

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS, LIBRARIES AND
INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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June 21, 2016
Start: 10:48 a.m.
Recess: 11:20 a.m.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E:

JAMES G. VAN BRAMER
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Elizabeth S. Crowley
Julissa Ferreras-Copeland
Peter A. Koo
Stephen T. Levin
Andy L. King
Costa G. Constantinides
Laurie A. Cumbo
Helen K. Rosenthal
Mathieu Eugene

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Nicole Hollant-Denis
Architect
Aarris Architects and Associates

Judith Destin
Destin Stars

James Debrosse
Attorney

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2 **TRANSCRIPTION NOTE:** Translation needed
3 at time stamps [00:06:16], [00:16:25] and [00:16:42].

4 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Good morning
5 everyone and welcome to this important, and I am sure
6 that Council Member Eugene will agree historic,
7 hearing and committee meeting for the Committee on
8 Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International
9 Intergroup Relations.

10 My name is Jimmy Van Bramer and I'm very
11 proud to be the Chair of this committee. Joining us
12 from left to right are Council Member Costa
13 Constantinides, Council Member Stephen Miller [sic],
14 Council Member Laurie Cum... [interpose background
15 comment] Did I say... [background comments] oh..
16 [background comments] Council Member Steve Levin,
17 Council Member Laurie Cumbo, Council Member Helen
18 Rosenthal, and to my immediate left, Council Member
19 Mathieu Eugene, and we are now formally in session
20 and ready to take up two very important resolutions
21 sponsored by Council Member Mathieu Eugene.

22 Res. No. 0664-A calls on Congress and the
23 President, as well as the State Legislature and the
24 Governor to establish October 9th, annually, as

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2 Haitian Day in recognition of the historic
3 contributions of Haitians to the United States.

4 Res. No. 0687-A would establish October
5 9th, annually, as New York City Haitian Day in
6 recognition of the historic contributions of the
7 Haitian diaspora to the City of New York.

8 As we all know, and as I know Council
9 Member Eugene will speak to at some length today,
10 Haitians have made great contributions to the City of
11 New York and to the United States throughout its
12 history, from major achievements in athletics, arts
13 and cultural, music, to social advancement for
14 persons of African decent, to leadership and elected
15 offices, including Council Member Eugene, from the
16 local to the national levels.

17 I want to thank, and we all thank Council
18 Member Eugene for bringing this matter to the
19 Council's attention, and I would add, for fighting so
20 hard to make sure that these resolutions saw the
21 light of the day. Perhaps only myself and Council
22 Member Eugene know how hard he fought to make sure
23 that these resolutions were passed by the New York
24 City Council. So I wanna thank him for his passion,
25 not only for the Haitian diaspora, but also for his

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2 work in the New York City Council and I know all of
3 my colleagues join in congratulating Council Member
4 Eugene on this day, which is so important to himself
5 and to so many he represents. So with that I'd like
6 to invite Council Member Eugene to give remarks on
7 this very important and historic occasion.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: Thank you. Thank
9 you very much, Chair Van Bramer, thank you.

10 I would like to thank the Cultural
11 Affairs Committee Chair Jimmy Van Bramer for bringing
12 my legislation, Res. 0664 and 0687 to a vote this
13 morning prior to this afternoon Stated Meeting at
14 City Hall.

15 Mr. Chair, I want to personally express
16 my gratitude and my thanks to you from the bottom of
17 my heart, on my behalf and on the behalf of the
18 Haitian community and on behalf of Haiti also.
19 People don't know, but I know that you fought hard to
20 bring this resolution to the chamber to be voted
21 today and I know you have been trying so hard. Thank
22 you so much and I appreciate that and I can tell you
23 that not only I will make sure that you can get the
24 visa to go to the Haitian community [sic] any time,
25 but to go to Haiti any time. But on a serious note

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2 now, thank you so much, Mr. Chair and I would like to
3 extend my gratitude to all my colleagues in the
4 Council who also sit on the Cultural Affairs
5 Committee and are prepared to cast a vote on this
6 legislation in a few moments.

