

GARIFUNA COALITION USA, INC.

Garifuna Heritage Month Proclamation in New York

Celebrating Garifuna Heritage and Culture in New York

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New York – The Board of Directors of the Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc. a, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit organization is pleased to announce the proclamation of March 11th – April 12th, 2010 as Garifuna Heritage Month 2010 in observance of the 213th anniversary of the exile of the Garifuna people from St Vincent on March 11th, 1797 and their settlement in Central America on April 12th, 1797 and 187 years of Garifuna Contribution to New York’s Culture.



The proclamations were presented by the Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr, Lucia Gomez-Jimenez, Assistant to the New York State Governor David A. Paterson for Community Affairs, George Torres, Community Affairs Unit Office of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Assemblyman Michael Benjamin, during the Garifuna American Heritage Month 2010 Press Conference on Thursday, March 11, 2010 in the Rotunda of the Bronx County Building at 851 Grand Concourse, Bronx NY 10451. Proclamations are the most significant of non-legal, yet official forms of recognition issued by government officials.

“Unfortunately, most of our residents learned about the Garifunas through tragedy, but today we want to celebrate the beauty of this great community, we want to recognize its contributions to the economy, culture and prosperity of The Bronx,” said Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr.

In addition, Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr, presented Certificates of Merit to each Garifuna Heritage Awards recipients: Mr. Pablo Roberto Mejia the key promoter of the development of the Garifuna Community of Livingston (Labuga) in Guatemala, Crisanto Armando Meléndez, Artistic Director of The Garifuna National Folklore Ballet in Honduras; Kensy Sambola, President of the Afro Garifuna Association of Nicaragua, David Glasgow, President of The Garifuna Heritage Foundation of St Vincent and the Grenadines; Blanca Arzu, Branch Manager at Ponce de Leon Federal Bank in New York and E.Roy Cayetano, author of the People’s Garifuna Dictionary from Belize. This is the first time since the exile, that members from St Vincent and the Grenadines, the ancestral home of the Garifuna people and members of the Garifuna Diaspora have met under one roof. “This was very historic moment”, said Jose Francisco Avila, President of the Board of directors.

Garifuna-American Heritage Month, celebrates the great contributions of Garifuna-Americans to the fabric of New York, and pays tribute to the common culture and bonds of friendship that unite the United States and the Garifuna countries of origin.

Two hundred fifteen years ago, the Paramount Garifuna Chief Joseph Chatoyer was killed at Dorsetshire Hill, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines on March 14th, 1795. Two Years later the Garifunas were exiled to the island of Balliceaux and on March 11th 1797 they were loaded onto a convoy of vessels and transported to the coast of Honduras, where they arrived on April 12th, from where they dispersed along the Atlantic coast of Honduras, Guatemala, Belize and Nicaragua.

After the exile everybody wondered if the Garifunas were going to survive as a people and live a long healthy life. However, 213 years later, not only have they survived but have become a vital part of New York City's social, cultural and economic way of life for the past 187 years, while preserving their customs, cultural values and beliefs, as demonstrated by such notable individuals as Playwright William Henry Brown whose 1823 *play The Drama of King Shotoway*, is recognized as the first black *drama* of the American Theatre and has as its subject the 1795 Black Caribs (Garifunas) defense of the Island of Saint Vincent against colonization by the British. New York City is home to the largest Garifuna Community outside of Central America.

As part of the Garifuna Heritage Month celebrations, the first Garifuna Heritage Awards and Cultural Night were presented on Saturday, March 13th at the Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture to honor those who have made outstanding contributions to the preservation and promotion of the Garifuna. In addition to the award, each honoree received a special citation by New York City Council Member Maria del Carmen Arroyo, District 17.

In addition, a Memorial mass was celebrated on Sunday, March 14th, at St Anthony of Padua Church, in memory of the Paramount Garifuna Chief Joseph Chatoyer.

The activities will continue this weekend with a photo exhibit by Garifuna Photographer Augusto Amaya on Friday, March 18th, 6:30 PM at Casa Yurumein, 1184 Fulton Avenue, Bronx, NY 10456, for Information call (718) 991-2233. Followed by a book signing by Mrs. Sara Doris Sambula Mejia author of "Garifuna Teachers and their Contributions to the Education of Honduras," on Saturday, March 20th at 1:00 PM at the Garifuna Advocacy Center at 391 149th St, RM 215, Bronx NY 10455, for Information call (718) 402-7700, and on Sunday, March 21, 6:30 PM at Casa Yurumein, 1184 Fulton Avenue, Bronx, NY 10456, for Information call (718) 991-2233.

The Garifuna Heritage Month Proclamation is significant and critical in making visible the Garifuna American identity, developing the agenda and recognizing Garifuna Americans who contribute significantly to the American landscape.

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