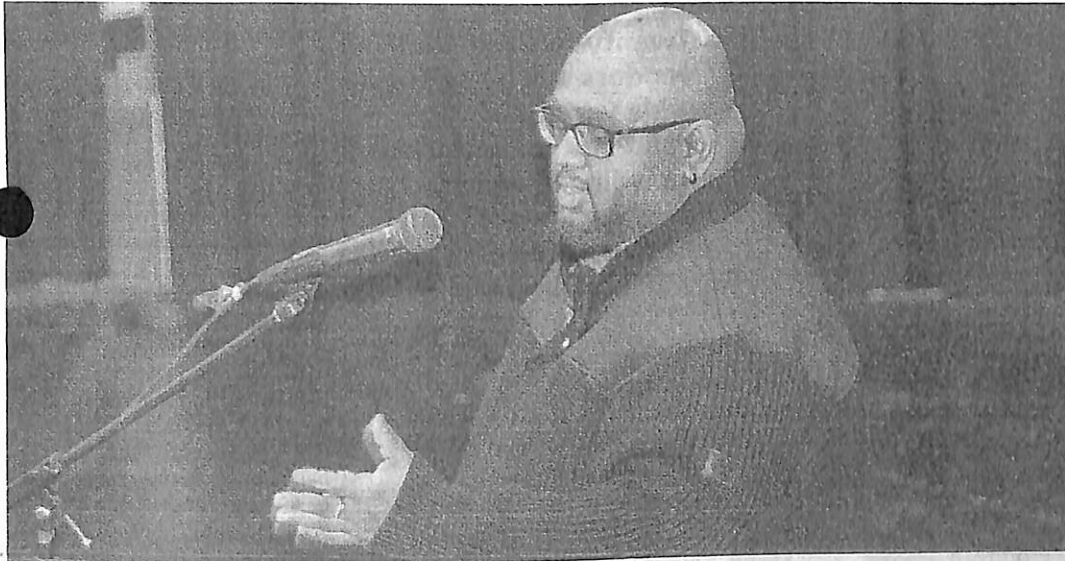




Jeff Perera, addressing a crowd at the A/V room of Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School on Oct. 11. Sam Macdonald

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Perera discusses the path to gender equality

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Jeff Perera introduced himself at a talk at Dr. John Hugh Gillis Regional High School in Antigonish as "an elephant hunter."

Not the big grey pachyderms, he clarified, but the elephants in the room that are the uncomfortable, but necessary conversations about gender that he wants to encourage.

Perera, quick with his wits and a virtuoso in the subtlety of metaphors and analogies to prove a point, was a speaker who has done two TED talks, and has curated the first four What Makes a Man conferences and worked with the White Ribbon campaign.

He spoke to a crowd that filled half the AV auditorium about the way society has to go, to reach gender equality.

Although the conversation Perera started was not an entirely comfortable one, he took to it with an air of optimism, indicating that the way forward was one where men and women collaborate. One where men unlearn unhealthy masculine roles and act with compassion and empathy in the pursuit of gender equality.

"In this day and age the conversations are about the divides, the seemingly larger and larger divides between us, amongst us, within our communities. The divides that are coming up in the headlines of our stories ... I say the divides amongst us reflect the divides within us," Perera said.

To bridge those divides, Perera said it's important to find the middle ground, and treat the conversation of gender equality like a potluck - a feast where everyone brings something to eat.

Perera compared the uncomfortable way people sit with problems that arise in gender roles to the way people try to ignore the blinking lights and beeping associated with car problems - implying it's a bad idea to just dismiss those problems.

"That moment of discomfort, when something comes up is a moment you have to lean into - especially young men and boys. It's good to feel uncomfortable, because it means you care," Perera said.

"The ultimate question you can ask yourself ... is 'Am I the kind of person that someone would want to be stuck in an elevator with?'" Perera said, using anecdotes from his life to illustrate his point.

Perera touched on a number of topics, many of them pertain-

ing to what men and boys can do to help achieve equality. These include listening to see "the things you can't see," considering issues through the perspectives of others, and finding the root, systemic causes of the inequalities in society, rather than just responding to the symptoms of those issues.

Perera spoke about how limiting and extremely damaging models of masculinity and femininity are, especially in relation to one another, noting that the message for girls and women in society is often, "know your role, shut your mouth and act like a lady."

Meanwhile, Perera noted men and boys are expected by society to derive a sense of identity through repressing their emotions, resorting to destructive, violent and dysfunctional models of masculinity that reduce women and girls to trophies and devalued props to the attainment of power.

"Masculinity is a ladder we're trying to climb to this impossible ideal of being a man. It's impossible, having all the answers,

never backing down, not showing emotion," Perera said. "Part of that is entitlement that to be a man is to have everything at your disposal. When we raise boys, we carve out access to emotions, and when we raise young girls we carve out things like assertiveness."

Perera insisted there needs to be a new role made for boys and men so that they have a model of masculinity that isn't a simple dichotomy of, "you're either a superhero or a zero, and there's no in-between."

Perera compared the collaborative approach to building healthy communities to building a proper garden, with the soil being the community; seeds as ideas and perspectives; with goals and

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dreams as flower and plants; weeds and pests as harmful toxic attitudes and behavior; with water as people supporting one another - and even manure as the "fertilizer," representing mistakes that people learn from in the pursuit of equality and better communities.