

Standing shoulder to shoulder

A diverse group of leaders from different ethnic and cultural communities are working to break down barriers and solve problems through an international and united perspective

By **ANTONELLA ARTUSO**, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU CHIEF

When 15-year-old Jordan Manners was shot to death in his North York school, a determined group of Ontarians immediately set to work seeking solutions to the escalating youth crime that was devastating families and terrifying communities.

It was their declaration that they would hold public hearings following Manners' death in 2007 that spurred Premier Dalton McGuinty's government to commission the Roots of Youth Violence review by former Ontario chief justice Roy McMurtry and former Ontario Speaker Alvin Curling.

Each of the 29 members of the Special Advisory Council to the League for Human Rights of B'nai Brith are high-profile leaders in their own ethnic and cultural communities and together they form a unique multicultural think tank.

"Too often individual communities have had to address their own problems and unfortunately only see the problems from their own perspective," said Special Advisory Council Chair Dr. Aubrey Zidenberg, national vice president of B'nai Brith Canada. "We felt that bringing together a group like this and sharing our input could help us individually and collectively see and understand our problems from a more international perspective, come to better solutions to the problems and develop a more culturally-sensitive plan of how to resolve these problems.

"We could stand shoulder to shoulder, black and white, brown, red and yellow, Christian, Muslim and Jew and create an impenetrable wall of support for each other," he said.

At the invitation of Toronto Sun and 24 Hours Publisher and CEO Kin-Man Lee, the council met with senior Sun executives this past week at the newspaper's King Street East offices.

The members talked about their belief that the problems of one community are the responsibility of all.

Courtney Betty, a Jamaican Canadian human rights lawyer who represented the Manners' family and serves as a special advisory council member, said very few organizations were prepared to take up the challenges made obvious by the brazen murder of the teenager.

The council was able to prompt the provincial government into action in a way that a lone voice or a single community could not, he said.

"I believe that there are many lives that potentially have been spared because all of a sudden now governments recognize that... enough is enough and that it was no longer going to be an issue of dealing with the black community or saying this is a black problem," Betty said. "It now became a societal problem and for me that was really critical in being able to make the kind of progress we did."

Council members bring business, media, political, technological and legal expertise to the table, as well as perspective from their own ethnic, faith or cultural communities.

In its relatively brief history, the council has met with religious and political leaders, advised police, pursued school reforms and tackled the problems of individual situations with their collective common sense.

Dhaman Kissoon, a lawyer from the Indo-Caribbean community, said the size and reputation of the group has allowed it to attract the attention of powers-that-be.

"We cannot be ignored any more," Kissoon said. "And as a result, when we speak