

FINAL Video_David Woods

[00:00:00] At the time, this was early nine, 1990s, you know, we had been, always been sort of tagging along whenever white, white, uh, run organizations decided to do a Black event. And, and that seemed to be the status quo in Nova Scotia, um, and to feel, supposedly feel very happy when we were blessed with that, um, which usually meant we only, we only got to do things in February. Um, but as mature individuals, you figured that that can't be a way forward. So. So, yeah, so we had some discussions among some writers and artists and, and decided to form an organization. I guess, um, I'm differentiated from a lot of [00:01:00] artists, because most of the things I do, I'm self-taught. I, um, in my own life, I was, I was in university headed towards law. Because all immigrant parents want you to be a lawyer or doctor or something like that. But, um, in my first... second year of university, I, I was, I was hired to do a research project, um, which took me to every single Black community in the province at that time, about 20 to 30. Some of them were not fully communities in the sense, you know, they had been communities but were down to like, you know, maybe 20 people on a back road, you know, and stuff like that. But once... The experience of spending the entire summer, talking to [00:02:00] people, um, you know, a hundred to 200 year old communities, actually, um, you know, getting into the real sense of the history and culture of Black Nova Scotians, um, dialoguing with, um, elders and discovering their art and listening to their folk songs. And so once I came back home, I was, I was, I was done, you know, my mind had been sort of filled up with so many new things and, um, I found it very difficult to, um, to pursue a sort of a conventional path that was just about my own, supposedly, profession to make others happy. Or, well, you know, well, you know, by my second year of college, I, I mean, you're still kind of finding yourself, but [00:03:00] this seemed to be a very real thing for me uh, unlike, unlike my other experiences, even school, um, and my brain sort of made a tremendous leap and then I couldn't get it out of my brain. So, you know, all my, um, all my, um, all my ambitions—I had always been writing and painting—suddenly had a purpose. And so that's um, so from that point onwards, you know, it was the war between whether I do a conventional thing, or whether I respond to this new impetus to, to be a kind of a cultural person, and cultural person won.

You have to understand, unlike places like Montreal or Toronto, the urban [00:04:00] centres, Blacks didn't have a whole lot and were not considered, you know, we did not, you know, you couldn't really apply for grants to get things unless you were stereotypically looking for things to help people get jobs or anti-poverty or things like that, that were officially recognized as Black things. So it was never a situation where we could enjoy the benefits of, um, a lot of what I began to realize that people in Toronto and Montreal and different arts groups, easily access. Nobody in our community had gotten Canada council grants. Nobody was getting any [00:05:00] organizational arts funding or anything like that. Um, as the leader of BANNNS, um, it became very important to me that, very much like my journey throughout all the Black communities and being inspired by that experience, to kind of lead people into being true to their own experience as a way through. My own example is by bringing forward things that have not been brought forward, and being true to that experience had led me to my own success, both as a writer, as an artist, et cetera. And so I think the, the greatest impact that the organization had is that in the midst of all the, the lack

of resources and lack of support [00:06:00] for the idea of Black art, um, the artists began to also look towards their own communities as a source of strength and also their own vision. So I think what BANNs has done is that it transformed a lot of... because we've started bringing forward a lot of things from the community that nobody ever knew existed. The artists themselves began to be inspired by that and then started, their work started reflecting that. So I think that has been our, our greatest achievement, is that we, we, we created, uh, a sort of indigenous vision of our own culture that previously had not been there before.

