

Haitians look forward and back

With bicentennial celebration, community reflects on future

By Kevin Joy, Globe Correspondent, Globe Staff, 1/1/2004

When Jacques Borges emigrated from Haiti in 1966, he knew 20 other Haitian families in the Boston area. Today he hears teenagers mixing Creole with English when he walks through Mattapan Square. He sees Haitian-owned clothing stores and restaurants dotting Blue Hill Avenue. And some of his fellow Haitians have successful careers in law, medicine, and technology. As Borges, the city engineer in Brockton, and thousands of others gather today to mark the 200th anniversary of their homeland's independence, local Haitians find themselves at a crucial crossroads, balancing concerns over their troubled country while working to empower their people in the United States.

Throughout the state, Haitians will attend religious services or gather with friends and family. Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley is set to celebrate Mass today in Creole with a predominantly Haitian congregation gathered at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Washington Street.

Some, like Gerda Bernadin, manager of Caribbean Best Cuisine in Dorchester, will serve meals featuring a traditional pumpkin soup. Others will hold a 12-hour fast to pray for the solidarity of their tiny Caribbean nation, rocked by years of poverty and political turmoil.

Though today marks a celebration of Haiti's liberation from France in 1804, establishing Haiti as the first independent black republic, it also is a day of reflection and meditation. "We would love to celebrate our bicentennial, but when you think of the country's economic poverty, desperate conditions, diseases, and corrupt government, you have to question that," said Carline Desire, executive director of the Association of Haitian Women. "It's heartbreaking to see what's happening."

Political divisions between supporters of Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide and thousands of antigovernment protesters have resulted in violent protests and counterdemonstrations in the last month. The economy is in shambles.

"We're still not able to celebrate in a way that truly shows our age," said Pierre Imbert, executive director of the Haitian Multi-Service Center in Dorchester. "It's been 200 years, and we're struggling with the same issues."

Beginning in the late 1950s, Boston became a prime destination for Haitian professionals seeking to flee the regime of Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier. The numbers grew in the 1970s as Duvalier's son, Jean-Claude, rose to power. By the early 1980s, 20,000 Haitians were living in the city, according to a website for the Haiti Program at Trinity College in Washington, D.C.

But by the mid-1980s, many less educated Haitians also flocked to Boston, straining social services. Haitian organizations began to sprout, focusing on public health, women's rights, immigration, domestic abuse, and the threat of HIV and AIDS, the Trinity website reported.

US Census data counted about 44,000 Haitians in Greater Boston in 2000. And as their numbers grow, so do the challenges.

"Finding basic access to health and education services to participate in American society and find quality jobs -- that's a struggle," said state Representative Marie St. Fleur, who was born in Haiti. "But there are very hardworking people who come here and succeed. It can be tough to do that."

St. Fleur, a 41-year-old lawyer, said that while the Haitian community wants to assimilate into the US population, it must not lose its identity and connection to its home country if it is to maintain collective strength.

That strength is needed to fight negative stereotypes and bias against Haitians and establish a viable Haitian community in Boston, community leaders say. Many Haitians were deeply offended when a popular video game "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" contained the statements, "Kill all the Haitians" and "I hate these Haitians." The manufacturer later apologized and agreed to remove the dialogue from future copies.

Some Haitians also found themselves at odds with Catholic Charities over a new, \$10-million service center in Dorchester. They wanted the center as their own, but Catholic Charities said they would have to share the building with other groups.

Eno Mondesir, chairman of the board of Haitian-Americans United Inc., said the community is in the midst of change. No longer struggling to put down roots in a new country, Boston's Haitian residents must now find a way to unite and wield greater political power, he said.

Mondesir said the Boston community should take a cue from Miami, where the politically active Haitian community has turned out strong leaders.

"We have to plot a participatory role in the political process, so we are better represented," said Mondesir, whose group is organizing an Independence Day celebration Saturday in Randolph. The theme of the celebration is "Haiti: 1804-2004. A time for Reflection and Action."

Greater attention must also be paid to Haitian youth, many of whom feel disconnected from their community and their culture, said Mondesir.

"There is a sense of dispossession, for lack of a better word," said Mondesir. "We need to make sure Haitian youth remain involved and invested in the community. Right now, I see a lack of belonging. The older generation is not reaching out to them."

But many Boston-area Haitians see a brighter future.

The Rev. John Morin -- who served at St. Angela's Catholic Church on Blue Hill Avenue for 11 years, where the congregation of roughly 1,200 is 75 percent Haitian -- has seen the results firsthand.

He now presides at St. Joseph the Worker Shrine in Lowell, where children are taught religion in English, but sing hymns just as easily in Creole and French. The children study hard, and their parents often work more than one job. The younger generation has discovered a newfound pride in their community.

"When I first got to Boston, younger people were sort of ashamed of their culture," he said. "I told adults: 'You shouldn't be ashamed of your culture. If there was bad politics in Haiti, it's not your fault.' There is a rich heritage with great culture, literature, music, and dancing that you should be proud of."

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