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Haitian community celebrates the holidays in Spring Valley

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The 15th annual holiday party held yesterday at the Konbit Neg Lakay community center in Spring Valley had all the trimmings, children in party clothes and pans of griot, a meat and vegetable dish any Haitian will tell you has to be part of Christmas dinner.

Santa Claus stopped by too, thanks to Nicholas Stanish, Daniela Ducasse and Walter Zayas of the Hudson Health Plan, an organization that works with the center to sign up residents in low-cost health programs. Zayas, a senior marketing director with HHP, said the organization donated \$500 toward the purchase of gifts handed out to children participating in a variety of youth and after-school programs at the center.

Konbit Neg Lakay means "together for a stronger community" in Haitian Creole, and the center lives up to its name by serving as many as 5,000 people a year in Spring Valley. Staff and supporters celebrated 20 years of service earlier this fall, and many came back to crowd the rooms in the center's new building for the holidays.

Minouche Sanon attended the party with her husband and two children, Bryan, 11, and Briana, 6.

Sanon said she has visited the center since before she had children, when she came seeking help with immigration issues. Now her children attend the after-school program, and her son takes piano lessons.

"He loves to come here. Even when school is out he loves to come," Sanon said, adding that Bryan now invites other kids from the center studying music to come jam at his house on Saturdays.

As she spoke, he performed holiday songs on his keyboard for guests.

Spring Valley's new village justice, Christine Theodore, came with her son, Stephan, 6, who joined the kids around the Christmas tree to sing carols.

Theodore got to know several youth from Konbit Neg Lakay when she came last week to host a forum with teens and their parents about how to avoid what she called "pitfalls" as they grow up here.

They acted out skits and discussed school delinquency, shoplifting, drug abuse, sex education and cultural differences as the most important topics to educate parents about.

"Our hands are full," said Theodore, who gets a lot of calls from parents who need help understanding the system, "but we're going to work with organizations in Rockland County to get the conversation started now and not wait until a crisis happens."

Jimmy Micourt and Stanley Michel, both from Spring Valley, guarded a table in the center's basement loaded with pans of beans, blackened rice with mushroom, oxtail stew and goat griot.

Adult students who attend the center's literacy, ESL and nursing exam prep courses cooked the small feast for the party's guests.

Micourt assists students with reading three times a week, while Michel often gets put to work at the center when he comes to call for his wife, one of the center's instructors.

Bernadette Valsaint, secretary to the center's director, Renold Julien, brought her husband and four daughters, ages 2 months to 4 years, to the party.

She described how, in Haiti, parties start days before Christmas. Families come from all over to eat together and enjoy coconut cocktails, attend Christmas Eve Mass and participate in troubadour music, and in the tropical climate, holiday revelers sing and walk from home to home.

"Here we don't do that. It's too cold," she laughed.

Lizianne Cherilus, 10, lives closer to New City, but came to the party with her cousin. She enjoyed seeing Santa but expressed concern for families in Haiti who don't have as much for Christmas as kids she knows here, and said she donated money for Haiti in a box placed at the Nanuet Diner.

"We care a lot for the Haitian community," she said.

By the looks of the room full of party-goers, presents around the tree and Christmas feasting at Konbit Neg Lakay, Cherilus is in good company.
