



"Haitians have been very productive in the American society," says Carl-Henry Joseph of Spring Valley, "and this country has given us a lot, too." NANCY CUTLER/JOURNAL NEWS

Haitian immigrants rocked by rancor

Trump, Vance rhetoric is no surprise, they say

Nancy Cutler

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The Haitian diaspora around the Hudson Valley again hear their brethren and their culture derided and disrespected. For Haitian-Americans, new accusations may be shocking, but not surprising.

Several recently expressed heartbreak over stereotypes being spewed about Haitians. The added insult, they say: the long-dismissed rumors are being spread by former President Trump and Sen. JD Vance as a campaign technique as they run for president and vice president on the GOP ticket.

The invectives and accusations do not match the community they know, one that values education, hard work and family.

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"The best part of my life I've given to this country," says Denet Alexandre, 63, who came to the U.S. from Haiti in 1986 and now lives in Hillcrest. PETER CARR/JOURNAL NEWS

Haitians

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“Haitians have been very productive in the American society,” said Carl-Henry Joseph, one of several Haitian-Americans to share how they’ve built a life in the Lower Hudson Valley. “And this country has given us a lot too.”

Spring Valley is home to the second-largest Haitian diaspora per capita in the U.S.; according to the 2020 U.S. Census data, about 1.5 million people living in the U.S. were either born in Haiti or had a parent born there.

Joseph’s recommendation to Americans of Haitian descent watching the degrading rumors again swirl: “Register to vote.”

35 years ago, they blamed Haitians for AIDS

Joseph came to the U.S. at age 15. He recently retired as an investigator for the New York State Department of Labor.

A former Spring Valley village trustee, Joseph attended what was then called Pomona Junior High and graduated from Ramapo High School.

“I’m a local kid,” said Joseph, 65.

Hearing the words about Haitian immigrants come from the mouths of a major political party’s top candidates, Joseph said, was appalling. “It’s really hurtful,” he said outside Konbit Neg Lakay, a community center in Spring Valley that’s been helping immigrants since 1996.

Such scapegoating of Haitians is hardly new, Joseph said.

He recalled how, in 1990, tens of thousands marched across the Brooklyn Bridge in protest of the U.S. government’s classification of Haitians as high risk for AIDS and the Food and Drug Administration’s ban on blood donations from people from Haiti. The FDA subsequently rescinded the policy.

Such stereotyping is not only generational, Joseph said, it’s historical. “Are we still paying the consequences of 1804?”

That was when Haiti became the first independent state in the Caribbean, self-liberating from France and slavery. But it was a nation born in debt, having to pay reparations to its past enslavers, and in isolation, because many Western powers feared the model of a free Black state when slavery was still in force.

Even though Haitians helped fight the American Revolution, the U.S. government failed to recognize the country until 1862.

Flashback to ‘s---hole’ comment about Haiti

Florence Pierre Pierre, a registered nurse and president of the Haitian American Nurses Association of the Hudson Valley, was born in Haiti and came to the U.S. at age 6. She grew up in Nyack and now lives in New City. A mother-baby nurse, she works at a hospital in New Jersey.



Florence Pierre Pierre, president of the Haitian American Nurses Association of the Hudson Valley, speaks at a Sept. 17 press conference outside Konbit Neg Lakay in Spring Valley that called on elected officials to condemn rumors about Haitians eating pets. NANCY CUTLER/LOHUD

“This definitely hit hard,” she said.

Pierre Pierre attended a Sept. 17 press conference held by former U.S. Rep. Mondaire Jones, who is again running to represent the 17th Congressional District, and former state Sen. Elijah Reichlin-Melnick, who is running to again represent the state Senate District 38. The two Democrats have called on their Republican opponents, U.S. Rep. Mike Lawler and state Sen. Bill Weber, to condemn Trump and Vance for spreading lies about Haitians. While both incumbents have slammed anti-Haitian rhetoric, neither named the two candidates at the top of their ticket.

Pierre Pierre recalled that Trump had invoked tropes about Haitians before. Then-President Trump reportedly said all Haitians had AIDS in a June 2017 meeting about immigration. In 2018, Trump was accused of categorizing Haiti and African nations as “s---hole countries” during a meeting in the Oval Office.

The Trump administration ramped up deportations of Haitians, despite political and environmental chaos in Haiti.

Pierre Pierre called Vance and Trump’s baseless claims that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, are eating cats and dogs “the lowest.” But she also said it’s a continuum:

“We had AIDS, we were eating dirt and branches. ... Now we’re eating cats and dogs.”

Pierre Pierre leads an organization of highly educated health care professionals. Her family and friends of Haitian descent are doctors, lawyers, engineers. “But somehow people still try to portray us as immigrants who don’t conform to American society,” she said.

‘They know the contributions we have made’

“Red meat to the base,” Denet Alexandre says with a wave of his hand as he discussed the ongoing rhetoric portraying Haitian immigrants as “illegal” and unable to fit into “civilized” society.

Most Haitian immigrants, including those in Springfield, are in the country legally and with permission to work under a couple of special programs that include Temporary Protected Status and a humanitarian parole program.

Trump, Vance and others pushing the narrative know they will “upset the base and galvanize them,” said Alexandre, who recently retired as a school counselor in the East Ramapo district. “It’s sad in a country like the United States, where you would think ideas would win the argument.”

Alexandre, 63, came to the U.S. from Haiti in 1986, in his early 20s. “The best part of my life I’ve given to this country,” the Hillcrest resident said during a discussion at Finkelstein Memorial Library in Spring Valley, where he’s served on the board of trustees, including as president for more than a decade.

His work in East Ramapo, volunteerism with the library and with the Scouts, has allowed Alexandre to watch many young people of Haitian heritage succeed as doctors, lawyers, scientists. “Without exaggeration, we make the United States a more sophisticated country.”

Alexandre noted that as Haitians have long been scapegoated here, the U.S. has long benefited from Haiti, even when it was fighting for its freedom from France. “It distracted Napoleon,” he said of Haiti’s revolution. That’s how the U.S. acquired the Louisiana Territory in 1803, which doubled the country’s size with resource-rich land.

Alexandre said the new blame game that targets Haitians harkens to the past rounds of discrimination that this immigrant group of Black and brown people have faced: “For me, it’s déjà vu.”

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