I got noticed."

At that time, Grizzle was living in East York and befriended the first mayor of the borough, True Davidson.

It was Davidson's influence that convinced Grizzle to run for provincial government.

The first black man to brave the electorate in 1959, Grizzle ran under the CFC banner (today's NDP).

"We got 9,500 votes," he said proudly. "And we didn't even have 200 black people in the riding."

Change was under way.

After the election Grizzle received a call from the Ministry of Labour looking to add a visible minority citizen to their staff.

"Every morning I would go to work and walk by this guy's desk and he would say 'good morning you black bastard,'" said Grizzle. But he was undeterred. He stayed with the ministry for 17 years.

"I don't get mad," he said. "Non-violence, good will and direct action, those are my principles."

He believed people could change and saw it every day. "Someone can be a racist one day and democratic the next," he said.

His patience and perseverance paid off when he got the call to sit as a citizenship court judge.

"I've been through the system," said Grizzle. "I think we should treat our immigrants well."

During his time on the seat as a judge, he made a point of welcoming newcomers the best way he knew possible.

"I would always learn to say a couple of words in their language," said Grizzle. "When I retired I could greet people in 33 different languages."

Even though his experiences taught him many things, the most important lesson he learned at home.

"I never heard my parents speak negatively about anyone," said Grizzle. "Loving people is my greatest accomplishment."