



**BLACK  
HISTORY  
MONTH**  
FEBRUARY 2021



## RACE AND IDENTITY

### HELEN TESHOME BELHU (Operator)

Growing up in the GTA, as a Canadian child of Ethiopian background, I came to understand, in simple terms, that complex and contradictory social truths coexist - and how some things are just not right.

I have watched the TTC as a workplace since I was a preschooler. At first, through my father's eyes. As a kindergartener, I loved watching my father drive his bus route, through the city, interacting with commuters and colleagues. I remember my excitement as I showed my senior kindergarten class my father's uniform hat and told them how he helps people every day at his work – and that when I grow up, I want to be like him. I watched and learned from the work experiences he shared with us, and particularly, from his silence and quieter conversations with other supportive adults on those more difficult work days.

Over the past four years, I have lived my own experience as a transit operator and a woman of colour. My personal experiences of school and high school in Mississauga, Ontario, and as a swimming instructor and lifeguard at the YMCA, prepared me to be fit and, most critically, to be able to connect with people of different types. People with different biases and issues. People battling addiction, health issues, needing care, or dealing with cognitive and physical challenges. People going to their first job or spending their birthdays alone. While there are many positive interactions, the verbal abuse from commuters remains a real thing.

Since my father started his career at the TTC, in March 1994, he has proven himself as a reliable and safe operator. Many will attest to the high regard they have for him, his exceptionally positive attitude to life and that he is an amazing human overall. Sadly, in his early days at the TTC, my father was targeted not just for his skin tone but also as English was his second language. He

endured through many incidents of verbal abuse, even physical abuse - within the workplace and outside it. When my father completed his Day 25 as a transit operator, the manager, at the time, didn't feel the need to grasp my father's unfamiliar given name, and so to make it easier for himself, he gave him one to go by. He decided my father should be called 'Tommy'. My father's name is Teshome (pronounced Te'shom). I believe he is very worthy of being addressed by his given name.

Discrimination against non-white names is a form of systemic racism. Inclusivity is accepting people as they are, starting with something as simple as acknowledging the person's given name.

Things have been changing over the years. Today, I see many Ethiopians and colleagues from different corners of the world at the TTC using the names they were born with. It makes me so proud to see this shift. The TTC has made many efforts to become a diverse and inclusive workplace. TTC's no-tolerance policy for acts of racial discrimination in the workplace has helped to make it a healthier environment. While we are headed in the right direction, there is still much work to be done. I say with certainty, we still combat racism and ethnic discrimination today. We still need to find ways for everyone to have the right to be treated equally, without the need to prove we are equally human or equally capable of doing our jobs.

My father has shown great inner strength, despite the adversities he faced. He believes that the TTC is a better workplace to be a part of now – even for me, a woman of color. His resilience has inspired me to be here. I am proud of him and all my colleagues who pushed through many difficult times at the TTC. They have helped pave the way for me and many other employees of color to have this healthier work environment. They have done the hard work so we can inherit a better future.

