

Media gave racial slur too much prominence

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Sir: I teach at Montcalm Secondary School and a number of my students are residents of the now-infamous Cheyenne apartments. The outrage I felt upon reading Elijah Elieff's ugly racial slurs against "Asian immigrants" was in part for those students.

A number of our students who arrived from countries like Cambodia have suffered incredible hardships, including the loss of parents or other loved ones, at an age when our children are experiencing their first days of school. It is remarkable to me that they have survived at all, let alone begun a new life here in Canada.

I could cite many examples of "Asian" students at Beal (where most non-English speaking students attend) who have beaten the odds and graduated as top scholars. But the point of my letter is not to defend the honor of these new Canadians. We all know that the backbone of this country has been the hardship and toil of our own immigrant parents, grandparents and so on. It is ironic that Elieff is, in fact, an immigrant from Yugoslavia.

The real purpose of my letter was not simply to express moral outrage at Elieff's remarks. Racial bigotry and ignorance will probably always exist. I find myself more disappointed to live in a community that gives people like Elieff such widespread media attention. This month's London Magazine names Philippe Rushion as one of the "Top 50: The People Who Shape Our City. The changing face of influence in London." Are we such a "white establishment" town that we are oblivious to the devastating effects of racism within our community?

I am also ashamed to be part of an extremely affluent community that fails to provide adequate low-income rental housing to people who can't afford a condo near Richmond Row. I was first made aware of the appalling conditions of the Cheyenne apartments by Rev. Susan Eagle when she visited our school last year. She spoke of Elieff's failure to maintain the buildings despite pressure brought to bear upon him. Turnover of tenants is high, but for many tenants of low income there is little choice but to stay.

Surely a city contemplating a multi-million dollar performing arts centre can do better than to leave low-income tenants at the mercy of landlords like Elieff.

I would like to add that when I stand before my class, I represent the affluent white establishment in this city that I am not terribly proud to be a part of.

We can all be thankful to live in such a peaceful and freedom-loving country. Yet, what is the lesson to be learned by our students from events in our own backyard? Is it that hatred and injustice also live here, but simply take on a new face—the face of affluent white Londoners? I hope not.

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