Oakwood's Afro-Canadian Club celebrates 25 years

OAKWOOD COLLEGIATE INSTITUTE Afro-Canadian Club past and present... Current president Peter Bailey and the first president Dr. Kamari Maxine Clarke. Photo by Ron Fanfair

By RON FANFAIR

Dr. Kamari Maxine Clarke relished the opportunity to renew acquaintances with school mates at the 15th anniversary celebration of the Oakwood Collegiate Institute Afro-Canadian Club held last weekend.

This was a unique reunion for past members to reminisce with "old pals" and interact with the current membership.

It however soon became apparent to Dr. Clarke that times have changed since a group of about 30 Grade 12 and 13 students decided that they wanted a place to congregate informally.

"During my era at school, reggae music was en vogue," remembers Dr. Clarke who will teach anthropology at the esteemed Yale University this semester. "At the reunion party on Friday the music being played was predominantly hip-hop."

Past alumni and current club members mingled freely during the festivities and discussed ways in which they can work together to sustain the club through the next millennium.

As a result, the Afro-Canadian Club Alumni was formed and they have committed to assist the current club's executive to create a vision that will lead the progressive youth organization into the next century.

What began as an informal gathering of young Black and Caribbean high school students in 1983 has grown into an organization that has encouraged hun-

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HAROLD WRIGHT

Club honours supportive teacher

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dreds of students to build leadership skills, community awareness, personal vision and cultural pride.

The club has been instrumental in bringing the recognition of African-Canadian issues, experiences and contributions to the educational platform. Both in-school and community wide events have allowed diverse groups of students and educators to attend workshops and a winter retreat, and connect to an invaluable network of associates and alumni.

"It's been a stimulating and fulfilling experience for me," declared psychotherapist Sheryl Clarke, who is a founding member of the club and its first treasurer. "There were many people who were in trouble with the educational system who went on to hold key executive positions in the club and eventually became positive role models in society.

"The club shaped many lives and it's refreshing to meet so many of your friends who are now doing extremely well for themselves."

Harold Wright, who has taught at the school for the past 18 years and was instrumental in the formation of the club, concurred.

"When you look around this room, there are lawyers, doctors, engineers and other professionals who have graduated from this program and have gone on to excel in their respective fields," said Wright, the head of Oakwood Collegiate Institute's Biology and Chemistry department. He has supported the program from its inception.

"This is a great celebration of people who have achieved. It means a lot to me to see that so many graduates are doing so well."

Wright, who was the staff advisor at the school when the club was formed, was honoured for his contributions during last weekend's celebrations.

"Had it not been for him, there might not have been a club," suggested Clarke. "A club cannot exist in a high school without the support of a staff representative. Mr. Wright readily agreed to sponsor us when Milt Thompson approached him with our idea."

Clarke added that Wright's lasting legacy to the organization is that he has always allowed the club to shape its destiny.

"He never dictated what we should do," agreed Michelle Francis, a past club president who is completing her undergraduate studies in Sociology and Caribbean History at the University of Toronto.

"He was just there to support us, even in times of conflict."