Promoting Guyanese arts, culture overseas

T he Guyana Cultural Association (GCA) of New York's mission is to document, showcase and celebrate the multiple roots of Guyana's cultural heritage. Through its work, the association preserves Guyanese cultural heritage, and makes it available through various channels, to inspire future generations of Guyanese at home and abroad.

The Guyana Folk Festivals, launched by the Guyana Broadcasting Corporation during the early 1980's, can be identified as one of the forces that inspired the current Guyana Cultural Association (GCA) of New York (GCA, Inc). The not-for-profit organization has organized the annual Guyana Folk Festival in New York, which is recognized as the largest “summer festival of Guyanese culture”.

Making history

In October 2000, two Guyanese immigrants, Claire Goring and Maurice Bledman organized the first Guyana Folk Festival on the grounds of Wingate High School. Both were active in celebrating Guyana’s cultural life from the early post-independence years through the 1980s.

Claire Goring had established a formidable reputation as a graphic artist and designer of the festival arts; Bledman was known as an innovative cinematographer in the Guyana Film Centre. 

Goring and Bledman organized a second folk festival in 2000 on the roof gardens of the famous Brooklyn Children’s Museum. In these venues, two cultural spaces, a cadre of Guyanese immigrant volunteers supported them, and the public’s reception of the two folk festivals was encouraging.

In 2001, Goring, Bledman and other New York-based Guyanese immigrants Claire Patterson, Malcolm Hall and Evanett Clarke decided to repurpose the dormant Guyana Cultural Association of New York with the approval of the old Board of Directors.

In 2001, Malcolm Hall was elected president of GCA, and served as president until 2010. Goring was elected cultural director, Ivan Patterson treasurer, and Dr Vibert Cambrudge vice-president.

The members of the current executive committee of the GCA board are Dr Vibert Cambrudge, president; Avi Brewster Haynes, vice president; Claire Goring, cultural director; Claire Patterson-Moham, treasurer; Dr Juliet Emmanuel, secretary; Edgar Henry, assistant to the treasurer; Rose October-Kilin, assistant to the secretary, and Maurice Braithwaite, video space for sharing new research and scholarship. In 2008, the symposium “Celebrating Mac: Folk Identity and National Cohesion” was held in Guyana. In 2012, the symposium “Masquerades Live!” will again be held in Guyana in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports.

In 2007, the literary hang is an annual gath-erning of Guyanese writers, to explore the art and craft of writing, sharing of ground of residence in New York. The performing arts festival annual event showcases Guyanese drama and the range of talents associated with the performing arts: lighting, sound, set design, acting, costuming, make up, and acting.

Under the leadership of Maurice Braithwaite, the performing arts season is also a mentoring space and a dynamic link with the community. The home for the annual performing arts festival is Brooklyn's Myer Levin High School for the Performing Arts. In 2011, the Performing Arts Season celebrates the world premiere of Francis Farrier’s adaptation of C.L. R. James’ “Minty Alley”. The organization has also supported research and scholarship. Dr Gillian Richards-Graves conducted important research for her dissertation on Kwe Kwe at York University. Richard’s-Graves conducted important research for her dissertation on Kwe Kwe at York University.

In 2011, GCA hosted the “Come to My Kwe Kwe” event. It is an annual event, and is one of the important community-building events of the Folk Festival season. This event “marries” education (on the origins and process) of the folk tradition with community dance, singing of Guyanese folk songs and onstage foods. Non-Guyanese brides and grooms-to-be are regular participants at Kwe Kwe nights.

In recent years, Guyanese leading scientists moving New York during this period would attend.

Some Guyanese performers have graced the stages at the family fun day, including Kenton Wyatt and the Kendrum group from Toronto, Canada. Dylan Douglas, who presented youth dance ensemble from Canada, and the Guyana-based Guyanese flautist, Keith Watih, who has participated in two family fun days. Dave Martina, Riz Benoit, and his dance company, Chaisique Dance Company have also performed at family fun day.

The Guyana Cultural Association of New York, Inc. has collaborated with other Guyanese organizations on innovative cultural events such as the Festival of Drums with the Rokumari Cultural Centre in Queen’s New York. In 2005, GCA collaborated with the Caribbean Cultural Theatre Alliance in mobilizing the diaspora’s response to the flood of the island of St. Lucia.

GCA works very closely with the many alumni and friends of the Guyana Diaspora in New York and the annual family fun day event provide opportunities for these alumni and hometown associations to publicize their services and raise funds.

GCA has facilitated the promotion of Guyanese music through the compilation CD ‘We: Three Music Orchids for You’ (2005). The leadership of GCA has received several prestigious awards from important arts bodies in New York. The Brooklyn Arts Council has collaborated with GCA on highly successful events such as Moonlight Storytelling.

Caribbean performers have a presence during family fun day. GCA has collaborated with the Caribbean Cultural Theatre on many initiatives. GCA’s primary goal is to establish the Guyana Cultural Association Centre by 2018, when it will be celebrating the organization’s 15th anniversary.

For more information on GCA, visit www.guyfolkfest.com.