

Reporter's Men Nou

News about people making
moves in our community

Workshops help Haitians get control of debt, finances

By YOLETTE IBOKETTE

"There are things that you want, but don't need."

That's one of the most important lessons that Ewald Sedna of Boston learned from the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) "Moving from Debt to Assets" program. Made possible by a grant from Citizens Bank of Massachusetts, the financial education program was offered in Haitian Creole and graduated its first class of Haitian participants last month.

The graduates received confidential, one-on-one counseling, peer support, and information on budgeting, credit, savings and banking products. They also received a \$500 grant to help pay off debt or open a savings account if they don't already have one.

To be eligible for the program, one must be a member of an institution in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) network. These institutions are mostly churches and synagogues. Institutions choose participants from their members. There is a lottery if there are more people interested than can be accommodated.

This free program attracts low and middle-income participants of every ethnic group and is also offered in English, Cape Verdean Creole and Spanish. Classes are taught by teachers from the Massachusetts Af-



The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization's Moving from Debt to Assets program held its first-ever graduation ceremony last month. State representative Linda Dorceña Forry (D-Dorchester) was on hand to congratulate the class, which was composed primarily of Haitian-American students. Program participants went through six weeks of financial literacy classes and credit counseling, and they will receive a \$500 grant to start paying down their debts. The ceremony took place on January 7 at Boston Missionary Baptist on Dudley Street. Pictured above, from left to right, are (front row) Joel Schwartz, Maudeline Dalexis, Judith Joseph, Marie Elda Francois, Marlene Moise, Myrlande Latouche, Rep. Linda Dorceña Forry, Job Noelsaint, Saul Augustin, Milot Thibault; (second row) D. J. Fleurissant, Ewald Fedna, Elie Beliard, Arthur Eugene, Jean Denis, Renel Richardson, Jean Chery; (third row) Jerry Saint-Cloud, Arotte Cesaire.

fordable Housing Alliance, Haitian Multi-Service Center and Citizens Bank. While GBIO's member institutions are usually found throughout Greater Boston, classes have also been conducted in Newton, Somerville and soon in Cambridge. The next Haitian Creole class begins on February 4 for members of Boston Missionary Baptist Church.

Jean Francois Chery, a bank officer at Bank of America, coordinates the Haitian-Creole classes through GBIO. He says that 15 men and women were chosen from a long list of interested candidates who needed help to increase their assets and reduce debts.

"The program taught the participants how to prioritize debt, deter-

mine which bill to pay off first and which one to make a bigger payment to. They also had an opportunity to share their experiences with each other," Chery says, adding that he received very positive feedback about the program from the participants.

Ewald Sedna decided to participate in the program because bad credit was preventing him from achieving his dream of buying a house. According to Sedna, the program taught him how to use his credit card and spend wisely.

"The teachers were very competent and experienced. I would encourage people to participate and for the GBIO and Citizens Bank

to continue to run it since they're doing good work," Sedna says.

The program, which provides many services, is unique in that it is offering 18 classes over an 18-month period. It's also successful because it works through the 72 institutions that are members of GBIO. The hope is that these institutions will later support the participants in the issues addressed by the program.

The four-week classes meet once a week for 2 1/2 hours. The participating institutions determine the location of the classes. The program is so successful that cities such as New York, Baltimore and Chicago are now considering replicating it.

Those who are interested in participating in the "Moving from Debt to Assets" program can contact Joel Schwartz, its director at Greater Boston Interfaith Organization at 617-953-8487.