

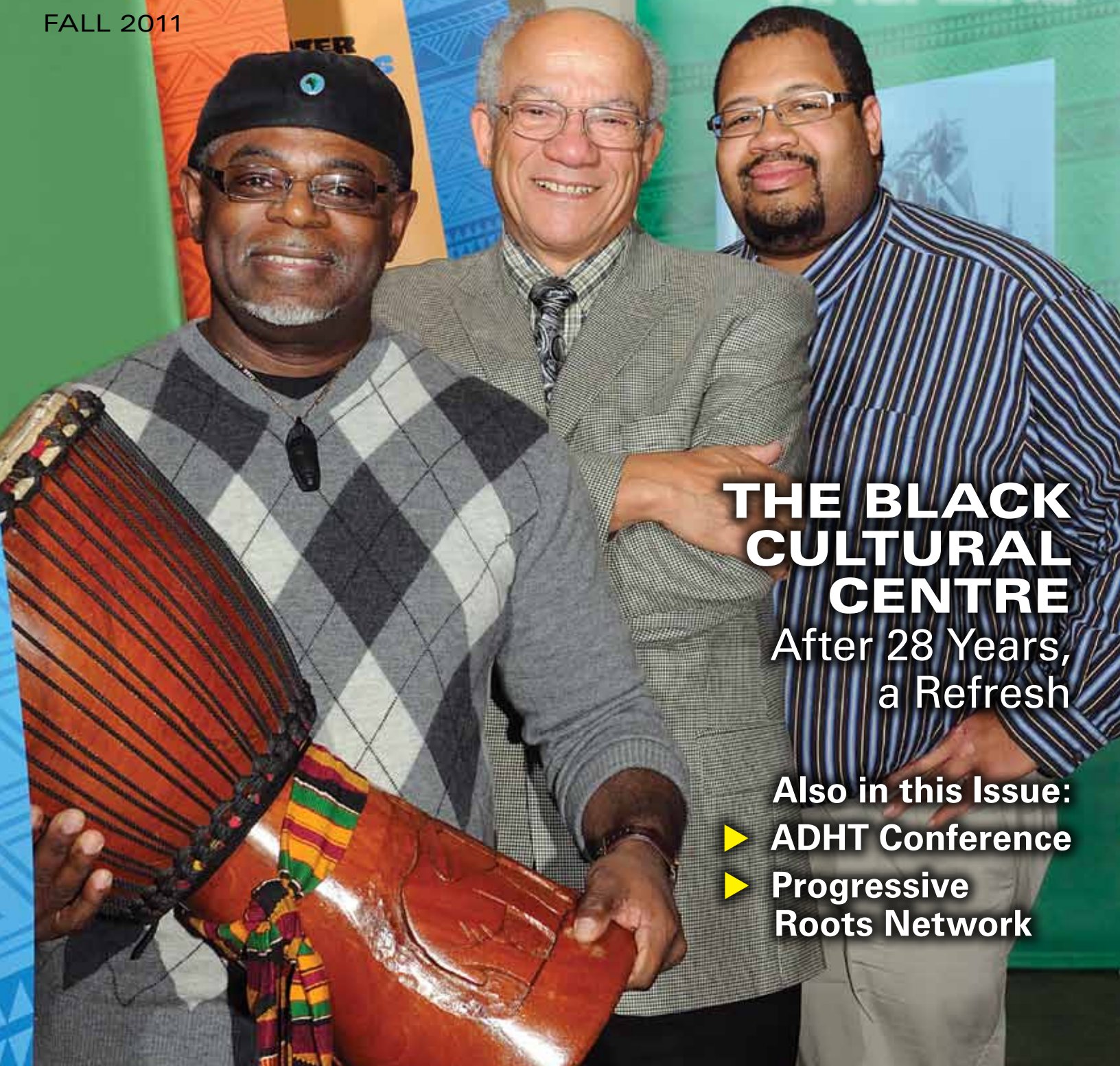


BLACK BUSINESS

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THE BLACK CULTURAL CENTRE

After 28 Years,
a Refresh

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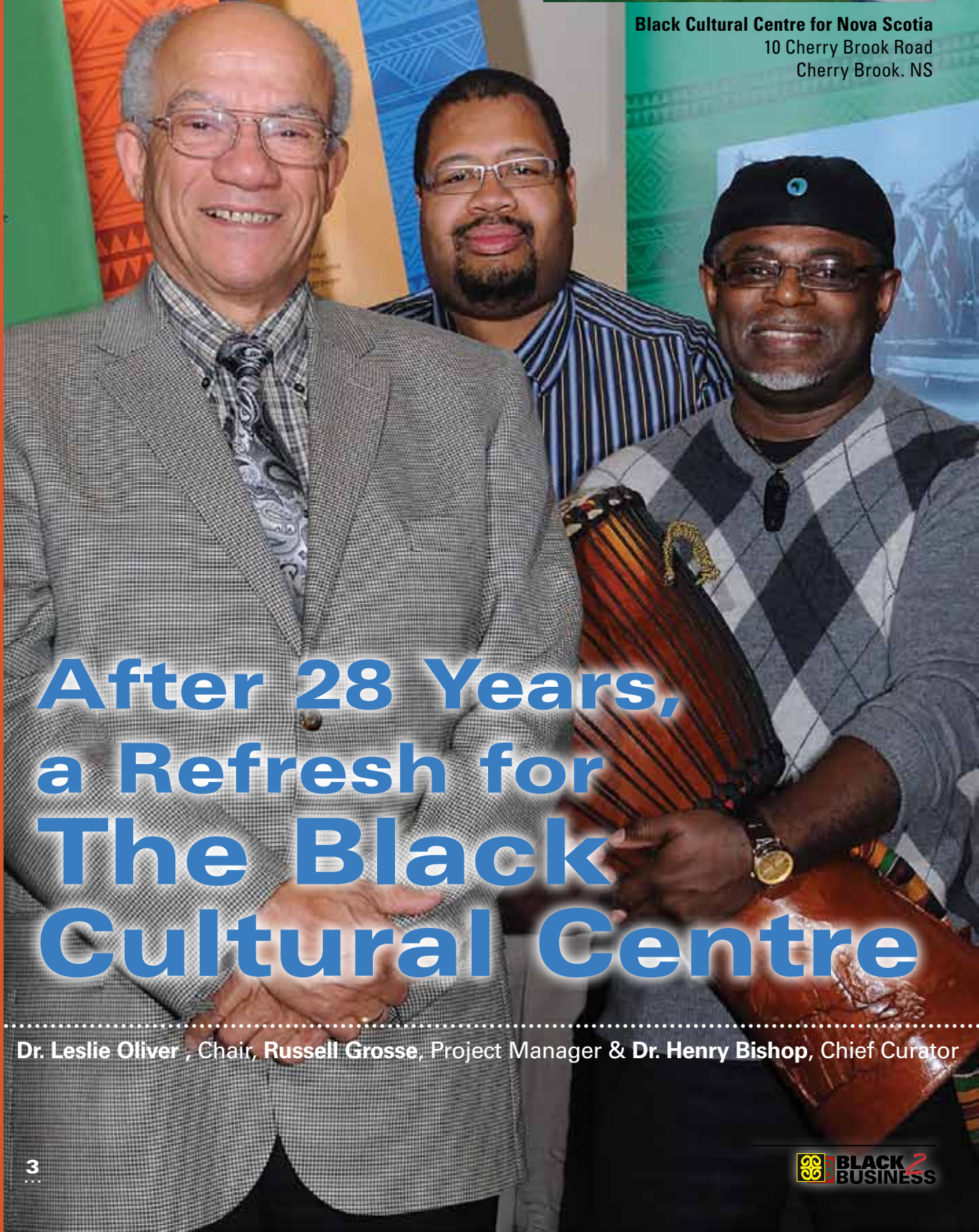
- ▶ ADHT Conference
- ▶ Progressive Roots Network

"A dynamic and vibrant Black presence within the Nova Scotia Business Community."

Cover Story



Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia
10 Cherry Brook Road
Cherry Brook, NS



After 28 Years, a Refresh for The Black Cultural Centre

Dr. Leslie Oliver, Chair, Russell Grosse, Project Manager & Dr. Henry Bishop, Chief Curator

Here, in the centre of the main auditorium 16 majestic banners extend from ceiling to floor, forming a circle. On each banner is a larger-than-life image of men or women who played a vital role in advancing the black community. They are considered heroes. Above their heads hangs a satellite image of the continent of Africa. "The psychological aspect is to raise your head up," explains a proud Dr. Henry Bishop, the Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia's (BCCNS) Chief Curator. "Whether you're of African descent or not, you have to look up." On the floor is the province of Nova Scotia and the symbolism speaks loudly: The continent represents a distant homeland, heritage, and relatives. The province represents the present ground. Those honoured in between are links to both realities and represent struggle and achievement.

For 28 years the BCCNS has been a source of knowledge and inspiration for the black community. It was the vision of Wolfville's Rev. Dr. William Pearly Oliver, who had sought to establish a centre that would preserve black culture in Nova Scotia and educate the youth. The museum and library complex opened officially on September 17, 1983, on Cherry Brook Road and since then has hosted concerts, lectures, plays, and guided tours. Today, Dr. Leslie Oliver, son of the late Rev. Dr. William P. Oliver, is chair of the Black Cultural Society of Nova Scotia's (BCCNS) board of directors. "Before the Centre opened, there was no place to share those experiences," he says of the Centre's significance and legacy.

The inspiration for the Centre's refresh came with the province's decision to host the African Diaspora Heritage Trail (ADHT) Conference. "The province recognized the need to refresh the 28-year-old exhibits so that the Centre could communicate our cultural stories to international visitors," explains Dr. Oliver.



