MERCURY POISONING IN THE BRONX

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In March, the Rockland County Department of Health added an article to its health code that prohibited keeping mercury in an uncovered container in homes. It also required that all mercury sold in stores must be correctly labeled in English, French and Spanish, and must contain warnings about its danger. In addition, vendors are required to inform buyers of the dire consequences of mercury spills and exposure.

“This was specifically done because of the knowledge that people in the Afro-Caribbean neighborhoods of Rockland were using mercury for ritualistic purposes,” says Dr. Arnold Wendroff, the environmentalist and director of the Mercury Poisoning Project, who has been monitoring mercury use in these communities for more than ten years.

Is this a wake-up call for the Bronx?
Since the Bronx has a much larger Haitian and Latino community than Rockland County, why is New York City’s Department of Health not enacting similar laws banning the use of uncontained elemental mercury in buildings? “There is published hard data on mercury sales in the Bronx, and on the influx of mercury into the sewage treatment plants like Ward’s Island, which is highly elevated,” says Wendroff. “But no one wants to rock the boat because they know there’s a major mercury problem in the Bronx.”

Even Rockland County is careful about rocking the boat. Which is why, says Wendroff, the Rockland County Health Code sets its own level for the evacuation of buildings, using a measurement of mercury levels that is 100 times higher than those currently used in the rest of the country. (The national standard for evacuation in mercury spills is 1 microgram per cubic meter of air. For Rockland, it is 100 micrograms.) “And the reason why it’s so high,” he adds, “is apparently because the Rockland County Department of Health believes there is a problem, but they have no place to put people who would be displaced from their homes during an evacuation.”

For years, elemental mercury, or azogue, has been used in the Afro-Caribbean communities for ritualistic purposes. Families practicing Vodun, Santeria, Espiritismo, and other underground religions often use the substance to cleanse their homes of spirits, to put spells on loved ones, even to improve the skin or cure intestinal disorders. “As a girl, I used to watch my aunt cleanse her home with mercury,” says Evelyn Cordero of the Bronx, as she left La Division Botanica on Fordham Road. “I remember wondering what made the water glitter as she mopped.”

Carmen Santiago sells religious items at the Guadaloupe Botanica on the Grand Concourse and 183rd Street. “Mercury wards off evil spirits in the home, and has been used for that purpose for quite a while,” she says. “I know mercury is bad for you and that the cops will close you down if you sell it. I also know that you can still buy it in some botanicas if you know someone. But I don’t sell it.”

Neither does the owner of La Division Botanica, a man who calls himself “Professor” Eliseo, but refuses to reveal his given name. Eliseo, 52, who has owned his botanica for nine years and also teaches Espiritismo for $150 a session, says, “I have seen men pour mercury from the jar into gelatin capsules to sell it for a couple of dollars. And I used mercury a couple of times myself by placing it in candles.” Eliseo says he stopped after hearing about someone who drank mercury to cure his intestinal problems, but damaged his kidneys in the process. “I can tell you that mercury is being sold and used today. But I do not either sell it or use it,” he adds. Instead, he employs herbal preparations in the rituals he practices.

Eliseo points out that since 9/11, paranoia has spread throughout the botanica circuit. “I’ve heard rumors that if you sell mercury, you can be arrested because the government would think you might be making bombs,” he says. There is no truth to the notion that mercury is an ingredient for bombs. It is also not illegal, as long as it is properly contained and labeled. What is true, however, is that mercury is a menace. Sprinkled on floorboards, it evaporates and seeps into the floors and walls for up to 15 years.
Inhabitants of an apartment inhale the invisible and undetectable vapors, which can damage the brain, heart, lungs, and liver. Children and fetuses are especially vulnerable to mercury’s effects, which can include insomnia, bronchitis, emotional instability, neurological problems, gingivitis and developmental problems.

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“What users don’t know is how toxic mercury is long after they’ve used it,” says Wendroff, “and how compromised developmentally they may become if they have been contaminated.” Unlike lead or asbestos, he points out, mercury breaks up. “It’s a liquid and a gas at the same time. The little droplets on the floor are continuously evaporating, and the vapor is what’s toxic. It is inhaled and absorbed into the blood. The exposure is continuous and lasts for years.” Which means that families who move into apartments where practitioners once sprinkled mercury are also at risk, although they may not suspect it.