7 My legislation, Res. 0664 and 0687,
8 underscore just how important where today's
9 establishment of America the Haitian people [sic].
10 It is a well known fact that Haitians have had an
11 incredible impact on the history of the United
12 States. Notably, Haitian soldiers helped the United
13 States fight for its freedom at the Battle of
14 Savannah, Georgia in 1779. Chicago was founded by
15 Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, who is of Haitian
16 ancestry and the Louisiana Purchase, which increased
17 the mass of land owned by the United States of
18 America, was only made possible because of the
19 revolution in Haiti led by Toussaint L'Ouverture.
20 Haitians have also profoundly influenced American
21 art, culture, fashion, and most importantly, ideas.

22 Haiti is a country that has always stood
23 for freedom. In 1804, Haiti became the first black
24 republic to abolish slavery. It has always been a
25 place that promotes liberty and working with one

2 another to accomplish a greater good for mankind.

3 And as we Haitians say, **[00:06:16]**.

4 In the early 1800s, Haitian
5 philanthropist Pierre Toussaint, a free slave,
6 founded an orphanage on Franklin Street in Manhattan
7 for poor boys and girls, paying for their schooling
8 and finding employment for them in addition to
9 starting a credit bureau and a refuge for priests and
10 destitute travelers. Pierre Toussaint also raised a
11 family and donated a considerable amount of his own
12 money to build the Old St. Patrick's Cathedral in
13 Manhattan, where he was the first layperson to be
14 entombed and for which he was sainted by the Catholic
15 Church in 1996 by Pope John Paul II.

16 **[inaudible]** and now famous Lecture on
17 Haiti at the World's Fair in Chicago in January of
18 1893, Frederick Douglass, who had served as Minister
19 Resident and Consul General to Haiti from 1889-1891
20 stated, and I quote:

21 "Haiti has grandly served the calls of
22 universal human liberty. We should not forget that
23 the freedom that you and I enjoy today; that the
24 freedom that eight hundred thousand colored people
25 enjoy in the British West Indies; the freedom that

2 has come to the colored race the work over, is
3 largely due to the brace stand taken by the black
4 sons of Haiti."

5 Today we are privileged to have with us
6 the wonderful sister **[inaudible]** Nicole Hollant;
7 she's in the room and she's going to testify; she's a
8 famous architect who has designed several significant
9 site and buildings in New York City, including the
10 African Burial Ground here in North [sic] Manhattan
11 and The Ark of Return, a permanent memorial of the
12 United States and the United States Nations that
13 serves as a tribute to the victims of slavery and the
14 transatlantic slave trade.

15 All too frequently Haiti is only shown in
16 the media when a natural disaster strikes or when we
17 have political disasters; these unfortunate incidents
18 do not and should not define Haitians, we are strong
19 and courageous, determined and self-reliant people;
20 we have dreams and we work every day to achieve them
21 to make sure that we can provide a better future for
22 our families and contribute to the community where we
23 live **[inaudible]** United States of America.

24 My resolution will help reshape the
25 association people conjure up when they think of

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2 Haiti, its focus [sic] and the incredible
3 achievements of our Haitian ancestors, and the
4 passing of this resolution will help the next
5 generation realize it is up to them to do their part
6 to continue to help this country; we all love the
7 United States of America. This resolution will
8 inspire my younger Haitian brothers and sisters to do
9 their part for the betterment of the society and for
10 the betterment of the United States of America. We
11 Haitians, we are doctors, nurses, scholars, taxi
12 drivers, businessmen, businesswomen, artists,
13 teachers, mothers, and fathers and through our
14 elective work we have the power to continue to join
15 our ancestors and contribute to make America stronger
16 and greater.

17 At this point I would like to ask all my
18 colleagues to vote yes on these two resolutions, and
19 thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

20 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you very
21 much, Council Member Eugene; I know we all appreciate
22 your passions for this and I know all of the members
23 of the committee are pleased to join in celebrating
24 the contributions of Haitians and Haitian Americans
25 to both the country and the City of New York. Now I

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2 know we have three folks who would love to testify
3 and will do so, but I also know that members of the
4 committee have so many other meetings and other
5 things to attend to, so I'd like to ask the clerk to
6 call the vote right now so we can vote on this matter
7 before we hear from some of the witnesses who would
8 like to testify on this very important series of
9 resolutions.

10 COMMITTEE CLERK: William Martin,
11 Committee Clerk, roll call vote Committee on Cultural
12 Affairs. Chair Van Bramer.

13 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: I vote aye.

14 COMMITTEE CLERK: Ferreras-Copeland.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER FERRERAS-COPELAND: I vote
16 aye.

