

MEETING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY MIAMI'S HAITIAN COMMUNITY THROUGH PARTNERSHIP AND CONSISTENCY

Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami - FANM
(Haitian Women of Miami)
Miami, FL

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Marleine Bastien, Executive Director, FANM

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Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami, Inc.
8320 N.E. 2nd Avenue
Miami, FL 33138
Phone: 305-756-8050
Fax: 305-756-8150
Email: marleine_bastien@hotmail.com

SUMMARY: Since 1991, Marleine Bastien and her colleagues at FANM have been providing **direct service, leadership development** and **advocacy programs** for Miami's Haitian women. FANM also builds relationships with other organizations representing Miami's many diverse ethnic groups, enabling it to **impact public policies** that affect immigrants and refugees. Despite a particularly harsh political climate for immigrants, the organization effectively pursues the following strategies:

- **Build Strong Ties Where None Existed Before:** FANM asserts that all immigrants, not only Haitians, face unfair treatment. It regularly forms strategic partnerships and coalitions. Bastien and her colleagues foster a network of organizations that can tackle policy issues and individual rights violations. They work collectively and on each other's behalf. They resist both the historic isolation of immigrant groups and the classic "divide and conquer" tactics of those opposed to immigrant rights.
- **Gain Community Support By Delivering Consistent, Reliable Services:** "Anything that has to do with the Haitian community, the first door they're gonna knock on is FANM's door," says Jean Gervais, a FANM program coordinator. The organization attends to multiple facets of each person's needs, including legal, financial and emotional. This approach builds trust and results in community support for FANM's broader efforts.
- **Communicate Broadly:** The organization educates the Haitian community in Miami through Creole radio, fairs and markets, and bi-monthly meetings. It also strategically uses these resources at times to mobilize community members.
- **Invest in a Legacy of Leadership:** FANM plays a unique role in educating Miami's Haitian women about health, immigrant rights, domestic violence and other issues. It trains women who are organizing for worker rights and provides seed money and technical assistance for women to develop small businesses.

The following story illustrates FANM's holistic approach to serving the Haitian community:

MAGNIFYING THE IMPACT; FOCUSING ON A COMMON CAUSE

Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami

Writers: Angie Chan and Jonathan Walters

Co-researchers: Marleine Bastien (Award Recipient); Angie Chan (NYU/LCW)

A Call to Action

October 29, 2001 started off like any other day for the staff and volunteers of FANM—Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami (Haitian Women of Miami), a community organization providing social services and advocacy for Haitian immigrants and refugees in Miami. Suddenly, the phone lines in their office sprang to life. A boatload of Haitian refugees had just arrived on the shores of Miami. Like so many refugees, the Haitians were fleeing the poverty and political instability of their home country in the hope of finding asylum and a new life in the United States.

Marleine Bastien, Executive Director of FANM, and one of her staff members immediately headed to Key Biscayne where the refugees had landed. The scene was alarming: mothers throwing their young children overboard hoping that they would reach the shore; families huddled on the beach in their wet clothes with no one helping them; all of them hungry and exhausted from an arduous eight-day voyage with practically no food or water. The attention that the refugees were getting was also alarming. Many of them, including children, were detained immediately upon reaching the shore and swept away indefinitely.

Within hours, FANM staff members were speaking on Creole radio to inform the Haitian community of what had happened and to mobilize them for action. At the same time, FANM called on their partners --Haitian and non-Haitian activists and community groups--to rally support for the new arrivals. That very night, Haitians and non-Haitians from all over Miami gathered at Key Biscayne to demonstrate and demand fair and humane treatment for the refugees. So many demonstrators arrived that they tied up local traffic for hours. But the message did not stop there. The group of demonstrators made their way to the entrance of the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) building (now part of the Department of Homeland Security) to continue their call for fair treatment and freedom for the refugees. Meanwhile, FANM and other community leaders gathered in a nearby restaurant to craft a plan to sustain the pressure on the INS. They wanted to promote the interim goal of obtaining the detainees' release and the long-term goal of ensuring equal treatment for them in asylum proceedings.

For an entire month following the initial demonstration, the diverse members of the Miami community rallied each day in front of the INS building with FANM. Many non-affiliated people would demonstrate alongside FANM for eight, nine and sometimes ten hours. Aline Francois, the Social Work Supervisor at FANM, recalls some of these demonstrations continuing until "one o'clock in the morning, still running strong."

