

SPIRITS UPLIFTED RESIDENTS FROM TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO WILL CELEBRATE THE ISLANDS' INDEPENDENCE AUG. 31 IN A LAUDERHILL FESTIVAL

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Living in a multicultural society can have unexpected benefits-such as getting a day off for every group's holidays.

"By law, all religious holidays must be celebrated in Trinidad," said Jerry Alleyne-Nagee, a Trinidadian native who lives in Miami and publishes the monthly *Caribbean Contact* newspaper. "We get Christmas, Easter and Corpus Christi off, but we also take the main Hindu and Muslim holidays," she said.

While immigrants from Trinidad & Tobago don't have that privilege in south Florida, the plethora of holidays in that Caribbean island nation is a reflection of the multinational nature of its residents, including a large number of people from African heritage and a significant group that comes from an Indian background.

"It started with the British who, when slavery was abolished, brought in indentured labor from India," explained George Rahael of Coral Springs who also counts Syrian ancestors in his family tree. "Indians were brought to work both in Trinidad and in what was then called British Guyana. That decision was made by the sugar company that controlled the operation of property and mills there."

Rahael said that other Caribbean islands did not develop a sizeable Indian population because the sugar companies that operated there chose to import labor from other locations.

Reflecting that there are often tensions when people of different people live together, Rahael said that as a people, Trinidadians "have learned to be very tolerant and to embrace each other's culture."

"Barriers will break down as people get to know each other's music and food and invite others into their homes," he reflected. "Trinidadians are more easy going and more tolerant."

That tolerant, easy-going nature has helped immigrants from the two-island nation of Trinidad & Tobago to settle easily into south Florida where Spanish is a widely spoken language and Latin Americans make up the majority of the population.

"Spanish is not a problem," asserted Alleyne-Nagee. "Trinidad has a strong Spanish element and we are very close to Venezuela. Many Venezuelans come to Trinidad to learn and we go there frequently to shop."

While many of south Florida's Latin immigrants have come here to escape political or economic turmoil, most of those from Trinidad & Tobago come for education, economic opportunity or private reasons, according to Harold Robertson, the Miami-based Consul General.

"Our preliminary guestimate, based on those who registered for elections in Trinidad, is that there are between 15,000 and 20,000 Trinidadians in south Florida," Robertson said. "They are spread out all over, with most of them in Broward County, but a large group in Orlando and in Miami as well as in Lauderdale Lakes, Lauderhill and West Palm Beach."

Robertson said that the immigrants range from professionals to business people to mechanics and some who are unskilled. "They don't have too many problems settling in here," he said. "Jobs and housing are a critical factor, but generally they just blend into the society."

"We are very friendly people," said Pat O'Brien of Boca Raton who came here from Trinidad 16 years ago. "We make friends and have fit in. We have become accustomed to American food as well as Indian and Chinese food."

O'Brien said that kidnapping has become a problem in Trinidad, and some of the more recent immigrants have come here because of that kind of social disruption on the island.

"Be nature, we tend to get involved," Rahael said. "We are very politically aware and we get to know what happens around us. Then we get involved in schools, organizations and churches."

Religious participation is a significant part of life, according to Victor Soomar of Hollywood. "It's a part of our culture," he said. Soomar is a Deacon at Lighthouse Ministries, a newly formed church in Miramar that began in early July and is reaching out to people from Trinidad and other Caribbean islands."

"Our church is a little different," he explained. "It's not as laid back as some other churches, it's more up-tempo and the service lasts for two to three hours."

O'Brien is active at St. Jude Roman Catholic Church in Boca Raton. "There are a group of us from Trinidad in this area and we all attend there," she explained.

The Roman Catholic Church is the predominant Christian group in Trinidad, followed by the Anglicans and other Protestant groups.

"The church used to have a loud voice in the community during the 1960s and 70s," said Patrick Loobie of Miami who has lived here for 22 years. "Now it's not a dominant voice anymore."

However, religious practice will be a part of the upcoming celebration of two Trinidadian holidays here--Independence Day on August 31 and the country's admittance to the British Commonwealth on September 24.

A special Thanksgiving Mass will be celebrated at 10 a.m., on September 14 at Christ the King Roman Catholic Church, 16000 SW 112th Avenue in Miami. Father Reginald Hezekiah of Trinidad will travel to Miami for the occasion.

Other celebrations will also involve several carnivals and the preparation of traditional foods from the islands.

"We enjoy cooking food from our own culture, but it is a mix of foods from the different cultures," said Pauline Rahael, George Rahael's wife. "We can get most of the ingredients we need from Publix, but we have to get some special types of corn meal and green leaves from West Indian markets."

"We like Pelau, which is a rice and meat dish with a lot of spices," explained O'Brien. "We like to use a lot of spices, you name it, we use it. Our food is not bland at all."

O'Brien also enjoys Indian Roti, a mix of meat, spice and potatoes wrapped in a flour-type of tortilla.

"It's a kind of pita bread," explained Pradeep Sawh of Sunrise who operates Joy's Roti Delight, a small business tucked back in a corner behind the Lauderhill Mall in Lauderhill. "It's like a sandwich that people dip into meat."

The meat used in Roti can range from the common chicken or beef to goat meat, shrimp, conch or ox-tail. Also on the menu are Doubles, commonly a breakfast food consisting of chickpeas enclosed in a patty.

In addition to serving typical Trinidadian food, Sawh's restaurant has become a gathering place for the local Trinidad and Tobago community. "People know that they can come here and relax, eat good food, and enjoy island music," said Sawh's father, Joy, who along with his mother and brother operate the popular eating place.

"If you are looking for somebody, you will probably find them here," the elder Sawh said. "If you wait here for three hours, you never know who you will see."

Among those eating at Joy's Roti Delight on a recent Saturday was Ralph Sooden of Lauderhill who had just come from a Steel Pan band presentation at the nearby Lauderhill Swap Shop. "We play there every Saturday and Sunday afternoon," he said.

"We do it for cultural reasons," Sooden explained, referring to a children's steel drum band that he has also helped start. The group, for kids seven years old and up, meets each Monday and Wednesday evening at 7 p.m. in the parking lot just outside of the restaurant.

Sawh's restaurant is one of several businesses and organizations that are sponsoring a Trinidad & Tobago Multicultural Day from 2 until 10 p.m. on August 31 at the Lauderhill Mall. Entertainment will be provided by several musical groups including the Lauderhill Steel Ensemble. Typical island cuisine will also be available.

Events:

Independence Ball, Saturday, August 23, 7 p.m., at Kovens Center, FIU, 3000 N.E. 151st Street, Miami. Cost: \$50. For more information and reservations, call 954-741-5428.

Sunday, August 31, 2-10 p.m., Trinidad & Tobago Multicultural Day at Lauderhill Mall. Music, typical food. Free admission.

Sunday, September 14, 10 a.m., Thanksgiving Mass at Christ the King Roman Catholic Church, 16000 SW 112th Avenue in Miami. Father Reginald Hezekiah of Trinidad will travel to Miami for the occasion. Free

RESIDENTS FROM TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO WILL CELEBRATE THE ISLANDS' INDEPENDENCE AUG. 31 IN A LAUDERHILL FESTIVAL, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, Aug 4, 2003