17 COMMITTEE CLERK: Levin.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVIN: I vote aye.

19 COMMITTEE CLERK: Constantinides.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER CONSTANTINIDES: Aye.

21 COMMITTEE CLERK: Cumbo.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER CUMBO: Permission to
23 explain my vote. I simply just wanna thank Council
24 Member Mathieu Eugene as the first Haitian elected in
25 the City Council; we are very proud of the work that

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2 you do and that you continue to be a voice for the
3 Haitian community and all the people of the African
4 diaspora; you've made history today and I vote aye.

5 COMMITTEE CLERK: Rosenthal.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER ROSENTHAL: **[inaudible]**

7 [laughter] I proudly vote aye and congratulations,
8 Dr. Eugene [sic].

9 COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: Thank you. Thank
10 you.

11 COMMITTEE CLERK: By a vote of 6 in the
12 affirmative, 0 in the negative and no abstentions,
13 both resolutions have been adopted by the committee.

14 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Congratulations,
15 Dr. Eugene. Now I'd like to call up.. [crosstalk]

16 COUNCIL MEMBER EUGENE: Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Nicole Hollant-
18 Denis, Judith Destin and James Debrosse. If the
19 three of you would come to the witness table and then
20 you can feel free to deliver your testimony in the
21 order that we called, so maybe Nicole first, Judith
22 second; then James third.

23 NICOLE HOLLANT-DENIS: Good morning
24 everyone -- oh much better.

25

2 I'd like to first of all thank you
3 Councilman Eugene for inviting me this morning. I'd
4 like to thank members of the Council, Councilman
5 James Van Bramer and the distinguished council
6 members.

7 This is the first time that I've been
8 asked to testify on behalf of a national holiday, so
9 I ask, what should I do; I was asked to talk about my
10 accomplishments, which I don't normally do; I usually
11 talk about my architecture, so I prepared this
12 testimony.

13 It is a great and deeply solemn honor for
14 me to be here today providing this testimony in full
15 support of the proposed resolutions 0664-A and 0687-A
16 to the New York City Committee on Cultural Affairs,
17 Libraries, International Intergroup Relations for the
18 introduction into law the City and nationwide
19 celebration of October 9th Haitian Day.

20 I represent a number of very hardworking
21 Haitian American professionals who not only bring a
22 high level of competency to our industries here in
23 our beloved United States of America, but who also
24 bring a very high level of passion and dedication;
25 what I refer to sometimes as Haitian passion and

2 dedication. I also represent a very small number of
3 Haitian American women who are licensed architects in
4 our beloved country.

5 My name is Nicole Hollant-Denis, as you
6 already heard; I am owner of Aarris Architects and
7 Associates, LLC; best known for my design work on the
8 African Burial Ground National Monument, along with
9 my esteemed colleagues, and for other notable work in
10 the city, including the Business School at Columbia
11 University and other work.

12 Born of Haitian descent in Brooklyn, New
13 York, several years ago as a young person I was
14 determined to find a way to give back to our
15 struggling community through art and architecture.
16 At Cornell University I traveled to Japan; throughout
17 parts of Europe studying architecture; never learning
18 anything about countries [sic] my family was from, I
19 took the option of creating an independent thesis
20 study on Haiti and learned her incredible struggles
21 towards freedom from France and the transatlantic
22 slave trade. At the center of this amazing story is
23 what is today on the world heritage list; a fortress
24 close to 3,000 feet up on Haiti's highest mountain

2 peak, spanning approximately 350,000 sq. ft.; I
3 immediately fell in love with [00:16:25].

4 I created a memorial of the Unknown
5 Maroon [sic] Memorial Museum Convention Center,
6 conceptually, and named it in reference to the statue
7 [00:16:42].

8 After working for a number of years, I
9 became licensed in 1996; one out of approximately 96
10 minority women who were licensed to practice
11 architecture in the United States at the time; out of
12 100,000 people that are licensed to practice
13 architecture in the United States, there are less
14 than .02 that are Haitian American women, so I could
15 basically have a small cocktail party in my living
16 room and invite them all; we all know each other
17 quite well, actually.

18 After working for more years, I completed
19 my graduate degree at Harvard University in 2000; in
20 2001 I founded and co-owned Aarris Architects; with
21 the design concepts from which I developed my
22 undergraduate thesis we developed the African Burial
23 Ground National Memorial in Downtown Manhattan. In
24 2004, through a very competitive process provided by
25 the General Services Administration, we were selected

2 as winners. In 2007, we created a memorial that
3 respectfully pays homage to our ancestors, the men,
4 women, children and infants who were laid to rest at
5 this sacred site.

