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Haitian American professionals kick off conference today

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South Florida's striving Haitian-American community -- 245,000-plus strong -- has its growing share of professionals, but they have not been at the forefront of issues affecting the struggling majority. That's about to change.

A group of Haitian professionals is putting up its own money -- raising more than \$60,000 so far -- to bankroll a conference that as many as 3,000 Haitian-American professionals are expected to attend starting today.

It comes as a politically chaotic Haiti prepares to hold elections in less than two weeks. This new generation of South Florida's Haitian-American professionals -- comfortable in both worlds -- hopes to make a difference there and here, but with a twist. They are challenging the notion that the only way to help Haiti is by immersing oneself in bruising Haiti politics.

"We are in a critical situation in our country and in our community. It's not a game anymore," said Angelo Gousse, a Haitian-born Yale educated urologist who has brought together a diverse group of professionals under the banner of the Haitian-American Leadership Organization.

"Once we gain political power in the United States, it will translate into political power in Haiti."

That's a tall order for a community whose previous attempts to unite around a common agenda haven't always succeeded.

"How can it be, all of us accomplished all of these great things in a foreign country in a different language and we can't get our act together?" said Gousse, 42, who lives in Miramar and works at Jackson Memorial Hospital. "We could be so powerful as a community if we get organized and contribute more."

A 2004 study released by the Brookings Institution, a public policy think tank, found that while Broward County cities like Miramar boast the wealthiest Haitian communities, the community overall still remains relatively poor, especially in Miami-Dade County where Haitians are the second-largest immigrant group after Cubans.

The study, based on the 2000 Census, was done at the request of the Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center, one of several local groups working to address the community's needs, which are many.

They include understanding individuals' rights as immigrants, no matter their legal status; accessing healthcare; how to get into postgraduate programs like law or medical school; how to start a business or invest in real estate.

By addressing these issues over the next three days, and through year-long seminars and mentoring programs, the professionals' group hopes to not only educate the community but to build bridges.

"We need to forge a community agenda that all Haitians can agree upon," said Gérard Philippeaux, a Miami-Dade County Commission aide. "It is the only way to create sustainable progress and maintain a common identity."

Herold Merisier, a North Miami Beach family doctor, agrees. Merisier and his wife, also a physician, moved to South Florida 10 years ago after living in France and Canada. His motivation, he said, for joining the group is not just the goal of linking up the different Haitian organizations that already exist, but the opportunity to serve as a role model for Haitian-Americans youths.

Karen André understands the importance of role models. As the daughter of a Haitian cultural icon, André never had to look very far when she was a child to find professional artists, doctors, teachers -- all Haitian -- routinely visiting her Miami home.

Hers was more the exception than the norm in a community known more for its boatloads of refugees than its bankers, lawyers or computer programmers.

"We are out there," said André, an attorney who worked for former U.S. Rep. Peter Deutsch, D-Fla. "I know there is this oasis of Haitian professionals, but I might meet one or two at a time."

Census figures show that at least 10 percent of Haitians in Miami-Dade and Broward counties are college educated.

"Plenty of qualified professionals have made significant strides in the community, but that is all left in the shadows" by decades-old stereotypes that do not hold true for Haitians, Merisier said.

``After being here for 10 years, the message I see being projected of Haitians is still the same as 10 years ago. Most are boat people, not educated, although they are hardworking."

This is not the first time groups of Haitian-American professionals have come together in hopes of devising a community blueprint. One of the most recent efforts involved the Society of Haitian-American Professionals and Entrepreneurs. It had about 100 active members before it dissolved in 2004.

Learning from that group's past experience will be important for the venture's success. Also key will be its image as a nonpartisan group where Haitians of various political persuasions can hammer out a plan.

Such a test will occur Sunday afternoon, when several Haitian community activists with very different views about Haiti and the upcoming election will meet in a roundtable discussion on how best to empower the community here politically.

Some of those involved have in the past been criticized for dividing, instead of uniting the community. It will be one of many tests of the community's maturation, and of the group's sustainability.

"We are trying our best not to endorse political agendas," Merisier said. ``We want to remain open to everybody."

The conference begins at noon today at the third floor of the James L. Knight Center, 400 S.E. Second Ave. Tickets are \$25 for the three-day event and free for students with valid ID. A reception tonight begins at 8 p.m. and cost is \$50, featuring Haitian *konpa* music king, Sweet Micky.

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