To get an idea of the extent of the mercury culture in the Bronx, doctors at Montefiore Medical Center conducted a 1995 study, sending an Espritismo practitioner out to locate Bronx botanicas and see if she could buy mercury at each. All in all, she unearthed 41 botanicas and bought unlabeled mercury at 38 of them; 35 of these shops estimated how many units of mercury they sold a day (with one unit being 9 grams). The average amount, based on a 300-day retail year, fluctuated between 25,000 and 155,000 units a year, the median being 47,000 units or 930 pounds. In addition, more than 29 percent of botanica workers, customers, and others who were queried suggested that the primary way to use the mercury was to sprinkle it on floors.

As of 1995, says Wendroff, “Somewhere between 8,000 and 50,000 homes per year are being contaminated with enough mercury to warrant evacuation.”

Some local environmentalists like M.arian Feinberg, the environmental health coordinator of the organization, “For A Better Bronx,” believe that these statistics are alarmist and that putting the blame solely on the Hispanic community is racist. “If mercury is so dangerous, why are dentists still putting it in our mouths?” she says. “I’m out of the mercury in the environment that we’re exposed to comes from power plants. The tuna fish that you eat today is more dangerous. It’s full of mercury.”

Wendroff, who has a Ph.D in medical sociology with a specialty in the traditional medicine and witchcraft of the southeast African country of Malawi, where he served in the Peace Corps, first became aware of the mercury problem in 1991 while teaching science at a Brooklyn junior high school. Pointing to the symbol for mercury, he asked if anyone knew what it was used for, thinking that kids would reply, “Thermometers.” However, one boy volunteered that his mother sprinkled mercury on the floor to ward off what is known in Santería as bruja, or evil spirits. “It suddenly rang a bell,” says Wendroff, who also noticed that the child was exhibiting signs of mercury exposure such as anorexia, irritability and forgetfulness.

Wendroff claims that not only are individual homes tainted by mercury use, so is the city’s water supply. It becomes compromised when excess mercury is either flushed down toilets or poured down drains after Santería rituals are completed.

However, mercury in the community has become a taboo subject. Few want to talk about it, and even fewer want to own up to the fact that it is a problem. The New York City Department of Environmental Protection tested New York City’s waste water in late 2003 and early 2004 and discovered that there was an enormous excess of levels of mercury in the Ward’s Island plant, which serves Washington Heights and the South Bronx.

Most politicians, like Congresswoman Nydia Velásquez, Senator Bill Bradley, former Mayor David Dinkins, and former Bronx Borough President, Fernando Ferrer, have paid lip service to the problem, but little more. Wendroff claims to have written almost every local politician and says that they have either ignored him or voiced their concern with no follow-up. When The Bronx Journal contacted Bronx Borough President Alfonso Carrón and Ferrer for this article, they both refused to comment.

“Mercury can be cleaned up. But first you have to find it,” says Dr. Arnold Wendroff of the Mercury Poisoning Project, who suggests that up to 50,000 homes are being contaminated each year with enough mercury to warrant evacuation. “It’s a liquid and a gas at the same time. The little droplets on the floor are continuously evaporating. And the vapor is toxic. It is inhaled and absorbed into the blood. The exposure lasts for years.”

Mercury is a political hot potato, says Wendroff. In part because politicians fear alienating the Hispanic community by placing the blame on ritualistic mercury use, and in part because any real solution is expensive. “Cleaning up mercury spills can cost up to $50,000 per apartment,” he explains, “It can be cleaned up. But first you have to find it, which is also expensive. And embarrassing. Because all these political people know. And so does the media. They’re treating it as a ‘potential health threat’ and not doing the research themselves.” In the end, he believes, the government, because of its past negligence, will be directly responsible for the cleanup.

What both Wendroff and Feinberg agree on is that public health education is crucial. “I don’t think it’s about politicians,” says Feinberg. “It’s about health education. The most affecting change will come when people will start to be more educated in general about the problem.”

Still, Wendroff remains skeptical. He points out that in 2000 the New York City Department of Health created two pamphlets, one for laypersons in English, Spanish, and Creole, and another for health care workers. “But they never adequately distributed them to the public,” he says. “They did a cover-your-ass operation. And that was it. The city is at a fabulous, fabulous legal liability. After all, our officials failed to seriously assess the problem. And they never communicated their concern to the people.”

For now, the Bronx – and the New York City Department of Health – needs to take inspiration from Rockland. As Dr. Joan Facetie, Rockland’s health commissioner, said bluntly, “We don’t know the extent of the problem.”
EDITORIAL

BIENVENIDOS, BIENVENUE, & WELCOME!!

