

Mark McLean never realized the importance of embracing his blackness until he moved to Albany 13 years ago. McLean, who was born in England to Jamaican parents, admits he never made the effort because he didn't feel it was important.

Being black was the norm growing up in London, McLean said. He was surrounded by people of color in a Caribbean community.

It wasn't until he and his wife, Kathleen, had a child eight years ago that he realized the importance of tapping into the black community.

"All around her was white and she wasn't getting the black experience," said McLean, a computer programmer for the state Assembly who lives in Latham with his wife and their three children, ages 8, 6 and 2.

An influx of black people with roots in the Caribbean or sub-Saharan Africa is changing black communities across the United States. Between 1990 and 2000, newcomers who identified themselves for the census as Afro-Caribbeans -- immigrants or descendants from such places as Jamaica, Haiti and Guyana -- total more than 1.5 million, larger than such national-origin groups as Cubans and Koreans, according to "Black Diversity in Metropolitan America," a study conducted at the University at Albany.

People with sub-Saharan African roots -- many of them from Nigeria and Ghana -- total more than half a million, the study found. Nationally, nearly 25 percent of the growth of the black population in the 1990s was due to people from Africa and the Caribbean.

Overall, the number of black Americans increased 10 percent to 31 million between 1990 and 2000, while the number from Africa increased 134 percent to 537,000 and the number from the Caribbean rose 63 percent to 1.5 million.

In the Albany-Schenectady-Troy metropolitan area, despite an increase in number, Afro-Caribbean and African residents combined remained between 7 and 8 percent of the total black population in both 1990 and 2000. The total black population increased 46.6 percent, according to statistics from UAlbany's Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research.

"One of the reasons Albany has not attracted many immigrants in the last 20 years is that it's not perceived as a place that values ethnic pluralism," said John Logan, director of the Mumford Center and co-author of the report on black diversity.

Immigration from the Caribbean and Africa accelerated in the 1990s. And as the growth of the black immigrant population continues, it is creating a "black minority within the black minority" and raising the question of what it means to be black in America, said Logan.

For African-Americans with deep roots here, the new diversity means accepting the changing face of their community. For Afro-Caribbeans and Africans, it means adjusting to a new culture and finding their place in the black community.

"At first, it was difficult. The culture is different and it takes time to build a community of your own," said Tejitu Molla, who was born in Ethiopia and moved to the Capital Region 30 years ago to attend UAlbany.

"Albany was not an open society, and it was difficult to get into groups. Then I started meeting people from the community. We have a good African community, a good Caribbean community," said Molla, who lives in Troy and works as a computer system auditor for the state.

Molla is a member of the Capital District Caribbean American African Alliance -- CARAMA -- which holds a summer carnival and festival, usually in Troy, to celebrate Caribbean and African heritage. This year, it will be in Albany in August.

Molla also is a member of the Capital District Susu Women's Club, a financial club that raises money for college scholarships. In Africa, it's traditional for a group of women to form a financial group to help other women. Each member donates money and gives it to the woman who needs it the most that week or month, Molla said.

"We come up with different things so we can share our culture," she said.

Diversity in the Capital Region also is evident in the faith community. The Black Catholic Apostolate, where Molla worships, has a congregation of people who are African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, African, South American, West Indian, Cuban, Asian and American Indian.

Caribbean restaurants such as Clayton's Caribbean American and Spanish Restaurant on Washington Avenue, and Roy's Caribbean Restaurant and Grocery and Kenneth's Tastebud, both on Henry Johnson Boulevard, bring a taste of the islands to Albany.

"Jamaicans can cook Jamaican food. Americans can't, so if you want Jamaican food, you have got to come here," Osmond "Kenneth" Harris, owner of Kenneth's Tastebud, said in a distinctive Jamaican accent.

Harris crouched behind the counter and shared his thoughts of the black community in Albany and what it needs to do.

"If we unite, we're strong," said Harris, who has been in Albany for 25 years and owned his Arbor Hill business for 14.

Trevor Litchmore, 42, a Jamaican-born doctor at the Whitney Young Health Center in Albany, said the local black community is fragmented. Litchmore, who lives in

Rotterdam, moved to this country with his family when he was 18 and settled in New York City. His job brought him to the Capital Region from Rochester in 1997.

"Even in Rochester, we had a unified multicultural non-Caucasian organization that promoted cultural value and cultural achievement. I don't find that sense of organization in Albany," he said.

Unlike Rochester, which has a black mayor and a thriving Urban League, Litchmore said, "I don't see any affirmative action policy to put anyone of color in any meaningful position" in Albany.

Albany County Legislator Wanda Willingham said Litchmore's perspective is "quite limited and not fair."

"As black people, we are united. We want the same things for our children and for each other," she said.

She does, however, see a difference between black immigrants and other black Americans. "Because they come from a society more heavily populated with people of color, they had an opportunity to live out their heritage, to live out their ethnicity and not have to live it out in a special day" such as the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Willingham said.

Another difference is socioeconomic. Black immigrants tend to be wealthier and better educated than other black Americans, Logan said.

When dealing with diversity in America, the question used to be: Is it a source of strength or does it create division? Now, said Logan, that same question is being raised in the black community and in every other ethnic group.

The bottom line, said Jamaican-born Roger Gordon, is no matter whether someone is African-American, Afro-Caribbean or African, "When we're walking down the street, we're all black."

Gordon, 31, is Mark McLean's brother-in-law. He moved to the United States in 1984 to White Plains and has lived for nine years in Albany, where he conducts orientations for new members of the Capital District Health Plan.

Black is a characteristic of race, not ethnicity, said George King, a self-described black Latino. "A person who is black would have been black if they were born anywhere in the world," he said.

King, an attorney with the state comptroller's office, was born in Panama. He emigrated to the United States in 1962, came to Albany in 1970 for law school and now lives in Clifton Park.

Alton Brisport, a 39-year-old hand therapist in Schenectady who is of Guyanese descent, feels people unnecessarily advertise their heritage with such titles as African-American and Afro-Caribbean. "If we're all Americans, what's the need to do that?" Brisport said. "I'm not hiding from my heritage, but what do I gain by advertising it?"

Marcia Sutherland, a professor in the sociology and Africana studies departments at the University at Albany, contends that ignorance is the wall separating the black community.

Sutherland, a Latham resident living in the Capital Region since 1986, defines herself as a person of African heritage.

"Africa is the mother of all people. We are all human beings who emerged from Africa," Southerland said, "but we oftentimes forget who our mother is. That's been our problem. We forget who we are."

FACTS:BLACK ETHNICITY

Black ethnic population in the Albany-Troy-Schenectady region* increased by 17,767 to 55,857 between 1990 and 2000.

1990	2000	Total, % of black total	Total, % of black total	Population change	% change
African American	35,410	93.0	51,498	16,088	45.4
Afro-Caribbean	2,066	5.4	3,210	1,144	55.4
	1,149	2.1	535	414	36.1
	17,767	46.6	38,090	20,323	53.1
			Black ethnic total	55,857	6.4

Region population 861,424 875,583 14,159 1.6 * Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady, Saratoga, Schoharie and Montgomery counties Source: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, University at Albany