

January 06, 2003

Randolph gala celebrates Haitian independence and unity

By NICOLE SANTORO
The Patriot Ledger

RANDOLPH - It was a night for celebrating Haitian independence, pride and unity.

More than 500 members of the state's Haitian community gathered Saturday evening at Lombardo's in Randolph. The gala marked the 199th anniversary of the successful slave revolution in Haiti.

The event was sponsored by Haitian Americans United Inc., a nonprofit organization founded in Massachusetts to improve the quality of life for Haitian-Americans through education, social-economic empowerment and cultural development.

Eno Mondesir, chairman of Haitian Americans United, said the event is "one of the organization's high points ... to commemorate our independence and our spirit."

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino spoke about how important the Haitian community has been to the city over the past several years. He described the community's members as "committed, hardworking and dedicated to work and family."

"It is so important that Boston recognizes the diversity of our city, because diversity is the strength of Boston," the mayor said. "We all have to work together to make this a city that is open to all."

Ray De Silva, vice president of Citizens Bank, also applauded the Haitian community for "your great entrepreneurship, your spirit, your wonderful work ethic and your commitment to own a piece of America."

"It is well known that this great nation was started by immigrants - from Italy, Ireland, and England. Today, I am proud to recognize the new wave of immigrants that contribute to the greatness of America - immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly Haiti, who constitute the new fabric of America."

The Rev. John Borders, pastor of Morning Star Baptist Church in Mattapan, spoke of building a bridge between the Haitian and African-American communities.

"Boston, with all its ethnic diversity, is not a city that lends itself to racial harmony, but we must bring people together to find harmony," he said. "...(We must) stand by one another, side by side, as we seek to understand our cultures."

North Miami Mayor Josaphat Célestin, the first Haitian-American elected to a mayor post in the United States, inspired the crowd by describing the challenges he overcame to

achieve success. He also spoke of the opportunities available to Haitians in the United States - opportunities that can be taken advantage of through hard work and staying together.

“I love Haiti, I have Haiti in my heart, but (the United States) is the best country in the world,” he said.

Copyright 2003 The Patriot Ledger
Transmitted Monday, January 06, 2003

January 06, 2003

Haitians urged to unite politically: First Haitian-born mayor offers guidance, support

By RICK COLLINS
The Patriot Ledger

RANDOLPH - The nation's first Haitian-born mayor offered his political guidance and resources to the Greater Boston area's Haitian community Saturday, saying it is time to unite politically and have more Haitians follow in his footsteps.

“I will stand with you in the future so I can come back here and see commissioners and mayors,” said Josaphat Célestin, who was elected mayor of North Miami in May 2001. Célestin spoke during the Haitian Independence Day celebration at Lombardi's in Randolph. The event was sponsored by Haitian Americans United Inc. (HAU).

Haito declared its independence from France on Jan. 1, 1804. It was the first black colonized nation to make such a declaration, and its action sparked similar uprisings throughout the West Indies.

Célestin hopes to inspire other Haitian Americans to seek public office, especially in New York and Boston, which have the two largest Haitian Americans populations in the nation behind Miami.

While speaking, Célestin switched between English and French, the native language of Haiti. He said he won office by galvanizing the Haitian vote in North Miami, even though most Haitians were registered Democrats and he is a Republican.

“This was not about Republicans and Democrats,” he said. “It was about the powerful Haitian community that came out of nowhere.”

Célestin, who received 65 percent of the total vote, said Democrats originally questioned the results because they had never before seen so many Haitian voters at the polls.

There is strength in unity, and that power can be used to make the Haitian community a strong political force, much as the Cuban community is in Miami, Célestin said. And once Haitians begin winning seats in Congress, they will be able to start affecting change.

One law that needs changing, he said, is the Florida law governing the handling of illegal immigrants. Law enforcement officials are allowed to release most illegal immigrants into the community until their court hearings, but they are required to detain Haitian refugees.

“It’s a double standard,” Célestin said.

He believes the law is designed to discourage Haitians from fleeing their country, which has been wracked over the past several decades by a chronically depressed economy and political violence. It is the Caribbean country closest to Miami, aside from Cuba.

The Greater Boston-area Haitian community has been slow to grasp American political strategy, which depends upon grass-roots organization, said Eno Mondesir, chairman of Haitian Americans United Inc. He hoped Célestin’s visit would inspire cohesiveness and political activism within the Haitian community.

Haitian heritage

States with the most Haitian immigrants or descendants.

Florida 233,881
New York 160,319
Massachusetts 43,576

Massachusetts communities with the most Haitian immigrants or descendants.

Randolph 6% (2,060)
Brockton 5% (4,720)
Boston 3% (18,979)

Leading ethnic groups.

RANDOLPH

Irish 20%
Italian 11%
Haitian 6%
English 5%
German 3%
Russian 2%
Polish 2%
French-Canadian 2%

MASSACHUSETTS

Irish 20%
Italian 12%
English 10%
French 7%
German 5%
Polish 4%
French-Canadian 4%
Portuguese 4%

UNITED STATES

German 15%
Irish 11%
English 9%
Italian 5%
Polish 3%
French 3%

Source: 2000 Census

Copyright 2003 The Patriot Ledger
Transmitted Monday, January 06, 2003