6 One of the most startling facts uncovered
7 by the archaeological research was that more than 60
8 percent of the remains found were of young children
9 under the age of 12; as a new mother at the time, I
10 was completely heartbroken. It is our prayer that we
11 have captured a memorial that provides our city with
12 inspiration and healing for all those who visit.

13 In conclusion, what this resolution means
14 to me is that we are acknowledging and embracing
15 Haitian Americans in all walks of life who have
16 sacrificed their days and in many instances have died
17 for the good of our beloved country. Also, some try
18 to divide us into winners and losers; what has become
19 self-evident is that if one of us loses; then we all
20 lose; the only way to win is to link together; after
21 all, we are one in God. I guess you already voted,
22 but I'm pleading for support of the Haitian American
23 Heritage Day and I wanna thank you all. Thank you so
24 very much. Thank you.

25 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.

2 JUDITH DESTIN: Thank you, Nicole.

3 Hello, good morning. My name is Judith
4 Destin and I am here to thank the City Council for
5 voting, especially the Cultural Arts Committee, for
6 voting on behalf of this law and it is an honor and
7 pleasure because of the fact that I am a Haitian
8 American, born here through... by Haitian immigrant
9 parents who worked... who still live here and who have
10 taught me that it is important to always identify
11 with your culture and be proud of your culture.
12 Growing up in Brooklyn, New York it was very
13 difficult for Haitian Americans to identify being
14 Haitian Americans because of the language barrier;
15 because of the culture barriers, and a lot of times
16 we were bullied, we were ostracized; I grew up
17 knowing that Haitian Americans like myself wouldn't
18 even speak Creole because of the fact that it wasn't
19 popular, cool to be Haitian. However, throughout the
20 years we have seen how the Haitian community has
21 brought up itself in so many regards, including
22 business, culture, arts, music, as well as politics
23 and we congratulate Mathieu Eugene for bringing this
24 on because it's imperative for our community to know
25 that we are supported and that we are valued,

2 especially for the historic and contributions that we
3 have achieved. And I brought my daughter along, just
4 to show her that it's important that we, as Haitian
5 Americans we matter and we are continuing to build
6 and to build our community to show the many aspects
7 that we do and it's a wonderful day and it's a
8 beautiful day to thank you all for passing this bill,
9 because it's important for our community. And me, as
10 a Haitian American growing up and seeing this, it's
11 an historic day and I am so pleased and honored.

12 So my contributions; I work at the
13 Brooklyn District Attorney's Office in the Office of
14 Public Engagement and I also have a nonprofit, Destin
15 Stars Daycare, where we're building [sic] little
16 people to grow up to their full potential; I also
17 serve on Community Board 17, so for me it's a
18 wonderful thing that I'm contributing to my community
19 and thank you all for this great honor.

20 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you.
21 Last, but not least.

22 JAMES DEBROSSE: Good morning, my name
23 is... [interpose, background comments]... is it on? Can
24 you hear me? Okay.

2 Good morning, my name is James Debrosse,
3 Haitian American attorney, born and raised in
4 Manhattan; my first office was in Brooklyn; my second
5 one is in Queens; I've been serving the community for
6 over 25 years as a general practice attorney, so I
7 know how important these two resolutions are. As a
8 Haitian American attorney I realize that the Haitian
9 community has not been given enough credit for what
10 we have contributed to New York and the United States
11 in general since 1776 and one way that is done is not
12 talking about the history of Haitian contributions;
13 and Dr. Mathieu said, back in 1779 over 500 Haitian
14 soldiers came from the island of Saint-Domingue,
15 which is called Haiti now, came and helped turn the
16 American Revolution around against the British and
17 would help us to gain our independence; that's very
18 important, but it's not in the history books; I think
19 it should be.

