

Independence day in January

Boston Haitians proudly mark slave revolution

By Andreae Downs, Globe Correspondent, 12/28/2003

While others are picking confetti out of their living room rugs Thursday, local Haitians will be gathering to celebrate the bicentennial of the world's first successful slave rebellion -- the fight that won that Caribbean country independence on Jan. 1, 1804.

The Boston-area celebration will be one of several around the United States as part of a nascent Haitian pride movement that has gathered steam in the last three years in enclaves like Mattapan and Somerville.

"There's a growing pride" in being Haitian, said Eno Mondesir, chairman of Haitian-Americans United Inc. The three-year-old Boston organization headquartered in Mattapan formed to organize the Haitian-American Unity Parade in May 2000.

The US Census counts roughly 50,000 Haitians in the Boston area, but leaders of the community believe they are 75,000. They say that roughly one-third of Boston's public school seats are filled by Haitian children.

For years Haitians concealed their identity, Mondesir said, as the community struggled with stigma around AIDS and the news from a country known for poverty, political instability, and crime. The Unity Parade has brought out the positive side of being Haitian.

"Large numbers of young Haitians now come to the parade and are not shy about talking Creole or wearing the flag," Mondesir said.

The parade is held every May to commemorate the birthday of rebel leader General Francois Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, the creation of the Haitian flag, and the agreement between mulatto and black generals to fight together for Haitian independence, according to Wilner Auguste, a co-founder of Haitian-Americans United.

"This is really something to push Haitians to be proud of themselves," Auguste said. "We want to do this every year; to create a tradition we can pass down to our children."

The Jan. 3 black-tie gala dinner in Randolph will be another such tradition, hopes Auguste, who for 17 years has broadcast "Tele Kreyol," a Haitian program on the Boston Neighborhood Network. The dinner will feature state Representative Marie St. Fleur, the first Haitian-American elected to statewide office in the United States, as well as entertainment by Haitian bands and performers.

Organizers expect about 1,000 people to attend the gala Saturday in Randolph. Among the entertainers will be Emeline Michel, "the queen of Haitian song," Fantezi Kreyol Dance Company, singer Barbara Cajuste, storyteller Charlot Lucien, and the Boston Haitian Marching Band.

The gala will be a time when the community can "honor our ancestors, celebrate the 200th anniversary victory, and reflect on Haiti's 200-years history, and take some action," Auguste said.

He noted that some have questioned why the community is celebrating at a time when "things are not going that good in Haiti." But, he said, Haitian-Americans will be joined in their celebration by South Africans and other African countries that recognize the importance of the slave revolution.

"Nobody knows about the Haitian Revolution; you don't hear much about it," Auguste said. "But it was an inspiration for a lot of slaves in other countries, and brought fear in places where people owned slaves."

Haitian independence was so threatening to Western powers at the time that the rebels had to fight with the Spanish and British as well as the French under Napoleon. The United States didn't recognize the second republic in the hemisphere until after the Civil War.

Mondesir, too, stressed that the bicentennial was an opportunity for Haitians to plan for the future.

"We have to assess where we are and where we need to work to improve the quality of life," noted Mondesir. The community, Mondesir said, is looking to improve life for Haitians in the Boston area as well as for those in Haiti.

Tickets are \$65 per person. To attend, or for details, contact Haitian-Americans United, Inc. at 617-298-2976, 899-2629 or www.unity@hauinc.org.