

The Berkshire Eagle

Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Thursday, October 9, 2008

Welcoming West Africa

International musicians and local performers highlight West African immigrants in the Berkshires

If you go ...

What: West African Community Day, when The Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa performs.

When: Wednesday, community music, art, food and dancing begins at 6 p.m. The Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa performance begins at 7:30 p.m.

Where: The Colonial Theatre
111 South St., Pittsfield.

Information: (413) 997-4444.

Local organizations working globally...

BARKA Foundation:

www.thebarkafoundation.org,
inaandesu@barkafoundation.org.

Monument Mountain high school:

Will initiate a micro-loan program with a Burkina Faso school.

Railroad Streer Youth Projects and Greenagers:

Encourage involvement in Burkina Faso.

Berkshire Immigrant Center: berkshireic.com.

United Africans of the Berkshires.

The celebration will run from 6 p.m. until the Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa takes the stage. Local performers and vendors will bring western African culture, art, music and traditional cuisine to the lobby and stage of The Colonial Theatre.

Shirley Edgerton's Youth Alive! dance team will perform. Dancers will include Marla Robertson, Shanae Fields, and Josie Ampah-Tobin. Jerome Edgerton will drum on the Djembe.

Local organizations with global connections will also explain what they do in this community and across the world. An extensive group of organizations with ties to both Africa and the Berkshires have come together to create this event: The Berkshire Immigrant Center, the City of Pittsfield Cultural Council, United Africans of the Berkshires, the Women of Color Giving Circle, the Pittsfield Youth Commission and The BARKA Foundation.



By Susan Geller
Special to The Eagle

PITTSFIELD - Anticipation of the arrival of the musicians, singers and dancers of the internationally known Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa has created a clear buzz in Berkshire County. Drummers, modern dancers and storytellers, the troupe performs with many instruments - the Kora, N'Goni, the Balaphon, Djembe, Doundouns and flute, in all musical styles of Mali: peul, malinke, sénoufo, bambaramore.

They will perform at The Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield on Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. And the community will welcome them.

On the evening of the performance, an energetic gathering of organizations have melded together to highlight the world of African immigrants. David Fleming executive director of The Colonial Theatre, has given them his support and space to gather.

Dagga Mbye of Gambia and Felicia Boateng of Ghana, members of United Africans of The Berkshires, will reach out to the community.

Welcoming West Africa continued from previous page

Pittsfield Mayor James Ruberto has passed a resolution, declaring the city a smaller part of the statewide Hearts and Mind Campaign to make all immigrants welcome in Massachusetts. The city's goal is to bring peace to the global community, to raise the consciousness of diversity, and bring focus and compassion to all, said Brooke Meade of the Berkshire Immigrant Center.

Esu and Ina Anahata, founders of The BARKA Foundation in Housatonic, envision the mayor's Welcoming Massachusetts resolution as an invitation for travelers from all over the world to feel comfortable in Berkshire County. Barka is an African word that means "the most genuine and authentic expression of gratitude and blessings."

The Anahatas said this gathering of the African community aims to "create a culture of peace on the planet, through art, music and education, and to fight against poverty, both locally and internationally in the African nations."

They want the West African community evening to achieve an understanding and sharing, they said, where "we are all joining hands to bridge West Africa through The Colonial Theatre, who is hosting the African Dance Troupe."

The Anahatas cited United Nations millennium development goals to explain that more than 2 billion people around the world still live on less than \$1 a day.

They appeal to others to contribute \$1 to the Barka Foundation, to go to the third-poorest country in the world, Burkina Faso, Africa. Their first initiative is to assist with the delivery of clean water, as this is their most basic need. This will empower women, reduce disease, and help to encourage education for girls, irrigation and trade opportunities, they said.

"By joining our strengths and combining our respective goals, we can have a greater impact than anyone can have individually," they said.

They plan to bring these messages into the entire Berkshire community through schools, businesses, and faith-based organizations.

Another local organization taking part in the West African community celebration, the United Africans of the Berkshires, has had an immense impact on recent immigrants to the Berkshires.



Ina Anahatu, Shirley Edgerton and Esu Anahatu join many community groups in welcoming the Song and Dance Ensemble of West Africa to the Berkshires. Edgerton directs Youth Alive! in Pittsfield and the Anahatus run The BARKA Foundation in Housatonic.

Al Enchill, a native of Ghana and president and owner of Elegant Stitches, said that members meet frequently to encourage newcomers and to help with introductions to Berkshire housing, job opportunities and loans, and also to support those in need of any type of immediate assistance.

Many members have come from the Ivory Coast and Gambia. They all want to keep their African culture enduring with their young families, Enchill said.

They have already made efforts to make themselves visible in the community: One of their most recent endeavors has been marching in the Pittsfield Fourth of July Parade in brilliant African robes, red and green and blue and gold.

Al Enchill, president of United Africans of the Berkshires, helps new immigrants to the Berkshires to find community, services and encouragement in their new home.