With this spring’s issue, we are pleased to be reinstating our multilingual section of The Bronx Journal. Here, among our features, is an article in Japanese on slow-cooking foods; one in Spanish on how ethnis in Ecuador are finding a political voice; a Russian-language piece on the KGB’s role in the 1981 assassination attempt on Pope John-Paul; and, in French, an article on the playwright Edward Albee, whose acclaimed masterwork, “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” is currently enjoying a Broadway revival.

We are especially proud of our talented reporting staff. Ozzie Ramos, who this fall investigated the Parkchester turkey plant that was violating Environmental Control Board guidelines, visited the botanicas of the Bronx and interviewed Dr. Arnold Wendroff of the Mercury Poisoning Project in order to write about how the ritualistic use of the turkey plant that was violating health and safety codes; one in Spanish on how looking good helped her feel good—or, at least, better—during her recent battle with cancer.

Accompanying most of our reporters on their assignments, The Bronx Journal’s crack photographer, Ulises Gonzalez, deserves special credit this issue. Not only did he photograph the children at Jacobs, the student dancers at the Bronx Dance Academy, Rios, and comedienne Alba Sanchez, but he also drew the cartoon on this page and wrote the Spanish piece, “Presencias Reales.”

The Bronx Journal will take a summer break, but we will be back in the fall, ready to serve the Bronx community with relevant, compelling, and entertaining journalism.

Pro-Life

The TV image showed an abortion clinic’s room full of buckets—buckets brimming with tiny bones. A group of eighth graders watched and cried. I was one of them, sitting in a classroom at a Catholic seminary in the Dominican Republic. That day, I made a decision that if I ever faced with an unplanned pregnancy, abortion would not be an option. That was my choice. It is infuriating that living in the 21st century in the United States, where almost every method of contraceptives is available, more than one million abortions take place every year. Having an abortion should not be the solution for a night of passion gone bad. It is an irresponsible and selfish way out of things. I believe that the life and breath of a child take place every year.

It is time for American women to understand what is beginning to happen. The ruling party did not waste any time in enforcing its political agenda. Taking away women’s right to choose can divide the nation the same way slavery did. By giving the medical agencies the right to refuse abortions covered by Medicaid, the majority in Congress takes the first step to infringe upon the civil liberties of women.

Pro-Choice

Three years ago Solvita Mulka, 29, a New York City resident, had to have an abortion because she could not afford to provide for a baby. Even though she was a college graduate, she could not find a good-paying job and had just broken up with her boy friend. Hundreds of thousands of women in New York State rely on Medicaid to obtain the necessary health care. Our state is one of four in the country that offer abortion for low-income women under Medicaid coverage. Mulka was one of those to take advantage of the plan.

Last November 21, Congress passed a $388 billion spending bill permitting federal, state and local agencies to deny women abortion services. This law encourages abortion opponents in pressure hospitals and clinics into ignoring state requirements offering abortions to needy women.

For more than 36 years, since the State Legislature enacted landmark legislation legalizing abortion, New York has protected the reproductive freedom of its poorest women. The Legislature has long recognized that state Medicaid funding for abortion is essential if reproductive choice is to be a reality for them. But on December 8, President Bush signed the bill that Congress had enacted, thus giving the right to hospitals in New York, Maryland, Washington, and Hawaii to refuse abortion services to women covered by Medicaid.

This sounds bleak for women who believe in reproductive choice. Yet small steps are currently being taken to ensure that women’s health is not endangered by the sneaky political maneuvering of this administration.

On March 22, the Texas Senate Health and Human Services Committee approved Senate Bill 747, sponsored by Senator John Cornyn (R-Dallas), allowing for a Medicaid waiver. The bill expands the eligibility of women in Texas for lap smears for cervical cancer, screenings for breast cancer, sexually transmitted diseases, hypertension, cholesterol and tuberculosis. The waiver covers the eligibility of women who make up to $3,000 a year.

Of course, anti-abortion activists are already opposing the bill, fearing it might be a way of using Medicaid for abortions.

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IS YOUR KID FAT?

How Bronx Families Are Weighing In Against Childhood Obesity

TAMANA FRANKLIN
The Bronx Journal Reporter

Two months ago, Esquirina Espinar, a Bronx resident, took her 10-year-old daughter, Kiarabel, to the Tremont Avenue health clinic that’s affiliated with Jacobi Medical Center. Here Espinar expressed her concern about Kiarabel’s weight. “She’s eating too much, what can I do?” she asked the pediatrician.