The most dramatic thing we did was in [00:07:00] 1998 we had the first ever exhibition of Black art in Nova Scotia. This came on an invitation by the Nova Scotia college of art and design to do a Black history month exhibition, um, that they asked me to do where there was an expectation that they would have three or four, um, NASCAD graduates be the artists, um, in the two months prior to putting together the exhibition. I suddenly had a notion because it was getting close to the millennial, end of the millennium, and everybody, wherever I went in, in different galleries, everybody was doing major projects, celebrating the, the new millennium or the end of the millennium or the new millennium, except in the Black community. There was no, [00:08:00] no major artistic projects. Um, so I got a little pissed off to tell you the truth. And then I said, all right, um, you know, oh here it is in the year 1998, a whole millenium's done, we've never had a Black art show in our province. We've never, you know, never. And I said, well, maybe I should use the opportunity to, um, put up this gallery to see if there is Black art out there, because it has never been recorded or, you know, I said people didn't collect Black art. They didn't look for Black art. And so I basically got in a car and drove around the province for a month back to some of those old places that I had researched before, under different circumstances. And this time I was asking people if they knew [00:09:00] any artists or, you know, people that created anything, you know, whether it was woodcarvings quilts, whatever. Um, a month later I returned to Halifax with about 500 pieces of work and, um, kind of blew away the NASCAD folk. And we, we chose about a hundred pieces from that. And, um, we had an exhibition that opened in February of 1998 and it broke the record for attendance at that gallery in its history. And I think that was probably the most dramatic thing we did because prior to that, there had been no African Nova Scotian art history. Um, whether the art existed or not, nobody knew about it. It had never been shared. It hadn't even [00:10:00] been shared among artists. And so for the first time—and, and, you know, we could actually point to, this is Black Nova Scotia's art. Um, it came from a completely different route, you know, um, the vast majority of the artists were, um, untrained, self taught, you know, folk artists. Um, but that was probably the most glorious moment because, you know, I, I think, you know, even the opening, we, you know, I think about 500 people showed up and half the people were crying because their parents work had been recognized at last or, you know, and we've found art from the late 19th century, late, earliest piece about 1880, all the way to the present. So this was not just one [00:11:00] thing. It was actually a reclamation of history where they had never been an expectation that we had artists actually active back in the 19th century. We actually... Because nobody had bothered to ask, or look or do anything else. And it really unleashed the imaginations of, of the Black arts community. And you could almost trace the development of a lot of our artists from that exhibition, because I think a lot of artists, even when they had ambitions, they weren't, they didn't feel connected to anything except the white ins...

whatever the white institutions promoted, yes. But they didn't feel in their own, in their own spaces and their own cultural heritage, um, that kind of connection. Um, and this was, this was real. So, so that was very significant. 2001, we started the first festival that focused on a Black [00:12:00] community in Nova Scotia. We did four additions of that. That was, that was very significant because we, um, again, you have to remember most of the Black communities in our province are 200 years old, um, existed prior to Canada, um, and had been growing up sort of, um, alienated from their own history. They were mostly living in isolated areas. They were not taught their own history. Most of them had segregated schools where, you know, up until the seventies, most people did not stay in school. So people practiced their traditions without knowing how, where these traditions originated or, or without even understanding their significance. [00:13:00] So one of the things the Preston Festival did is it reconnected people to their origins. In the first festival, for example, we brought, um, a group from the United States called the Georgia Sea Island singers from the Gullah, Gullah islands off of Carolina and Georgia. Now these are a group of islands, they call them the Sea Islands. Most of the Blacks in those islands, um, because of their isolation, did not experience enslavement the way other Blacks did. The owners of those places allowed the Blacks to basically live on their own as long as they did their work, um, which was mostly growing rice. And the other thing is a lot of the runaway Blacks, a lot of Blacks who ran away went, we used to go to the islands, the Georgia Sea Islands 'cause they were very [00:14:00] isolated and whites, it wasn't any, there wasn't that many whites. So they maintained their own hybrid culture and, you know, they had their own dialect. A lot of the practices of North American Blacks, and certainly from the United States, originated there. Um, religious dance called the Ring Shout, a lot of our sayings. Um, A lot of our storytelling, a lot of our folk characters originated there because Blacks there were not circumscribed in the same way as in other places. They, they practiced their religion, they practiced nicknaming. Um, one of the funny things is that, um, one of the reasons we brought them is 'cause, in reading the history, some of the people in Preston, which is the largest Black community in Nova Scotia, came from the [00:15:00] Georgia Sea Islands, but their had never been any connection between the two nor even an awareness of what that meant. I found out about this because there was a movie called, um, daughters of the dusk by a filmmaker named Julie dash. And, um, while looking at that movie, I, I saw the similarities between one community, North Preston, and what it was I saw in the movie. And in the movie, everybody had a nickname, so there was, you know, Sugar Girl and Gingerbread and Flying Wheel. And the language style, you know, where like a grasshopper would be called a hopper grass. They'd switch the names. Um, so I, I immediately recognized that these were a lot of the practices that were going on in North Preston and, um, and, and was kind of [00:16:00] really intrigued that this... All of the stuff that people did, well, people always claimed they were so different up there, but nobody knew why. And here, here it was, you know, in a whole other part of the world, the origins of that. So, yeah. So why, you know, that was one of our great achievements is that we began to connect peoples to themselves again by examining their histories and showing that a lot of the things that they do that were being sometimes, they were trivialized and sometimes they were even looked down upon, were actually part of a larger tradition.

You know, people, as I said, continued traditions, but did not necessarily know about those traditions because our school system never taught about Black history. And there was not that many people who were familiar enough to see these [00:17:00] things. The last thing I would probably mention is in 2012, our quiltmakers created an exhibition called The Secret Codes.

