

MIAMI

Center is Little Haiti's lifeline

The Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center in Little Haiti this week celebrates seven years of helping the community.

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BY TRENTON DANIEL

tdaniel@MiamiHerald.com

JOHN VANBEEKUM / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

One-year-old Isaiah Adelin plays while his mother, Mefrisia Simon, and father, Adelin Salien, listen to Gepsie M. Metellus, Sant La executive director. The Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center, a nonprofit organization located in the Little Haiti neighborhood of Miami, is celebrating their seventh anniversary.

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Hil Moline had just closed his shoe stand at a Liberty City flea market and didn't know how to reconcile his unemployment with his taxes. He consulted an accountant, but found the experience off-putting.

Then a friend gave the Miramar resident this tip: Go to Alphonse.

"He was really patient and explained everything," Moline, 62, recounted. "To go from Broward to see him, it's really worth it. The best part is I didn't have to pay one cent."

Alphonse is Alphonse Piard, and he's the financial whiz at Sant La Haitian Neighborhood Center in Little Haiti, a go-to-guy for income-tax preparation, credit-building counseling, and other money matters.

On Thursday, Piard and the Sant La staff fete seven years of serving South Florida's Haitian community with a fundraising dinner at the Hilton Hotel at 1601 Biscayne Blvd. Tickets are \$125 per person.

The gala will honor three pioneers:

- Viter Juste, a former businessman who's credited with coining the phrase ``Little Haiti."
- Marie-Josée Ledan, an early women's advocate on health and other issues.
- Carmelau Monestime, the founder of South Florida's first Creole-language radio station.

Each is cited as helping build South Florida's Haitian community.

Sant La got started seven years ago when a group of like-minded activists hatched the idea for a full-fledged referral agency. Since then, Sant La, which means "The Center" in Haitian Creole, has expanded, attracting more clients and seeing its annual budget swell from \$25,000 to \$1.2 million. Fifty-nine percent of its funding comes from a mix of government sources, including Miami-Dade County.

Sant La referred an enslaved domestic to an immigration advocacy center after she complained that her employers were abusing her. Two of them were found guilty in a Fort Lauderdale court in March for smuggling the Haitian teenage girl and enslaving her in their Southwest Miami-Dade home.

In addition to referrals, the center has offered programs on civic engagement, parenting, and healthcare.

In 2005, executive director Gepsie Metellus hired Piard to help clients with taxes and other financial issues.

"To grow we needed to incorporate elements of financial planning and wealth building," said Metellus, who had worked in county government before co-founding Sant La.

Financial planning is especially important for newly arrived immigrants because some are used to conducting business in an informal economy, said Piard.

"There's a mentality of not keeping any trace -- nothing," Piard said about traditional financial record-keeping practices in Haiti.

Piard also helps his clients understand the importance of credit history and credit building. He also helps undocumented migrants with W-7 income tax forms.

The Sant La financial team once helped about 500 clients with their income taxes, Metellus said. Now, the figure hovers at 1,100.

Facing a housing market meltdown, it's little surprise that some clients have come seeking advice on house payments.

"Some of them have been affected by the mortgage crisis," Piard said. ``People are late six, seven months on their mortgages, they owe \$8,000 and \$14,000 on their mortgages."

Sant La also has attracted non-Haitian clients, hailing from far-flung places such as China and Greece and closer locales such as Cuba and Trinidad and Tobago.

Some come from Francophone West Africa.

"At first I thought it was just for Haitians, but then I realized everybody could go," said Esther Kuisseu, a 33-year-old nurse from Cameroon. ``They did a good job."

Kuisseu and her husband Justin, a hotel worker, had discovered Sant La three years ago while walking down Biscayne Boulevard.

They've returned ever since.