FANM's activities drew a lot of attention. By asking other Haitian refugees in Miami to share their stories and by using powerful images such as women struggling to carry their babies ashore, FANM began sensitizing the Miami community to the plight of Haitian refugees. Through their strong and sustained advocacy efforts, FANM and its activist allies aided the release of 27 out of 36 refugee children being held in detention. Additionally, 102 women and men were eventually released after a year of street actions, community education and advocacy. There is great hope that

many more of these refugees will be released and be granted political asylum, say FANM activists.

FANM's rapid action on the day of the incident, along with its sustained drive to win the release of the detainees is powerful evidence of its ability to mobilize its partners and friends in times of need. While the result of this effort was impressive, the ability to spark and sustain such action, a trademark of FANM's work, did not come easily. Such success relies on years of building trust and credibility among different groups in Miami, and of articulating common issues and concerns. In developing this capacity, FANM has had to overcome financial, political, cultural, and racial barriers to action by joining with other groups in Miami, and by involving Haitian members of the local community in the fight for refugee and immigrant human rights.

Getting Started

Marleine Bastien arrived in Miami as a Haitian immigrant in 1981. Soon after her arrival, she began volunteering as a paralegal at the Haitian Refugee Center. For five years in this capacity, she made daily visits to Florida's Krome Detention Center to help detained Haitians complete their political asylum applications and prepare them for their asylum hearings. In the course of her work, she says she witnessed not only brazen disregard for basic refugee and immigrant rights, but also the power of advocacy to confront that kind of injustice.

In 1991, Bastien and a small group of Haitian immigrant women in Miami launched FANM as a platform for advocacy and action that would address the cultural, social, and financial difficulties faced by the Haitian immigrants and refugees.

Initially, FANM's purpose was to help Haitian women and their families adjust to their new lives in Miami. The organization has since developed into a broader community-based social services agency for Haitian refugees and immigrants in Miami. FANM has created programs that address the needs of multiple clients and populations.

While FANM addresses virtually all of their clients' basic needs, including food, shelter, transportation and legal assistance, through various activities. It also operates four core programs: 1) Family Intervention and Women Empowerment Program, which provides counseling and other social services to Haitian women and their families in need; 2) Women Worker Empowerment, which identifies and trains Haitian women leaders to support nursing home workers in their push for better wages and working conditions; 3) Immigration Advocacy and Services, which provides advocacy for fair immigration laws and practices and equal treatment for Haitian immigrants, and; 4) Community Economic Development, which provides women seed money and technical assistance to start their own small businesses.

Apart from the resource constraints experienced by most small, community-based non-profit organizations, FANM is also beset by challenges resulting from an anti-immigrant political climate, a lack of cultural awareness between Haitians and non-Haitians, segregation, and the crisis-driven nature of their work.

A Harsher Climate for Immigrants

According to stakeholders inside and outside of FANM, U.S. immigration policy in a post-9/11 world has become more restrictive and punitive. Greater numbers of refugees are being turned

away at the border, and the process for becoming a citizen is increasingly time-consuming and arduous. "The current political climate, in terms of federal policy, has never been worse," says Steve Forester, FANM's Policy Advocate. "Haitians have come here as boat people since the '70s, and while dealing with the Immigration Service has always been difficult, we have been able, prior to the Bush administration, to get better policies at times. Certainly under the prior administrations, people were detained, but through advocacy efforts and otherwise, one was able to make a crack, a dent in it." Forester acknowledges that the anti-immigrant political climate challenges all immigrant groups, but Haitian refugees in particular have recently been subject to an indefinite detention policy, Coast Guard interdiction, and criminal prosecution.

The prevailing political climate, however, is simply a reflection of attitudes in the broader community, say FANM staff and community members. Racial tension between Haitians and non-Haitians has always existed in Miami, but recent shifts towards anti-immigrant policies have exacerbated the problem. They also note that Haitians historically have suffered discrimination in obtaining health care, employment, housing, and positions in local government. But the overall political context for immigration today has created deep-seeded fear among Haitian refugees and other immigrants in Miami.

Caught between the harsh policies of the U.S. government and the memories of the violence and swift retribution of the dictatorships of "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier in Haiti, as well as the current political instability that exists now, many Haitian refugees are very reluctant to openly voice their concerns or take action. "Some people are afraid to speak up," says Bastien. "They are afraid to go to rallies, afraid to stand up for their rights; they are numbed by the possible fear of reprisals. The challenge is really to keep people motivated, to keep them mobilized, to get them to go beyond that fear and move them to action."