And that is a exhibition of African Nova Scotian quilts inspired by the Underground Railroad. Um, again, using the sort of, uh, BANNS, um, sort of mandate that we tell everybody to look within your own selves. We looked at our own histories, um, enslavement, um, the resettlements of our communities, and we created stories around these that, um, I interpreted as designs and then they made these quilts, um, these quilts, again, trying to reflect their own culture.

And the exhibition opened in 2012 and it became a hit locally and, um, has remained very popular. [00:18:00] In fact, um, beginning in January 2022, we'll be going on national tour. So, so again, um, yeah, so these are probably three things that BANNS did that, that I think really resonated because they, they really deeply affected the consciousness of the local people and, and created some transformations. And the artists were now creating, um, exhibitions and, um, performances, et cetera, that were being recognized, not only locally, but nationally.

This is not a province where qualified people stay in the arts, or there's very little support. There's very little support for them in terms of being able to get jobs or, or the institutions have not have [00:19:00] not really shifted in any real way towards being very inclusive of Black culture. So we tend to lose all our expertise very quickly. You know, they move to Montreal or Toronto, out West. But we, you know, I said after 20, you know, almost 20, 30 years of existence, we really have totowards being much more professional in the sense of having full-time employees. I basically have been a volunteer for 30 years. Um, and for all its merits, and, you know, the fact is now that we can take advantage of more things, if we had more expertise available to us. Um, and so we have to figure out, you know... I did spend about five years back in the [00:20:00] early two thousands, we started an art gallery and a centre, but I spent all my time writing grant proposals and running out of money and it, it, it, it, it killed my art. So I said, I'd never do that to myself again because, you know, that was something... That's, that was a labor of love, but it was kill, it was killing me because it, I, I was sort of left holding the bag. And I said, you know, right now, I said, I don't mind doing stuff, but, you know. So we need people who will see themselves in that way as, as organization builders, because essentially I'm a creative artist more than I am an organization... I mean, I can build organizations, but I don't want to manage them on a day-to-day basis. So I think that's what we need now because at least now we have the, um, [00:21:00] the track record and the vision and the possibilities of doing major things. Um, and if we had three or four people at our disposal.

The, um, the government sponsored a couple of things that we thought we would, um, we would access during the pandemic. You must have heard about the one where they wrote everybody and told them they weren't Black, even though they were Black. Well, we were one of them. Yeah. Well, I know they didn't read the proposal. See, that's the, that's the

whole myth. That, that thing that went out in the middle of the pandemic make—giving people, making people think that they would get something. And you can imagine us on the periphery here on the East Coast, who never gets anything. So we spent about a month preparing that proposal. Um, and we really thought this would be the [00:22:00] time that we would grow as an organization. And then we got the letter saying that 'you did not demonstrate that you were Black'. This is a group with all Black people. But that was very devastating to us because it was framed in language that kind of gave us a belief that this would be accessible. And, and, um, and then we were sorta devastated by the response. So that was, I only bring it up because it was one of those things that, had we gotten it, we would have been moving to that step that we need to take, the professionalization. We would have been able to put in an infrastructure that would have, you know, made it you know. Not we do, we, we do fairly well with the Canada Council, but we don't have any permanent staff. So that would have given us that other thing that we don't have. [00:23:00] So that's what we need right now, um, is to have three or four people with expertise who want to run an organization. We've just opened up, um, I wouldn't say a branch, but a, a new for the first time, a Black cultural group in new Brunswick. And there's also a new cultural group in PEI. So we began discussions about doing maritime consultations on a, on a whole bunch of things. So the trick is—and I don't think it will be me cause I'm getting old and I got to, I got to create my work more than I have to run organizations—you know, if we have that in place now, we are able to do a lot of strategically really great things. So that, that, that is the thing I'm hoping for, um, in the next little while as the next step. Maybe some of those young'ns [00:24:00] will show up and, you know, yeah.

So we spent a lot of time doing research, actually. You know, we have like two or three exhibitions that we want to do. You know, we're doing one on Edward Mitchell Bannister. He was the first. Black artist in North America to win a major art prize in 1860... 18... When was the Centennial? 1876? Sort of a New Brunswick-born Black artist that nobody in Canada knows about. Um, so I went off to New Brunswick and researched his, uh, hometown. Um, he was very well known in the United States but completely unknown in Canada. So we've been researching that in, in getting ready for a major exit, the first Canadian exhibition by a Canadian artist that's famous in the United [00:25:00] States. Um, that will happen in 2024. So I was able to just focus on the research of that. I've been researching, uh, um, another artist from Africville who was very active in the late eighteen-hundreds. So we've kind of been, yeah, spending more time researching and getting ready and also just understanding the whole, um, online thing, lining up resource people that can help us make that transition.