FAU and Stonewall Library Museum Archive Host ‘The Harlem Renaissance: As Gay as it was Black’ Exhibition

BOCA RATON, FL (May 5, 2010) – Florida Atlantic University Libraries and Stonewall Library Museum Archive will host “The Harlem Renaissance: As Gay as it was Black,” an exhibition about Harlem’s artistic movement and some of its leading gay, lesbian and bisexual participants, from Tuesday, May 11, through Wednesday, June 30, on FAU’s Boca Raton campus, 777 Glades Road.

The Harlem Renaissance, which occurred in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s, shaped black culture for generations and influenced American society. The movement was “surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these,” according to historian Henry Louis Gates, whose research the exhibition’s title is extracted from.

“I think most people like to draw neat little identity lines around people,” said Jack Rutland, executive director of the Stonewall Library Museum Archive in Fort Lauderdale, which organized the exhibition. “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. The Harlem Renaissance was moved along by men and women who led double lives. Many imbeded their work with coded references to their sexuality.

Profiled are such famous people as writer Richard Bruce Nugent, whose “Smoke, Lillies and Jade” is praised as the first published black gay short story. Langston Hughes, who is considered one of the foremost writers of the Harlem Renaissance and author of “The Weary Blues,” also is featured. Zora Neale Hurston, a writer and folklorist whose best known work “Their Eyes Were Watching God” was set in Central and South Florida in 1937, is another leading figure profiled. Poet and novelist James Weldon Johnson, a Jacksonville native who with his brother John Rosamond composed “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the song now known as the Negro National Anthem, is another artist the exhibition pays tribute to.

The exhibition also features a section acknowledging that not all contributors of the Harlem Renaissance were homosexual. Historian W.E.B. Du Bois; actor Paul Robeson; artist Aaron Douglas; dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson; songwriter Eubie Blake; bandleaders Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway; and musicians Louis Armstrong and Fats Waller are among those noted.

The Harlem Renaissance ended with the outbreak of World War II. In the ensuing post-war decades, the sexuality of many of its leading figures has been overlooked.

“It was a subject that none of us at Stonewall had seen addressed very fully in any of the existing literature on the Harlem Renaissance,” said Rutland. “We also discovered it was a wonderfully unusual
gay/lesbian history story. Usually the history of a minority in America ended up being a tale of repression and rebellion. This was a tale of creativity, cooperation and coming together.”

The library will host two events related to the exhibition in June, which is national Gay and Lesbian 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 1-800-564-9539.

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.

June was chosen as Gay and Lesbian Pride Month to remember a riot in 1969 at the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan that is thought to be the beginning of the gay liberation movement in the U.S.

“This exhibit and lecture continue the FAU Libraries’ community engagement, using library resources to explore topics of interest to many people and celebrate the diversity of our culture,” said Dr. William Miller, dean of Libraries at FAU. “We encourage people to see the exhibition and participate in the forthcoming lecture and discussion.”

Stonewall Library Museum Archive documents, explores and honors the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender past while striving to inform, inspire and engage this and the next generation of its community’s leaders. Funding for Stonewall is provided in part by the Broward County Board of County Commissioners as recommended by the Broward Cultural Council, and is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, The Stella Fund and the Community Foundation of Broward.

The exhibition can be viewed during library hours, which can be found at www.library.fau.edu/geninfo/hours.htm?boca or by calling 561-297-3770. For more information on the exhibition, call Sara Landset at 561-297-3921 or Jack Rutland at 954-763-8565.

-FAU-

Cutline:
Photo #1: Zora Neale Hurston, author and anthropologist
Photo #2: Langston Hughes, writer

About Florida Atlantic University:
Florida Atlantic University opened its doors in 1964 as the fifth public university in Florida. Today, the University serves more than 28,000 undergraduate and graduate students on seven campuses and sites. Building on its rich tradition as a teaching university, with a world-class faculty, FAU hosts 10 colleges: College of Architecture, Urban & Public Affairs, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts & Letters, the Charles E. Schmidt College of Biomedical Science, the College of Business, the College of Education, the College of Engineering & Computer Science, the Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College, the Graduate College, the Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing and the Charles E. Schmidt College of Science. For more information, visit www.fau.edu.