

Kiwi-Nigerian shares riveting testimony on racism in Aotearoa – Race Unity Speech Awards 2023 Media Release



“The way you fertilise a tree determines how it will grow - My tree has grown thinking: What if I was not black? What if the melanin flowing through my skin was actually a win? What if everyday I walked out of the house, my skin was placed on society's spectrum of beauty?”

Those were the powerful and challenging calls of the 2023 Race Unity Speech Awards National Champion Esther Sovincet.

The Year 13 student from Auckland’s Selwyn College was one of six finalists who poured their hearts out on the issue of racism and discrimination in Aotearoa.

Sovincet shared her lived-experience with racism in Aotearoa, growing up as a Nigerian-New Zealander.

“Although I am not shot to death with bullets, I am shot with words, encapsulated in jokes and actions,” shared Sovincet in her 8-minute-long speech to a room full of dignitaries, government policy-makers and whānau.

The national finals of the Race Unity Speech Awards was held today at Auckland’s Ngā Kete Wananga Marae at the Manukau Institute of Technology.

The Awards is New Zealand’s only and longest-serving platform dedicated to hearing young people’s ideas on race relations and solutions to racism in Aotearoa.

Chief judge NZ Police Deputy Commissioner Wally Haumaha says the calibre of speeches at this year’s Awards was extremely high.

“The depth of the thinking that came through from these young people was absolute gold... It tells us that the future of this country is in good hands,” says Deputy Commissioner Haumaha.

The Deputy Commissioner Haumaha has been involved with the Race Unity Speech Awards as its chief judge for 16 years.

“It has been a pleasure to listen to all of these young people offer their perspective on how our country should move forward.”

“This year’s speech topic, ‘Awhihia te rito – Nurture the young’ highlights the importance of fostering and nurturing the next generation. Race unity is our future not our goal,” says Deputy Commissioner Haumaha.

Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities Priyanca Radhakrishnan says all the speeches were incredible and impactful.

“Discrimination is an issue but there is the will from many to address it, and clearly from our rangatahi,” says Radhakrishnan.

“Diversity is our taonga. It absolutely is a strength of ours.”

The Race Unity Speech Awards are organised by the New Zealand Bahá’í Community and were established after the tragic death of race relations advocate and Bahá’í Faith member Hedi Moani.

Chief executive of the New Zealand Bahá’í Community Suzanne Mahon says the national champion and finalists this year were outstanding examples of rangatahi contributing valuable insights into an important discussion for Aotearoa’s collective well-being.

“In offering their thoughtful speeches, they are helping to spread an antidote to the hatred that is an all too common denominator to the onset and escalation of conflict,” says Mahon.

Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner Saunoamaali’i Dr Karanina Sumeo was on the judging panel this year and says Sovincet’s use of personal anecdotes in her speech was brave.

“I think a lot of us who are not tangata whenua can relate to her story... I’m very proud that she’s doing her bit to change this country that we all want to be in.”

Sovincet also received the Tohu Auahatanga – Speech NZ Award for Delivery, thanks to her creative and engaging use of spoken word poetry that captured the audience’s attention.

Former Trustee of Speech NZ Meredith Caisley says Sonvicet’s address was living and vibrant right through her whole speech.

“We promote the living speaker and we’re delighted to award Esther Sovincet with this award,” says Caisley.

The six finalists that were part of the Race Unity Speech Awards 2023 were: Esther Sovincet, Leo Mwape, Gargi Vaidya, Lena Ormsby, Jacqueline Te Kani-Nankivell, Ebony Kalin.

ENDS.

Photos attached: Credit - Race Unity Speech Awards: Ben Parkinson

1. Race Unity Speech Awards National Champion 2023 Esther Sovincet (centre-left) with speech awards judges Children's Commissioner Judge Francis Eivers (left), NZ Police Deputy Commissioner Wally Haumaha (centre-right) and Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner Saunoamaali'i Dr Karanina Sumeo (right).
2. (L-R) Children's Commissioner Judge Francis Eivers, finalists - Ebony Kalin, Gargi Vaidya, Lena Ormsby, Leo Mwape, Esther Sovincet (national champion), NZ Police Deputy Commissioner Wally Haumaha, finalist Jacqueline Te Kani-Nankivell, Equal Employment Opportunities Commissioner Saunoamaali'i Dr Karanina Sumeo.
3. The Race Unity Speech Awards National Semi-Finals, Finals and Hui were held at Auckland's Ngā Kete Wananga Marae at the Manukau Institute of Technology on June 17 & 18.
4. Race Unity Speech Awards National Champion 2023 Esther Sovincet.

Attached: Copy of Esther Sovincet's speech

Video footage of Esther Sovincet's speech available on request

Watch the livestream of the event here: <https://fb.watch/lefrKHqChX/>

High quality footage of all finalists' speeches will be available Monday June 19 here: <https://www.youtube.com/@RaceUnity>

About the Awards

- The New Zealand Bahá'í Community established the awards after the tragic death of race relations advocate and Bahá'í Faith member Hedi Moani.
- The New Zealand Bahá'í Community is a religious community concerned with promoting the oneness of humanity at the local, national and international levels.
- The Hui and Speech Awards are organised by the New Zealand Bahá'í Community and are sponsored and supported by the New Zealand Police, the Human Rights Commission, Manukau Institute of Technology, the Ministry for Ethnic Communities, Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori, Speech New Zealand and the Hedi Moani Charitable Trust.

Race Unity Speech Awards by the numbers:

- 2,000 – Students have participated in the Speech Awards since 2001.
- 40,000 – People have listened to these speeches in person.
- 2 million – Views of these speeches online.
- 1,000 – Police officers, academics, government officials and other people of influence have served as judges of the Speech Awards.

YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/RaceUnity>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/raceunityaotearoa>

Instagram: @raceunityaotearoa

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