Peter Marsman

One of the new exhibits

A typical 18- to 24-month project took only six months, according to senior designer and museographer Jean Pierre Camus of Camus Productions Ltd. "The institution had a big challenge on its hands," he says with a chuckle. Dr. Oliver, Dr. Bishop, Pastor Brian Johnson, and Russell Grosse formed a project committee that guided the decision-making process of the renovation.

As project manager, Grosse's role was multi-faceted. "I was taking the comments and concerns from the committee back to the consultants, so I basically had to mediate and say, okay what we can do that makes both sides happy?" With the refresh occurring during peak tourism season, he and Dr. Bishop improvised to maintain a quality visitor experience in the midst of renovations. Dr. Bishop

by: **Abena Amoako-Green**

comments, "If it wasn't for [Russell] the place would be in chaos."

Planning had been vital. "There was a vision we had in place for at least 10 years," says Grosse. Lack of funding had always been an issue. But it came and they were ready. "We're really grateful for the fact that Black Business Initiative was a strong part of helping facilitate that," says Grosse.

Despite a risky timeline, Camus Productions was supportive. "We prefer not to push the envelope as much as was done with the BCC, but sometimes there's no choice." Camus attributes the project's success to the centre's readiness with content. "By the time we arrived on the scene we had good strong background information to rely on."

Grosse adds, "The fact that we had a plan gave us the ability to do far greater than we had ever imagined."

This time around, the BCCNS gracefully demonstrates that less is more. "We didn't want to flood the place like we did before" states Dr. Bishop. "It became chaotic." All the artifacts have been kept for future use. "The old exhibits were the creation of many devoted people over the past 35 years," says Dr. Oliver. "It was sad to remove things that our predecessors, including my own parents, had lovingly installed." But he adds that a new strength is that the exhibits are self-guided. Similarly, Camus comments, "The exhibits don't force visitors to move in a particular direction." Scrapbooks allow for photos to be added to a continually evolving story. "We wanted to keep the ability to show that Black Heritage is dynamic," says Dr. Oliver. "It is not a frozen point in time."

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When Lenworth Rose speaks, you can hear the cadence of the Caribbean in his words. Even after many years in Cape Breton, you can still hear the sounds of Jamaica in his voice.

He was born on that beautiful Caribbean island and came north to another beautiful island to be with family and set down roots. Now his own kids are grown up and he speaks proudly of his son, also named Lenworth, who's doing well as a software developer with Research in Motion in Fredericton.

When he first opened L&L Electrical Repairs and Service, he had a partner but bought him out and is now the sole proprietor, although he has kept the company's original name.

"Anything that's electrical, we do it," he says. The list includes power tools, air exchangers, vacuums, and home appliances."

One thing he has noticed is that most home electronics today are not built to last, like they once were. With this disposable society, it's reached a point where "it's much easier to say junk it and buy a new one," he admits. "It's often cheaper to replace something than have it fixed."

Having said that, he does a good business in warranty work. That's a great convenience for his customers who prefer to deal with someone local rather than ship their electronics off to Ontario and beyond for service, whether it's covered by a warranty or is past the warranty's expiry date but still can be fixed. Plus, with the cost of postage these days, it is much easier on the pocketbook when there is a local company where electrical products, like toasters and vacuum cleaners can be taken.

by: *Carol Dobson*

Business is steady and when Black to Business called to speak to him, he was busy with a project so had to set up a later time to speak. But he does enjoy the opportunities he has to speak to people from the Black Business Initiative. "Mr. Rustum used to drop in to say hello when he was in Sydney," he says.

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In some ways, people who can take a broken down piece of electronics and nurse it back to health are becoming a dying breed. His skills harken back to days when you didn't pitch something out when a circuit blew or a switch broke. Fortunately, for the people of Sydney, he is at their service. ☸

L & L Electrical Repairs/Services
Lenworth Rose
Sydney
902 564 0125

The BCCNS
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Dr. Bishop shares how the Many Rivers to Cross gallery speaks to the importance of community and knowing ones roots, "Really we're country folk ...so we had to give credence to our outside communities and not look at ourselves as being marginalized." The Lift Every Voice gallery pays homage to the black church. Both galleries showcase archived static and slideshow images of community life. "We were excited to have a chance to incorporate some modern technology into the production and presentation of our exhibits," says Dr. Oliver.

For Grosse, doing the job well meant bringing forth the organization's values: quality, professionalism, community, and inspiration. It was important that the information be accurate, that the centre remain a gathering place and instill pride among the people. "I'm proud that our story is told in a different way." For him, he says, the completion of the refresh is a testament of faith. He credits Camus Productions and their special team for their work. "They really put in more than they had to. They were as convicted as we were to see the vision come to light."

Dr. Bishop expresses a sense of honour. "We had dreams about this stuff. We had nightmares about this stuff but now it's a reality. That's powerful."

As for next 25 years Dr. Oliver hopes the BCCNS will see increased use as an educational and inspirational centre for young people deciding how to live productive lives in Nova Scotia. "As an increasing number of youth are born with multiple heritages, we expect the BCC to be a beacon, reminding them that their African heritage is an important personal asset." ☸