Sewing Together the Patchwork

Another challenge for FANM is the cultural diversity and segregation in Miami. The city is populated by a wide variety of ethnic groups of different socio-economic backgrounds, such as Haitians, African-Americans, Cubans, Whites, and other Hispanics. This diversity creates a patchwork of ethnic communities in Miami. Historically, each community has been geographically isolated and insulated, with communities working relatively independently on their own issues and for their own interests.

FANM realized that the multiple challenges it faced, in addition to the common constraints placed on community-based organizations, required that the organization be creative, collaborative and quick in mobilizing support, as was the case during the October 29th crisis. But creating a network that can apply significant pressure on the establishment takes a huge amount of groundwork that includes building trust and loyalty within and among diverse communities, emphasizing the humanity of all the people it helps, educating constituencies to the importance of collective action, and perhaps most important, leading by example.

Because of Miami's diversity and segregation, FANM would be in a weak position if it were to fight alone. Not only would FANM be competing with other ethnic groups to obtain favorable policies and fairer treatment from government, it would also be bound by its limited resources. FANM understands this dynamic. As a result, the staff builds strong ties between ethnic groups where they virtually never existed before. FANM, says Bastien, has worked hard to communicate

the larger scope of the issue with other groups: the challenges and injustices faced by the Haitians are not solely Haitian issues; they are immigrant issues. Likewise, the hardships that plague refugees and immigrants are not unique to them, but are familiar to all members of society who suffer from discrimination.

Through these partnerships and coalitions, FANM has demonstrated the multiplying effect of community-wide collaboration for advocacy and action. By focusing on what these different groups have in common—the desire for fair treatment, not only of refugees and immigrants, but all minority groups—FANM has been able to build relationships that have helped make it effective, and also sustain its work in good times and bad.

Not only has FANM built power through numbers, the strategy of coalition building with other ethnic groups allows the organization to counter the ‘divide and conquer’ tactics often employed by those opposing immigrant and refugee rights initiatives. By evincing a ready willingness to go to bat for other groups, FANM has helped create a reciprocating network of advocacy organizations, one that is constantly reaching out to new constituencies. Max Rameau, a local activist and partner of FANM, recalls the first time African Americans joined Haitians in a significant way. It was a case in which the Miami police had been accused of brutality against a Haitian immigrant. “It [the joint demonstration] was important. It marked the beginning of a real relationship between the African American and the Haitian communities,” says Rameau. It would be the beginning of a partnership that now works regularly to tackle issues of mutual concern, he says.

Initially, says Bastien, some members of the African American community were skeptical of the potential partnership. “[Some] were wondering why they should support our issues. Why should they join our struggle when they have their own struggle? What is in it for them?” Her argument was straightforward: “Our issues may be different, but the system that denies us our rights, the system that tramples our rights, is the same system. And if we get together, if we organize together, we can better impact that system.”

For FANM, such relationships are necessary and valuable, but they also can be messy and risky. As some FANM staff observe, there may be times when no one dares to defend a partner organization in a politically unpopular cause. But these advocates also note that FANM makes it a point to step up and help precisely at such times. As the October 29th demonstrations show, such bold actions often are recognized and reciprocated by their partner organizations. FANM’s coalition members knew when it was time to return the favor.

But FANM’s participation in coalitions and partnerships is not just about facilitating their work nor is it about strategy, according to FANM supporters and activists. FANM operates on the assumption that inclusion is the natural order of things: that the true spirit of activism and human rights demands it. The organization is grounded in a sincere belief in the unity of humankind, say FANM advocates. Therefore, by enlarging their scope of work and by embracing larger swaths of humanity, they gain support for their root cause without the risk of alienating potential allies.

Cementing Your Base

While FANM has been able to overcome the limitations of its small size by working in formal coalitions and partnerships, it also is able to make a large impact on community affairs because of

the considerable support that it receives from the Haitian community in Miami. Those who have followed FANM's work say that support has been built up over the years by demonstrating organizational consistency, reliability, and fairness in terms of the social services that it provides, the message that it advances to the public, and its presence in the community. According to those who have dealt with the organization, FANM's staff is known for their commitment, and their genuine concern for the Haitian community. As one of the staff members notes, "You build trust in the Haitian community by doing what you say you're going to do." FANM delivers on its promises to support, inform, and generally assist Haitian refugees and immigrants. In return, the community offers their loyalty and support for FANM's activities.

