

**Community Workshop:  
“Circles of Change: A Quiet Revolution in Haiti”**

January 18, 2006, 6:00-8:30 PM  
American Friends Service Committee  
15 Rutherford Place, New York 10003

A Continuing Dialogue on Healthy Democracy in Haiti  
Presented by the Haitian-American Community Dialogue\*

**Proceedings Summary**

As part of ongoing efforts to promote greater cooperation within the Haitian community in New York and based on action recommendations from the November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005 community forum, the Haitian-American Community Dialogue (HACD) organized a community workshop entitled, ***Circles of Change: A Quiet Revolution in Haiti***. Fourteen people attended the workshop, including four members of the HACD planning group.

John Engle and Jean Plaisir, of Beyond Borders (see bios below), led the workshop. They presented a video documentary and led a discussion on an innovative approach to leadership development and community organizing in Haiti. Through grassroots techniques such as “Open Space” and “Reflection Circles,” the project seeks to transform the notion of education and leadership and to nurture a culture of democracy and tolerance in Haiti and in the diaspora.

The documentary features different members of the Haitian society, including teachers, students, and community leaders, as they reflect on the notions of communication, respect, and equality among Haitians and inside Haitian institutions such as the school and the family. Topics that come up in the film include authoritarianism in Haitian society, the need for constructive dialogue in which people actively listen to one another and respect each other’s opinions, and the potential of the education system to encourage speaking freely or thinking critically.

A brief discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the Haitian educational system followed the showing of the video during which the group talked about their own experiences with the education system in Haiti and the question of critical thinking and active listening as keys to good schooling and building a democratic society.

The workshop participants were then invited to create agenda of topics to be discussed with an abbreviated Open Space process for the rest of the workshop. Topics that were suggested included:

- Security in daily life versus hijacking
- What happens around the coming elections
- Education and conflict
- How to organize the Haitian-American diaspora to have a voice as one community

- Dual nationality
- Civic education and opportunities (education and civic responsibility)
- Dialogue as a way to build mutual trust and respect among Haitians.

Participants then chose their topic of interest and broke into small groups for discussion. Below are a few reflections made by participants, at the end of the small group discussions:

- We need to define a Haitian agenda to express our concerns as we come together, speak loud and with confidence.
- We need to organize resources, get people to vote and manage our “power” in the US.
- In re discussion on the role of family and education, we need to make character building and civic participation part of the education system in Haiti to produce better citizens. But parents and family should also play a role in developing children’s character, etc.

As the workshop was only an introduction to the method, many topics did not get discussed. To conclude, each person was invited to share briefly reflections and impressions about his/her experience in Open Space. Participants agreed that the Open Space method was effective in managing problems and differences. All supported the use of active listening, and felt that disagreement was a healthy element in dialogue. They also agreed that we should maintain this constructive method of dialogue.

The presenters:

**John Engle:** is cofounder of US-based Beyond Borders and Haiti-based Limyè Lavi Foundation. He coordinates Circles of Change, a Haiti program that promotes participatory learning and leadership. He also facilitates the Open Space meeting approach with US-based organizations and serves on the board of the Open Space institute. Prior to living in Haiti (1991-2004), John spent seven years in the for-profit sector.

**Jean Y. Plaisir,** a New York-based teacher educator, has worked with various grassroots organizations in New York, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. His vision is to promote peace and social justice through education and leadership. He is a board member of Beyond Borders.

The HACD welcomes new participants. Please feel free to contact the HACD at the AFSC for more information: 212-598-0957 or [haitiandialogue@afsc.org](mailto:haitiandialogue@afsc.org).

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\* The Haitian-American Community Dialogue was brought together with the objective of addressing the obstacles to building healthy and sustainable institutions in the Haitian-American community via constructive dialogue within the community. Informal explorations were undertaken in the fall of 1995 to assess the feasibility of the Dialogue. The program was formally established in July 1997 when the first Haitian-American Community Dialogue took place with a weekend problem solving workshop. The HACD is hosted by the New York regional office of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). To learn more visit our Internet pages at: <http://www.afsc.org/nymetro/conflictresolution/CRHACdialogue.htm>.