

Michael P. Farkas

My name is Michael Pierre Farkas. I was born in Montreal and my ancestors came from New Brunswick.

Being different

My parents are European, my adoptive parents. They adopted eight children. Today, five of them are still with us.

We came from all different nationalities. I came from New Brunswick. Among the others, there is a Greek, a Micmac, etc. They are children of the world. Let's just say that in the 60s, in Quebec, a family like that was pretty unique. I lived in a very nice village, Mont-Saint-Hilaire. We were surrounded by apples. And there were no black people, or very few anyway. There was one other family but they moved to Toronto. Sometimes, when there are just one or two of you, you are like the exception to the rule. Up until high school, everything was fine. In high school, it became a bit more difficult to bear, a bit more apparent that I was different from others. Among other things, there was the issue of dating. Since there were not many young black girls, I would go out with young white girls. Their parents, even the more affluent, didn't ever allow me in their houses.

Finding one's place

My parents always made me see reason: "Just be yourself and everything will turn out fine." So I was given a good foundation. But when I went to the vocational college after high school with other people who were like me, I realized I was not really like them at all. I was not Haitian or I was not... I had grown up in Mont-Saint-Hilaire. I had my preferences, my own culture, all that. I made the friends I was meant to have. And I quickly realized that it was not an issue of colour, in the end. It was more a question of who I could really connect with, regardless of the person's colour and the preferences we shared. If the person was white, or any other colour, that's the way it was. I did not really look to hang out with black people because I felt I had to hang out with black people. At the same time, it was interesting to be in that context once I got to college. Because at all other times, in high school, I was the only black person. It was pretty unusual.

On identity

My notion of identity is mainly about feeling good in your own skin. And naturally, if you can identify with your parents, that's a very good thing. If you can identify with your brothers and sisters, it begins with that. But also, being able to identify with where you live, your environment. I have always felt the need to identify with my environment. I did some research on the Rastafarian movement, where I really became aware of the

person I wanted to be, who I was. And that is why I adopted a Rastafarian way of being several years ago. My hair, it's been like 30 years since I've cut it! But when I say that, it's not a question of the hair. I'll say it in English: it's not a function of the hair; it's a function of the heart. Identity is really in your heart, and being at peace with oneself. We talked a bit about music, and reggae music specifically. There were great ambassadors of this music who had extremely powerful messages, and who touched my heart and my soul. I think of Burning Spear, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh.

In the 80s, I really delved into their art, into their songs to develop myself, to give myself an identity in relation to Rastafarianism. And on top of that, there is the lifestyle. Wanting to not be a violent person, but a person looking for serenity, peace. I felt that there were elements in Rastafarianism that could bring me closer to that.

The importance of Black History Month

MICHAEL P. FARKAS HAS BEEN PRESIDENT OF THE ROUND TABLE ON BLACK HISTORY MONTH SINCE 2009

For me, it is very important to highlight the contributions of black people in the Americas, given that it has been poorly documented, often hidden. So for me it is very, very important to shine a light on that side of us. How we built this continent together with many other ethnic groups, many other people.

Michael P Farkas has been President of the Round Table on Black History Month since 2009 and has been Director of Youth in Motion since 2008. He lives in Montreal.