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The Garifunas and Happy Land Social Club Fire

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As we commemorate the 18th anniversary of the Happy Land Social Club fire on March 25th, 1990, we should take time to pause and assess the meaning of over 70 years of struggle and development in this great city, while looking forward to a future brimming with promise and hope. But for most of the past seven decades, Garifunas have not experienced reflection and renewal. Instead, they have witnessed shocking images of a community in crisis.

Despite many positive contributions to the social and economic fiber of New York City, Garifunas have remained outsiders with no influence on the important civic processes of New York City. They had been, in a word, “invisible”. Although Garifunas have been migrating to the United States in search of a better life since the 1930s, the community was virtually obscured in New York City until the Happy Land Social Club fire on March 25th, 1990. Fifty nine of the victims were Hondurans; More than 70 percent of the Honduran victims were also of Garifuna descent.¹

After the Happy Land tragedy, many promises were made to New York City’s Garifuna Immigrant Community, including the President of Honduras and the Archdiocese of New York who promised to build a recreation center in the South Bronx to diminish the need for illegal clubs in the area. Former Cardinal O’Connor, who conducted the service, said the church would match the contribution if the city donated the land to build the center. He promised to donate \$999.99.²

Furthermore, in a plea bargain that ended his trial after two days of testimony, the leaseholder, Jay Weiss, agreed to perform 50 hours of community service and to pay \$60,000 to help build a community center for Hondurans who live in the Bronx.³

Unlike more established groups in the city like Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, hundreds of thousands of Colombians or even the relatively few Argentines, the Hondurans have established no landmarks of their presence. Over the years, they have often gathered in small civic groups, but those have tended to dissolve more quickly and easily than they have formed.⁴

In the year after the Happy Land fire, more than 20 groups were formed to serve the needs of Hondurans. These groups united as the Federation of Honduran Organizations, better known as FEDHONY⁵. FEDHONY was created as an umbrella organization of Honduran groups and the result of the first real attempt to put together a pressure group was formed as a direct response to the Happy Land fire. The Federation served to coordinate aid to the families of survivors and victims, accompanying them to court and speaking in their behalf. This continued for two years after the fire. By then the federation was negotiating with city officials to open a permanent Centro Hondureno on city-owned property.⁶ According to various sources, FEDHONY received funding from Fund for the City of New York to establish and staff an office and then Mayor David Dinkins, donated the land for the center, however, it never opened the

¹ Negron, Edna, Club Tragedy an Awakening for Garifuna, New York Newsday, August 18, 1991

² Associated Press, Pledge to Build Bronx Center, The New York Times, April 21, 1990

³ Hevesi, Dennis, Leaseholder Admits Violation In Happy Land Nightclub Fire, The New York Times, May 7, 1992

⁴ Goulden, Tim, Fire in the Bronx; Hondurans Lack Place to Grieve Over Fire, The New York Times, March 28, 1990

⁵ Branan, Kate, Happy Land fire remembered, with empathy for Mali tragedy, The Bronx Beat, April 2, 2007

⁶ Jones-Correa, Michael Between Two Nations: The Political Predicament of Latinos in New York City, Cornell University Press, 1998

proposed center and has faded from the community. FEDHONY is not listed on the Internal Revenue Service's list of organizations eligible to receive tax-deductible charitable contributions.

As a result of FEDHONY's failed effort, Mujeres Garifunas en Marcha, Inc. (MUGAMA) organized the Garifuna House Committee with the mission "To build a multi-purpose resource center in New York City that will offer a variety of needed social programs and services to the community. Programs will range from providing day care for young children to establishing an adult education learning Center. Garifuna House will serve as an oasis for economic development, academic achievement, health education, preservation of arts and Garifuna Culture." The Committee held its first meeting on February 1, 1998 at Hunter College and was registered on March 1, 1999, as a New York Not-for-Profit Corporation, under the name Garifuna House, Inc. unfortunately, the proposed mission was never accomplished due to difficulties in the organizational process.

In 2001, Maria Elena Maximo established a nonprofit organization, Jamalali Uagucha, to conduct a census of the Garifuna people living in New York City "The problem is we do not have an identity here," she said, "and we are not able to get social services because we are not recognized as a group with special needs."⁷ Maximo became the main force behind efforts to bring political leverage to the Bronx Garifuna community by promoting the Garifuna census. Unfortunately, Ms. Maximo was arrested on April 4, 2006 on mail fraud charges.⁸ As a result of the legal troubles of its executive director, Jamalali Uagucha, Inc. is no longer listed on the Internal Revenue Service's list of organizations eligible to receive tax-deductible charitable contributions Most Recent Data Update of December 31, 2007. Despite remaining at its former location, Jamalali has for all practical purposes, ceased operations.

Jamalali's practical cease of operations, has left a huge void in the provision of social services and advocacy for the Garifuna Immigrant Community. The lack of a Garifuna Center, has forced this growing immigrant population to meet in public places, such as Bill Rainey Park better known among the Garifunas, as Waporu and the Crotona Park strip located on Southern Blvd., popularly known as the "Trujillanos' Park among the Garifunas.

These informal meeting places have caused concern among the neighbors who live in the area, who complain of noise, trash, and anti sanitary conditions, due to the large crowds. These concerns were expressed during the Community Board # 2's general meeting on September 26th, 2007. During the meeting, a board member stated "Garifunas are drunk, yell and curse at kids, there are too many kids running around, leave both the park and street dirty" and concluded that "Garifunas are a bad influence" to the community.

The Happy Land Social Club tragedy and the void left by Jamalali Uagucha, are seen as turning points for the Garifuna Immigrant Community. In answer to these alarming conditions that beset their society, The Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc. chose to fill the void and developed the slogan "*Garifuna Pride, Our Voice – Our Vision*" as a voice for the Garifuna Immigrant Community to bear on all facets of the New York society. Over the past twelve months, as part of its grassroots organizing and community development efforts, it has taken the lead to include the Garifuna Immigrant Community into the civic process of New York City, working to find solutions to the social issues confronting it and serving as an advocate for Garifuna issues and a united voice for the Garifuna community in New York City. Believing that it is its responsibility to raise the funds it needs on behalf of the community it cares about, so that it can continue to work toward social justice and social change, the Garifuna Coalition developed a fundraising plan to seek funding from various sources to establish a Garifuna Advocacy Center in The Bronx. On February 6th, the Board of Directors of the New York Foundation authorized a grant of \$42,500 to the Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc. to develop an advocacy Center to provide social services and advocate for community members. "We are very grateful to the Board of Directors of the New York Foundation for authorizing the grant and for their belief and support in our organizing efforts as we strive to

⁷ Kugel, Seth, Bronx UP Close: A Quest to Count the Descendants Of Islanders and Castaway Slaves, New York Time, August 5, 2001

⁸ United States Attorney Southern District of New York, Preparer of fraudulent immigration applications arrested, press release, April 04, 2006

secure a future for our community,” said Rejil Solis, president of the Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc.

The Garifuna Coalition understands that developing a donor base is essential to effective organizing and that it helps build a broad base of support within the community most committed to the issue it cares about. Therefore, it launched an Individual Donor Program to build a broad base of individual donors in the Garifuna Community; in addition, it has scheduled various fundraising activities during the upcoming months.

As we reflect on the greatest tragedy for the Garifuna Community in the United States and as we pay tribute to the 87 victims of the Happy Land Social Club Fire, it is my hope that we also experience renewal towards a future brimming with promise and hope by showing that we care about our community and want to make a positive difference in making the Garifuna Center a reality. Let's not wait for another tragedy to happen, let us not fade back into invisibility! Let's prove that WE can!