

Pride and prejudice

For local Haitians, a new controversy stirs things up on eve of celebration

By Johnny Diaz, Globe Staff, 12/14/2003

New Year's Day will hold special significance this year for the Fabien family of Hyde Park and thousands of other Haitians across Boston as they mark a milestone in the history of their homeland -- the 200th anniversary of independence from France.

Irlene Fabien and her two children -- 14-year-old Antoine and 8-year-old Samantha -- will sit down to dinner together and eat the traditional fragrant yellow squash soup, then pray and reflect on how far their community has come in Boston and in Haiti.

"It's considered the first day in our country," Fabien says. "It's a time for everyone to be together."

But their conversation may be tinged by talk of a recent controversy that has forced Haitians to galvanize and speak up once again.

A few weeks ago, Fabien learned that a popular video game in her son's collection, "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City," which portrays Haitians, Colombians, and Cubans as gang members and drug lords, has dialogue with lines like "Kill all the Haitians" and "I hate these Haitians."

Despite the midweek announcement that the game's manufacturers, New York-based Rockstar Video Games, would remove the offensive dialogue from future copies, the incident reminded her of stigmas the Haitian community has endured since arriving on these shores. To a people whose pride has been assaulted over the years by taunts about carrying AIDS and being "banana boat people," the video game's phrases are just another attempt to tarnish their culture.

"It's a shame for all Haitian people," Fabien said. "Haitian people have suffered too much, and we don't need to suffer over a game."

To some the violent dialogue represents a more ominous threat as well.

"It's not only discriminatory, but it's also a danger," said Elda James, a Dorchester attorney who will cancel her work tomorrow, pack some Haitian friends -- another lawyer, a teacher and two journalists -- into her Nissan Pathfinder, and head toward Manhattan for a protest at the headquarters of the makers of the video game.

"This is the most recent blow in a string of insults to Haitians," said James, who was born in Haiti, came to the United States as a teenager, and later got a law degree from Western New England College School of Law in Springfield.

The video game reminded her of a scene in the 1998 feel-good romance, "How Stella Got Her Groove Back," that linked Haiti with HIV. One of the characters in the film asks her sister, a stockbroker who finds love in Jamaica with a younger man, if she used a condom "because those people have a history of AIDS." Another character interjects with, "No, that's Haiti, Miss Manners."

Early in the 1980s, the Centers for Disease Control labeled Haitians as a high-risk group for AIDS, and the Food and Drug Administration imposed a ban on all Haitian blood donors. In 1985, the CDC removed Haitians from its high-risk list, and the blood ban was lifted in 1990.

Controversy over "Stella" erupted into demonstrations back then, including a rally of 300 people outside Boston City Hall. Although the movie's maker, 20th Century Fox, apologized to the Haitian community for the offending joke and said it would remove the scene from the home-video version, Haitians say their community still suffers from the depiction.

Carline Desire, executive director of the Dorchester-based Association of Haitian Women of Boston, was among the protesters at City Hall.

"We feel we have fought hard, and we continue to fight," said Desire this past Monday, as she stood in the social service center's meeting room where a Haitian flag, which reads "L'union fait la force" -- the union makes the force -- adorns a wall.

A Boston resident on and off for 26 years, Desire has seen firsthand the effects such remarks can have on a young person. She remembers how fellow countrymen in the 1980s were embarrassed to say they were Haitian because of AIDS insults and jokes.

"Sometimes, when things like this happen, young folks don't automatically see the consequences," Desire said. "It could cause them to disassociate from the Haitian culture or impede their learning. That is what is making us act fast about this game. We need that special feeling, that pride to stay intact."

This summer's release of the Hollywood action movie, "Bad Boys II," which portrayed Haitians as gang members, hasn't helped either, James said.

"When you tie in the AIDS label, "How Stella Got Her Groove Back," "Bad Boys II," and now, this video game, it's pretty awful, and people are generally upset," said James. "Why are these types of assaults allowed to continue?"

James has been among a chorus of Haitians who responded to this week's uproar over the video game by dispatching e-mails to one another, calling community leaders and Boston's cable-access Haitian television programs, and voicing their concerns on local AM radio programs. And some will join organizers from Brooklyn's Haitian Centers Council at the protest tomorrow at 10 a.m. outside Rockstar Video's headquarters in Manhattan. Organizers expect a turnout of 3,000 people.

The incident comes as Haitian pride is about to reach a special peak. On Jan. 3, local Haitians will gather in Randolph for a gala celebration of the bicentennial of Haiti's independence. The day holds much meaning for Greater Boston's 40,000 Haitians, because it marks the day the country became the world's first liberated black nation and the second-oldest independent nation in the Western Hemisphere. On that day, Haitian forces rebelled and defeated Napoleon Bonaparte's forces for independence on the tiny Caribbean island.

Part of the independence celebration involves eating pumpkin or squash soup, called *joumou* in Creole. It was a dish, legend has it, that the French ate when they ruled, denying it to the native population.

But preparations for this year's fete have been marked by a haunting reminder of long-held stereotypes.

"We are not here to be offended or offensive," said Fabien, a bus driver who first heard about the video game's violent exchanges on Haitian radio last month.

The news struck close to home. She had bought the game for Antoine three months before.

Antoine said he thought it would be fun to play the video game, which featured a neighborhood called "Little Haiti," after Miami's predominantly Haitian community. But when he reached that game level, he saw gang bangers spewing the anti-Haitian phrases.

"I was kind of shocked because I didn't expect a game to say 'kill the Haitians,' " said Fabien, who added that the game is the most popular one among friends in Hyde Park.

He admits he continued to play the game before his mother spoke to him about it, but he said he would rather play with his other video games for now. After she talked to him, he tossed Vice City in the trash.

"I felt that it was a disgrace to the Haitian people," he said.

In attempts to assuage the Haitian community, the company promised last Tuesday that it would remove the offensive statements from new copies of the game.

"We are aware of the hurt and anger in the Haitian community and have listened to the community's objections to certain statements made in the game," the company said in a statement. "Accordingly, we will remove the objectionable statements from future copies."

When he first discussed the game's dialogue late last month, Mattapan Haitian journalist Ronald Nelson fielded phone calls from concerned parents on his WRNM (1640 AM) radio show called Radio Nouveaut. Disturbed by its potential effect of the game on young people -- it's rated "M" for mature by the industry's Entertainment Software Rating Board, meaning it's not supposed to be sold to anyone 17 and under -- he now plans to travel to New York City tomorrow to participate in the rally.

"When you stand up for your rights like that, it's like letting them know next time not to do it," Nelson said, "not only for Haitians but for any other nationality."

And after the demonstrations and speeches, the Haitian community will move on to its Independence Day celebration. On New Year's Day, James plans to attend a special Mass at St. Angela's Church in Mattapan, after which the traditional soup will be served to parishioners.

"It's not only commemorates our independence, but our contribution to the United States," James said. "We will have our flags and we will cheer the day."

The Haitian Independence Day Gala will be held at 7 p.m. Jan. 3 at Lombardo's in Randolph, and will feature Boston-area Haitian singers, dancers, a marching band and speakers. Suggested donation is \$65. For more information, call 617-298-2976.

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