Espinar had first noticed Kiarabel starting to get chubby a little more than a year ago, but she was not sure how to go about changing the girl’s eating habits. The clinic recommended a free program at Jacobi Hospital on Pelham Parkway. Since joining it, Kiarabel has lost seven pounds, going from 152 to 145, thanks in part to the clinic. “They’ve taught me to eat good food that helps you lose weight,” says Tyre Evans, 10, who is back on track after gaining weight during summer camp last year.

“Parents have to find a way to allow their children to play,” says Gyselle Gonzalez, assistant coordinating manager of the program. “Many children are not coordinated because they don’t participate in physical activity and cannot move as quickly as others. They should use the stairs instead of elevators when they can. They should also walk and look for free exercise programs like the Police Athletic League.”

“My daughter is eating too much,” one parent told her doctor. “What can I do?”

If a child misses one week, he can come the next week or even a month later, depending on the family’s needs.

Oliveia Evans and her son, Tyre, 10, joined the program in 2003. At the time, he weighed 148. Before that, Evans used to fry most of her family’s dinners. Since learning what is healthy, however, she bakes her meals instead.

At first, Tyre lost weight. But Evans and her husband, Quentin, who live in the Parkchester section of the Bronx, decided to...

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Photos: Ulises Gonzalez

“If factors like too much TV and too many Big Macs help cause obesity, so does genetic predisposition. However, weight gain boils down to this, says Dr. Bass: When a person eats more calories than he burns through physical activity, he gets fat.

Dr. Bass and the staff at Jacobi believe that educating people about this epidemic, and how to combat it, is important. She discourages families from serving children undiluted juice, which is full of sugar, and whole-fat milk, since skim or even two-percent fat is much healthier.

“If is clear that obesity runs in families and kids copy what parents do,” says Bass. “That means parents have to get rid of their own sodas.”

In other words, adults must improve their own eating habits if they have any hope of helping their children. For this reason, the Jacobs Weight Management Program heavily involves the entire family. “Parents are weighed and measured at visits with their kids,” Dr. Bass says. “We get them all up on the scale. We promote healthy living for the entire family. Healthy eating and exercise is good for both overweight and skinny people.”

A referral from a child’s pediatrician is all that he or she needs to attend the ten-week program. The initial appointment includes a full exam, lab work, and a review of symptoms for any problems that may be associated with being overweight. Among the team of experts on staff are a psychologist, a social worker, a dietician and a coordinator.

Children at the Weight Management Program range in age from 2 to 18. The young ones participate along with their mothers, one-on-one, rather than in a group. Staring with the second visit and continuing every Tuesday between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m., the children and their parents meet with the dietician and the psychologist to discuss some of the struggles the families are facing, including issues like making good food choices, acquiring self-esteem, and changing bad habits. Then between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m., they go to the hospital’s gym, where the children ride stationary bicycles, play kickball, do relay races, and stretch.

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send Tyre to summer camp to increase his physical activity. When he came home, she said, “He was humongous. He had gained all the weight back and then some, thanks to the meals there.”

In May of 2004, Tyre returned to the Jacobi program. Today he weighs 162, but he has also grown substantially; now he is 4’8”. This summer, says Evans, she will write on her son’s camp application, “Limit sweets intake.”

Parents of obese children need to monitor city-sponsored school and summer camp program lunches. While these are well-balanced, they do not consist of low-fat, low-calorie foods. According to the New York Department of Education, a five-year plan is in place to change the menus, but it is being phased in slowly. At Jacobi, the staff works with mothers, teaching them how to serve appropriate portion sizes and healthy foods, and how to set limits without feeling guilty about saying no. “If you give your kid a choice between an apple and an orange, there is only a good choice that can come out of that,” says Dr. Bass.

Parents also need to help their kids step up the level of their physical activity. Bass, who has been working at Jacobi for three years, understands that safety issues often limit children’s physical activity. “They don’t play outside like they used to,” she says, adding that cultural and economic factors come into play as well. “Often, people in the Bronx are living just below the poverty line, so there can be food insecurity issues. Also, healthier, organic foods are more expensive. Foods such as low-sugar cereals are rarely on sale.”

In the end, parents must not only be ready for change, they must be patient — and caution their children to be patient as well — because combating this epidemic is a process that takes time.

But most feel that it’s worth it. “I’ve learned how to eat in portions and read nutritional labels on food products,” says Tyre, sounding very mature for his age. “They’ve taught me to eat good food that helps you lose weight, and I can do things I couldn’t do before. That makes me feel much better about myself.”

