FAU exhibit looks at gay Harlem

New York City has some neighborhoods well known in the history of gay activism, including Greenwich Village, Chelsea, and the East Village. But here's one you might not have thought about: Harlem.

In fact, Harlem does have a rich gay history, according to a new exhibit at Florida Atlantic University. "The Harlem Renaissance: As Gay As It was Black" is on display at the FAU Library on the Boca Raton campus, 777 Glades Road.

Organized by the Stonewall Library Museum & Archives in Fort Lauderdale, the exhibition focuses on Harlem's artistic movement and some of its leading gay, lesbian and bisexual participants during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. This period shaped black culture for generations, but less is known about its influence on the gay community, organizers say.

"I think most people like to draw neat little identity lines around people," said Jack Rutland, executive director of the Stonewall library. "With this exhibition, we hope to blur those lines to show that when people come together in a place at a time, amazing things can happen when identity ceases to matter quite so much."

Few of the artists and writers profiled in the exhibition can be considered "out" or "gay" in any modern sense of the terms, organizers say. Instead, many led double lives, staying in heterosexual marriages while expressing their sexuality through coded references in their work.

Featured artists include writer Richard Bruce Nugent, "whose "Smoke, Lillies and Jade," is considered the first published black/gay short story; Langston Hughes, one of the best known authors of the period, and James Weldon Johnson, a Jacksonville native who co-wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing," now known as the Negro National Anthem.

The library will host two related events in June, national Gay Pride Month. Aaron Kula, director of music collections and performance at the library, and the seven-piece Klezmer Company Jazz Ensemble, will present a "Musical Tribute to the Harlem Renaissance" on Sunday, June 13, at 3 p.m. on the library's fifth floor. The performance will feature a guest vocalist and historical commentary. Tickets are $10 and can be purchased by calling the FAU Box Office at 1-800-564-9639.

A panel discussion and forum titled "Looking for Understanding and Acceptance in a Diverse World" will be held on Thursday, June 17, at 7 p.m. on the library's fifth floor. The discussion, which is free and open to the public, will feature community activists, as well as FAU staff and students.