Such support is based on FANM's policy of treating every person seeking help as unique and equally important, say FANM staff. The organization approaches each client's problems from multiple angles and gives a significant amount of attention to each person in order to address all the issues at hand, including those that lie beneath the surface. In that way, FANM attends to each client's legal, financial, emotional, psychological, and physical needs. The staff does not set a limit on the type of services that they will provide. The result of this humanistic and holistic approach is personalized, immediate, thoughtful and compassionate treatment of their clients. "Anything that has to do with the Haitian community, the first door they're gonna knock at is FANM's door," says Jean Gervais, FANM's Economic Development coordinator. "For every, every, every reason, every problem. We are helping people in every area."

Influencing Public Opinion

Treating refugees and immigrants as individuals with their own unique and legitimate issues is not only a value firmly held by FANM, it is also one that the staff tries to impart to the entire Miami-Dade County community as well, regardless of ethnicity. When the refugees arrived on Miami's shores by boat on October 29th, for example, they were essentially treated like criminals. Through the stories of the refugees themselves, FANM worked to sensitize the larger community to the plight of Haitian refugees. Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, an attorney in Miami, the president of the American Civil Liberties Union Miami branch, and a partner of FANM, says, "If it hadn't been for FANM, there would not have been a sensitizing that these were human beings. This country and this community have become very, very insensitive to the plight of immigrants and we're fighting a war on terrorism that has become a war on immigrants. It was FANM and the Haitian women sensitizing people to the plight of these women that even gave us a fighting chance in that battle."

Building Leadership Through Education

FANM realizes that winning sympathy for the plight of refugees and immigrants is only half the equation. The other half is to help acclimate newly arrived refugees and immigrants to an unfamiliar world. FANM offers a variety of education programs and projects that aim to help Haitians enter American society. The programs include everything from offering formal classes to prepare immigrants for their citizenship tests, to communicating more generally the importance of public participation, freedom of speech, and civic duty. At the same time, FANM tries to sensitize U.S. officials and public servants to Haitian culture and the difficulties associated with adjusting to a new life in a new country. This type of cultural sensitivity teaching—albeit informal—has helped to ease the tensions that may occur between Haitians and non-Haitians, say those familiar with FANM's work.

But because FANM is focused mainly on the livelihood of Haitian women, much of their education effort aims at giving women information about their health, domestic violence, children and family support, and immigrant issues. These efforts help Haitian women to take charge of the issues and problems that affect their lives. FANM tries to make this information widely accessible by spreading it through Creole radio, by participating in community fairs and markets, and by organizing bi-monthly community meetings.

Apart from FANM, no other organization initiates such activities specifically to support Haitian women, and to develop leadership skills among those women. This investment in education and community organizing is intended to build a legacy of leadership in the Haitian community so that when the current leaders are no longer around, others will be ready to rise to the challenge and continue FANM's work, says Bastien.

"Home-Grown Concern"

Much of FANM's dedication to the Haitian community can be attributed to their first-hand understanding of the plight of the Haitian refugees and immigrants, note FANM supporters and activists. The staff members of FANM appreciate the circumstances of their clients because they have been working closely with Haitian refugees and immigrants for years and because many of them are Haitian immigrants themselves. They have direct knowledge of what Haitians--both in Haiti and Miami--face every day. Jean-Robert Lafortune, President of the Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition, explains that Bastien and many on her staff are "home grown" and have spent time "in the trenches." In other words, FANM staff and activists did not 'parachute' into Miami from afar to provide simple fixes to problems about which they know little.

FANM staff and activists live and breathe Haitian refugee and immigrant rights, say observers. They demonstrate their dogged pursuit of the cause, and their commitment to their friends and partners in all of their work. FANM uses its strength, vision and commitment to Haitian immigrants and refugees in Miami to provide inspiration to its partners, volunteers, and community members, and to challenge them to step up and develop new ways of dealing with issues facing the community. As a result, FANM's strategies and activities have galvanized important parts of Miami's community in the cause of equal treatment, not only of Haitians, but of all ethnic groups.

Because of the scope of its concern and its willingness to fight for all who need the support, FANM has been able to meet all the challenges thrown at it. Although it is a small, community-based organization working within a complex and challenging context, FANM continues to be remarkably effective.

FANM's approach of lining up allies and then tackling issues, of taking on a wide variety of work, and of helping all who come through its doors and of demanding change from a society and political system that has often dealt harshly with newcomers, has made it a force to be reckoned with in the Miami area. By developing relationships, building trust, understanding clients, and fostering leadership, FANM activists have been able to earn the support of diverse community members and groups, thereby giving them the strength and the voice to carry on, while significantly magnifying the impact of its work.

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