African-American or black? Debate heats up in South Florida

By Georgia East, Sun Sentinel

7:02 PM EST, February 21, 2012

Do Americans need hyphens to tell the world who they are?

The debate over the term 'African-American' is heating up again as Black History Month winds down. Some, like Gibre George, a Hollywood-based entrepreneur whose family is from the West Indies, argue it's an archaic label. He created a Facebook page, "Don't Call Me African-American" to argue it is time to for everyone to simply be called American.

Others, like Edith Bush, a West Palm Beach community leader who can recall when Negro and colored were common labels, fully embrace the term African-American. "I hope that at one time sooner than later we will accept one identity," said Bush, 79, who has visited Senegal and believes it's important for today's generation to learn about African history.

But identity is a personal thing, especially in South Florida, home to 501,000 Caribbean immigrants, the nation's second largest concentration. And that community is split, with some saying they feel a greater connection to their homelands and others saying African-American is an accurate reflection of their heritage.

Yanatha Desouvre, 33, a computer technician from West Palm Beach, considers himself a Haitian-American. "The African-American title is great but most individuals who call themselves African-American haven't been to Africa and don't know where they're from in Africa," he said.

Desouvre, who moved to South Florida when he was 3, created a smartphone application named Proud to be Haitian. Still, he tells his daughter, 3, she is an American of Jewish and Haitian ancestry. "I believe anybody who was born on American soil should be known as American," he explained.

George, 38, who was born in New York and whose family is from St. Lucia and St. Kitts, said his Facebook page initially generated dialogue among friends. It recently gained national attention and now has 2,170 "likes."

"We keep these racial divides with all these titles," said George, who embraces his roots but argues Caucasians do not call themselves European-Americans. "It's foolishness."
The term African-American surfaced during the Civil Rights Movement, when leaders began rejecting the word Negro, and was made popular in the 1980s by the Rev. Jesse Jackson. But it came under renewed scrutiny during the election in 2008 of Barack Obama, the nation's first black president. With a Caucasian mother from the U.S. and black Kenyan father, some said Obama was an African-American in the truest sense, but his background sparked further debate about black identity.

Akbar Watson, the owner of Pyramid Books in Boynton Beach, said the debate is fraught with emotion.

"There are still people of African descent who are not comfortable with their African heritage and they're trying to fit into the European community," Watson said. Then there are a steady stream of customers who come looking for information about the lands of their ancestors or try to use DNA testing to trace their links back to Africa.

Derrick White, a professor of history at Florida Atlantic University, said it is not surprising that immigrants would have mixed views.

"For people of Caribbean descent, Jamaican-American or Haitian-American is far more descriptive of where their cultural and national origins are, especially here in South Florida which is more diverse than Kentucky where I'm from," said White, author of the book 'The Challenge of Blackness: The Institute of the Black World and Political Activism in the 1970s'.

But White, who describes himself as a product of the South, said he chooses to use black and believes there are cultural origins inherent in the term. "Black speaks to the political and cultural legacy of people of African descent in the New World."

Attorney and civic leader Marlon Hill, of Miami, said Black America is changing and how people refer to themselves will vary depending on who they're speaking to and how long they've been in this country

"What is more important is who we are rather than what we're called," said Hill. "We're not just one seasoning, we're more like a seasoning rack."