

PERFORMING ARTS    AUGUST 8, 2016 9:51 PM

# Group showcases African arts and culture in Miami-Dade, Broward

Miami's Little Haiti embraces African dance festival



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The Little Haiti Cultural Center hosted the African Diaspora Dance & Drum Festival of Florida, a cultural arts and education festival, on Saturday, Aug. 6, 2016. The festival featured dance and drum workshops, including Nancy St. Leger's Hatian folklore dance workshop. **Shannon Kaestle** - [skaestle@miamiherald.com](mailto:skaestle@miamiherald.com)

BY CHRISTIAN PORTILLA  
[info@roamfreewrites.com](mailto:info@roamfreewrites.com)

When Njeri Plato moved in 1981 from Brooklyn to Miami, she had a hard time fitting in. The dance instructor of Trinidadian descent decided she wanted to bridge the cultural gap the best way she knew how — through dance expression.

“I joined a group that did a little African dance, but it wasn't authentic. I saw the need to put more into it; it's more than shaking your body. It tells your story,” Plato said. “African dance always tells something about life.”

These stories celebrate the births of children, agriculture and wedding announcements. Each story carefully symbolizes a milestone in a person's life. Plato said not only is it important to teach people the expression of their bodies, but the expression of their history.

In 2010, she founded Delou Africa as a way to showcase African dance and culture to the South Florida community. She established it as a nonprofit to expand the brand and movement across Miami-Dade and Broward counties.

Last weekend, both counties celebrated the African diaspora.

Delou Africa's main dance show took place at the Miramar Cultural Center.

"We have connected the diaspora. We have Cuba, Haiti, United States, Colombia, Mali, Guinea and Senegal Africans here. When we speak of the diaspora we are talking about people that came from Africa and went all over the world," Plato said. "Dance and music have no barriers; it's a universal language. We may speak two different languages, but when we start dancing, we can look at each other and relate because we are just expressing ourselves from the inside out."

The second leg of the festival took place at the Little Haiti Cultural Center in Miami, which doubled as a crafts market. Hollow drum vibrations could be felt throughout the halls and musicians sang chants as dancers rotated their hips with each slap of the barrels.

The market also featured food vendors, a fashion show, a children's village and a health fair, where visitors and vendors walked around decked out in their most colorful kaftans.

Ahmed Jordan attended with his mother, Ima. He helped her sell stone accessories and said he's grateful she taught him about his culture, that some other children are not as lucky. Jordan, who was born in Africa and raised in Philadelphia, said he also found it difficult to identify with his culture once he moved to Miami.

"African culture is not as big in Miami as it is in other major cities in America, so when it does

come to Miami I'm ecstatic. It's almost mandatory for me to come to these events," Jordan said. "I teach Latin and African percussion to kids in underserved areas, and I can see how they can get stuck in what's going on around them. I'm happy to teach them their culture, which they're not connected to, and familiarize them with it."

Part of Delou Africa's mission is to cater to children, according to Plato. The organization includes youngsters in engaging activities, such as its Drums over Gunz program. The classes are open for all youths ages 5 to 17, as a way to build character development and enhance communication skills.

Plato, who says she's seen how the students benefit from the classes, remembers one in particular who recently finished the children's program and performed at the commencement recital.

"He was drumming and started to look a little sad, and began to cry. I went over to nurture him and asked him what was wrong and with tears in his eyes, he said 'I don't want to stop drumming. I love to drum,'" Plato said. "It was like his testimony. And that was a testimony for me to see the children enjoy what we give them, and hopefully, they will return this knowledge to future generations."

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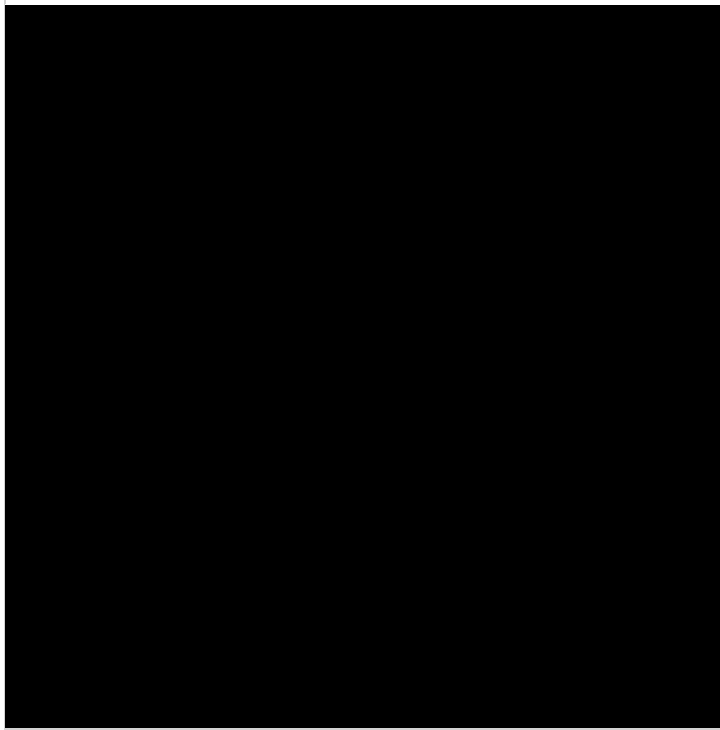


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