

BU\$INE\$\$ & MONEY

BURKE'S: AN EDUCATION IN CULTURE

By Raquel Hamilton
Contributing Writer

It has been up and running for just over two years now, but Sam and Rita Burke would like to think that Burke's Gifts & Picture Framing has added a necessary dimension to the representation of African Canadian art and literature available in the city of Toronto.

Having always worked for other people, the husband and wife team decided that they would like to explore the uncharted territory of small business ownership. After investigating a number of options, they decided on an art shop.

"There wasn't enough of our culture present in our community," Rita Burke explained in a recent interview with *Pride*. "There weren't sufficient variables in terms of books, in terms of art work...and so, we decided that, because we were interested in books, (and) we were interested in art, that would be the area we would pursue."

Although the primary goal of Burke's is to promote Afrocentric art, there is clearly an educational theme interwoven throughout the store. The focus on educating people, especially children, about African culture, is also apparent by the activities in which the Burkes participate and are involved.

School teachers are encouraged to bring their classes into the store, and readings are done for the students, Mrs. Burke explained. Once a month, the Black History Society brings in a group of students, and she talks

to them about local African Canadian authors and artists.

"A lot of them don't know that there are Black people that are writing (professionally) in this city," the soft spoken entrepreneur stated. "I will take out my books that are written by local Canadian Blacks and tell them a little bit about the story and about the author."

Both of the Burkes are practicing educators and many of the books carried by the store are for children. Children's books, written by local authors, such as Lynette Roy, Afua Cooper, Adwoa Badoe and Belinda Ageda may be found on the shelves.

"There are some adult books as well," Burke explained, "but a large part of what I do is because I am particularly interested in children's books...I deal a great deal with the schools and their kids, so I carry books for that purpose."

On November 1, Burke's will be hosting a book launch for local children's author and story-teller Itah Sadu. The launch, Burke explains, is another example of Burke's function as more of a cultural centre, rather than "just a store." While she defines a store as a place where people come to shop, she points out that people are offered the opportunity to do more than just buy at Burke's.

"I'd like to think of it as a place where people can come and do poetry readings...book launchings...art exhibitions," Burke expanded. "So it's a place in our community where African Canadians, or people with Caribbean backgrounds,

could come to and see themselves reflected in a positive light."

Not only are local African Canadian writers promoted at Burke's, visual artists are as well. Works by Lloyd Pollard, Macaulay (Mac) Eteli and David Kibuuka are popular features at the store.

Other merchandise offered includes fabrics imported from Kenya, jewelry from Nigeria and pottery from Guyana.

"We have diversified in terms of our merchandise," Burke stated. "We are not just focusing on the books or art. We're having a combination of items, so that, when people come, we are stimulating every sense."

With the December holiday season approaching, Burke's is planning on hosting a Kwanzaa celebration, which they did last year as well.

"We invite people from the community and family members to celebrate Kwanzaa," Burke said. "We go through the ceremony...we talk about the different prin-

ciples and the significance of Kwanzaa." For those not familiar with the celebration, a historical background is given.

The celebration, founded by Dr. Maulana Ron Karenga, is based on seven principles: Unity, Self-Determination, Collective Economics, Faith, Purpose, Creativity and Working Together. The main items used to celebrate this uniquely African tradition are seven candles, a straw mat, bowls of fruit and ears of corn. A libation is offered: The participants drink wine from a special cup, called the Unity Cup.

The Burkes are pleased that they have actualized their vision of creating a "cultural center" where people feel free to browse and chat, and where the contributions of many African Canadian artists can be celebrated.

Currently, they are in the process of negotiating a "major" art exhibition for next year with a group of artists from Barbados.

For more information call (416) 656-5366 or visit Burke's Gifts & Picture Framing at 1032 St. Clair Ave. W. ☐



Rita Burke, right, with her husband, Sam Burke with their daughter, Leah.