20 Then we have like Jean Point Du Sable who
21 discovered Chicago in the late 1700s; then we have
22 Brigadier General **[inaudible]**; he built forts for the
23 colonists in the 1700s to fight against the British
24 and who was a West Point graduate; he also was of
25 Haitian descent; most people don't know about him,

2 but we should talk about him. Then we have the
3 famous actors/actresses; we have like Garcelle
4 Beauvais, who was on *The Jamie Foxx Show* for years;
5 she's Haitian; we have the athletes, like Jason
6 Pierre-Paul, the giant; we have Jozy Altidore, U.S.
7 Men's Soccer Team, national team; we have Blake
8 Griffin, from the Clippers; I didn't even know he was
9 Haitian until two days ago. Then we have the famous
10 politicians, like Councilman Eugene, first Haitian
11 elected official in New York City, period; he
12 continues to make history. Then we have prominent
13 Haitians, like Jacques Jiha, New York City
14 Commissioner of Finance, first New York City
15 commissioner to be appointed by any mayor ever; he's
16 doing a great job. In Congress we have the first
17 Haitian congress member, Mia Love; she's in Congress
18 and she's Haitian.

19 But one of the things we don't talk about
20 is the economic contribution Haitians have
21 contributed to the U.S. in general. Haitians are --
22 I don't know -- it's in their blood, but they like to
23 be entrepreneurs; there are thousands of Haitian
24 entrepreneurs all over New York City and Florida and
25 New Jersey contributing to the economy, creating

2 jobs, millions... thousands of jobs, you know from taxi
3 drivers to doctors, to lawyers, architects,
4 engineers. We thrive on creating businesses and
5 jobs; the restaurants, the restaurants are all over
6 the place; in Florida we've got Little Haiti; over
7 here, if you go up and down **[inaudible]** Avenue or
8 Church Avenue, Nostrand Avenue, you'll see hundreds
9 of Haitian businesses; all these things contribute to
10 the New York City economy, New York State economy and
11 the country in general, so that should be given some
12 kind of credit.

13 We also have a bunch of Haitian American
14 judges that people don't -- like right across the
15 street, Judge **[inaudible]** in U.S. Immigration; she's
16 Haitian, but a lot of people don't know that. But we
17 Haitians are proud to have Haitians high up in
18 stature contributing.

19 Finally, I just wanna say; they should
20 always be given credit where credit is due; not
21 matter what your background, you should be given
22 credit. So I think these two resolutions, Res. 0664-
23 2015 and 0687 should be voted on in favor of, like
24 you have to day; thank you, but it should also go to
25 the governor's office and also to the President's

2 office so that the whole country... every Haitian,
3 primarily [sic] in New York and Florida, so these two
4 states know the Haitians more than the other 48
5 states, but the whole country should know the
6 contributions of the Haitian community through the
7 United States and I think this is the first step, so
8 I wanna thank you all. Thank you. Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Thank you all
10 very much for being here and for sharing so much
11 history and culture with us all; I knew some of the
12 individuals that you spoke of, but not all of them,
13 so I think we've all learned a little something
14 today.

15 I wanna thank you all; I wanna thank
16 Council Member Eugene for bringing this very
17 important day to the City of New York, proud that our
18 committee could support this resolution. As you saw
19 already, we have voted it out of committee, but now
20 it goes to the Full City Council in a couple of
21 hours, where I expect it to be passed unanimously.

22 So with that I want to excuse the three
23 witnesses; thank you so much for being here. I want
24 to recognize that we've been joined by Council Member
25 Elizabeth Crowley from Queens and we are waiting for

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2 Billy to come back, 'cause he is taking a vote in
3 Rules, and then once he comes back, Council Member
4 Crowley can vote in favor of the resolution as well,
5 which I'm sure she supports, recognizing the history
6 and the contributions of Haitians and Haitian
7 Americans to the city and to the country. So with
8 that, thank you all very, very much and Billy... so you
9 all are excused and now we're gonna complete the vote
10 [background comments] as Billy comes in and calls
11 Council Member Crowley.

12 COMMITTEE CLERK: Continuation roll call,
13 the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Council Member
14 Crowley.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER CROWLEY: I vote aye.

16 COMMITTEE CLERK: The vote now stands at
17 7 in the affirmative.

18 CHAIRPERSON VAN BRAMER: Great. So we
19 will... [background comments] Alright, with that..
20 [background comments] [pause] So we will keep the
21 vote open for another 15 minutes, as one other
22 Council Member from the committee attempts to make it
23 over. [background comments] [pause] [background
24 comments] And with this; we are closing today's
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2 hearing of the Committee on Cultural Affairs,
3 Libraries and International Intergroup Relations.

4 [gavel]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date July 8, 2016