

# Politicians celebrate Three Kings Day in Corona youth center

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According to the Spanish tradition, on January 6, Three Kings from the East found Jesus by following the Star over Bethlehem and brought him three symbolic gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

To celebrate Three Kings Day, Assemblymember José Peralta, members of Local 338-RWDSU, Marine's Toys for Tots representative, Gunnery Sergeant Alex Mesa and New York State Senator-elect Hiram Monserrate distributed over 3,000 toys to children in the Queens Community at the Elmcour Youth Center in Corona, 107-20 Northern Boulevard.

Monserrate, who has been arrested and charged with allegedly hitting his girlfriend with a glass during an argument,

received cheers from the multitude of people, who were chanting his name out loud outside the Elmcour Youth Center.

"Happy Three Kings Day," Monserrate said, while he was holding hands with dozens of mothers that accompanied their kids to receive their presents.

"An unfortunate accident has occurred. I look forward to serving my constituents and tomorrow I will be in Albany," Monserrate said.

"I can't judge him for something that I didn't see. I wasn't there, so we won't know the truth until January 16, when he has to go back to court," said Peralta.

Before the distribution of toys, a very talented girl sang the national anthem of the United States and during the gift-giving, a group of Spanish dancers gave a touch of color and music to the celebration.



THE COURIER/Photo by Ursula Gonzales

Hiram Monserrate enjoyed giving the gifts personally to the children who attended to celebrate Three Kings Day at the Elmcour Youth Center in Corona.

# Virtual field trip to Alaska

BY CLAUDIA CRUZ

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The children at the One Stop Richmond Hill Community Center recently engaged in a video conference with sled dog trainers in the Alaskan tundra and even barked at the dogs.

At the count of three, 27 students barked at a pack of huskies on a TV screen. The kids sat in a room in Richmond Hill; the dogs laid in the snow in Alaska.

Twice a week this group of children gathers at the One Stop Richmond Hill Community Center and participates in video conferencing with people from around the world. On Thursday, December 18, they learned how to train Alaskan sled dogs. Last year they spoke to an astronaut on the International Space Station.

According to the parents, the program has built their kids' self-confidence, improved their communication skills, and opened up an entire world to them. However, the budget cuts announced by Albany and City Hall could affect the virtual field trips, leaving the kids and their imagination stranded.

"All of our money comes from elected officials," said Simcha Waisman, president of One Stop Richmond Hill, which meets at the Richmond Hill Block Association's facility. "If we don't get money, we'll have to try to get money other ways. We'll try not to cut anything because it's for the children."

Waisman, who currently has two teachers on staff and must pay for supplies, equipment and the use of the facility, said the actual video conferencing cost money too. For example, to connect for one hour with the organization in Alaska costs \$100 according to the Kigluait Educational Adventures (KEA) web site, who taught the children about life in the Alaskan tundra.

But without the video conferencing to look forward to, 135 fingers would not be wiggling in the air, waiting to ask ques-

tions of the dog trainers.

"How do you name your dogs?" asked one girl. "Do the Alaskan huskies always find their way back?" asked another. "How long do the dogs mush (race) for?" a boy asked.

After a few seconds delay, on the TV screen appeared Christina and Richard Hum the husband and wife facilitators and founders of KEA. Both responded to the student's questions as they stood out in the snow dressed in colorful knit hats, thick gloves and even thicker coats.

"Each dog litter has a theme," said Richard. "Sometimes the dogs are named after superheroes."

"Once I lost my hat and Lulu kept barking because she wanted to go out into the tundra by herself," said Christina. "She retrieved my hat that had been lost for a week! Lulu has an amazing sense of smell and direction."

"Dogs can mush from 7 months to 13 years," said Richard. "But the prime racing age is between 2 and 9 years."

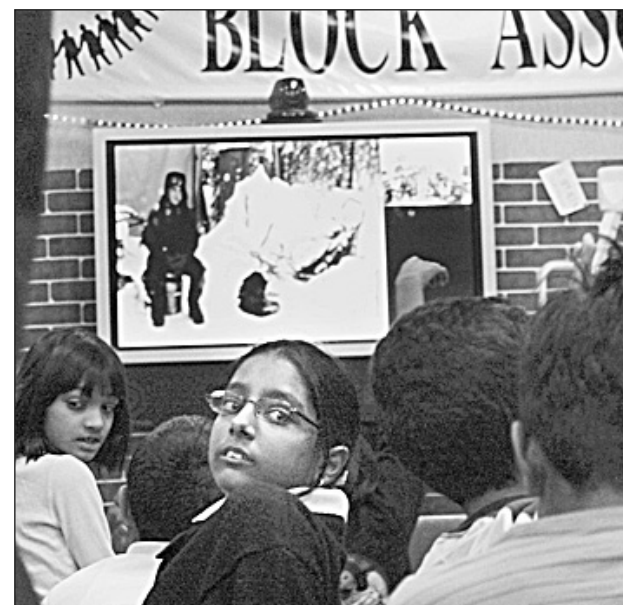
Unfortunately, the kids had more questions than the one-hour allowed. In fact, the kids had so many questions that most of the activities the Hums had planned for them had to be given up. However, one interactive activity couldn't be passed over.

"I think was a great experience because we got to know the puppies and give the dogs command," said Armanpreet Kaur, 10.

Erin Lee, 8, and her mates had studied the commands before the video conferencing. "'Gee' means turn right, 'easy' means slowdown, 'whoa' means stop and 'hup hup' means start or go," Lee said. All the children had the chance to yell commands at the TV and then watch the dogs react.

"I had never been here before and it's my first time video conferencing," said Moses Gonzalez, 9. "It was unbelievable to video conference from one side of the country to another."

Christopher Caviedes, 10, said the experience "was fun,



THE COURIER/Photo by Claudia Cruz

Youngsters mesmerized by a video tour of Alaska.

enriching and fundamental."

A father picking up his daughter said that the video conferencing program had developed her communication skills so much that he took his daughter to an Indian television station so that she could talk about the One Stop program.

"We got to find a way so that the program can continue with minimum effort until they get the funding," said Baggaoon Surenbra. "Hopefully they can keep working on it without any additional funding."