If you are interested in Jacobi’s Family Weight Management Program, contact the referral office at 718-559-4940.

MANAGING YOUR CHILD’S WEIGHT

Parents can keep children at a healthy weight by following the New York City Department of Health guidelines:

1) Talk to your healthcare provider to determine a healthy weight range for your child and yourself.

2) Set a good example. Kids are more likely to do what you do rather than what you say.

3) Keep in mind that people get fat when they eat more calories than they burn up. Reaching a healthy weight is a balancing act between what you take in and how physically active you are.

4) GET MOVING! Physical activity improves your health even if you do not lose weight. Spend at least one hour a day being physically active.
A homeless cat waits at the A C & C to either find a new family or be shipped to another city-run adoption center.

Anne Leonard
The Bronx Journal Reporter

At the Animal Care & Control Center, Even Your Goldfish May Find A New Home

Jose, a middle-aged laborer, looked worried as he and his pit bull terrier, Annabel, 5, approached the Bronx’s Animal Care & Control Drop-off Center on Fordham Road near Webster Avenue one recent Saturday.

“I have to turn over my dog,” he moaned. “My landlord wants me to get rid of her.

Jose has had Annabel for more than four years. And New York City law actually supports pet owners in rent-stabilized apartments who have been open about owning non-exotic pets like cats, dogs, fish, rabbits, and birds for more than three months. (The only exceptions would be if pets threatened the health and safety of other residents)

Mary Pannazzo, one of three people on duty, gave Jose the phone number of Legal Action for Animals, a group of volunteer attorneys who deal with landlords trying to evict tenants with pets. Despite the 90-day law, landlords continue to serve eviction notices to tenants without even giving them the 90 days)

Currently only one related bill is in any committee of the New York City Council. Intro 189 allows senior citizens to replace a rent-stabilized apartment with two cats; he asked this reporter to turn over his dog. Minutes later, the staff checked outside to make sure the cats had not been abandoned. They weren’t.

A couple brought in a Pekinese dog, and the wife explained, “We both have jobs and can’t take care of him.”

Moore assured them that the dog would be adopted quickly. Then a large pit bull arrived with its owner, who was moving to Manhattan or to Brooklyn to work with the AC&C.

“Years ago the city euthanized all the pit bulls,” Pannazzo recalled. “Lately we’ve been finding homes for some of them.”

One man in his early twenties arrived with two cats; he asked this reporter to adopt them, then explained to the AC&C’s technicians, Melissa Moore and Sabrina Janelles, that his sister was moving and they couldn’t keep them. Moore instructed him, “We have to find out from your sister if that’s what she wants.”

The man left and brought in his mother, who told a brand new story, adding, “I can’t take care of them.”

More than 10,000 animals from the Bronx are euthanized every year.

James advised her that she would need to pay $35 per cat for medical care.

Astounded at the cost, mother and son picked up their cat carrier and headed for the door. Minutes later, the staff checked outside to make sure the cats had not been abandoned. They weren’t.

No one turned up for the Pekinese dog.

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This is thanks to Boks, who was previously the director of the Phoenix, Arizona, shelter system, whose facilities he turned into no-kill centers. He is determined to accomplish this mission throughout New York City’s five boroughs.

One of the major reasons such a large number of cats and dogs are euthanized, explained Moore, is that so many unwanted animals are born each year. “People need to spay their females and neuter their males,” she says, adding that this has proven to be healthier “and it helps control odor problems in the home as well.”

This year the AC & C has sponsored two all-day spay-neuterathons, called “The Big Fix,” in which vets, working in a mobile truck, traveled the neighborhoods, fixing hundreds of cats and dogs.

Part of Boks’ mission to prevent animals from becoming homeless includes building a full-service shelter in the Bronx over the next year or two. “It’s our feeling that the Bronx and Queens are the most under-served boroughs in the city,” he says.

Boks hopes to make the Bronx center a community-oriented facility where families can come to learn about animals. The AC&C has a “TLC (Teach Love & Compassion) Program,” he says, “for so-called at-risk kids, teens who need to develop interpersonal skills. Many of them are from the Bronx. So they’re trudging either to Manhattan or to Brooklyn to work with animals.”

Pet Product News, the business trade magazine, has reported that 69 million dollars in America have pets. And their owners can be passionate – and activist.

For instance, Boks points out, last year Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced that he could save money for California by trimming the amount of time animals could stay in shelters. But pet people protested – loudly.

“He changed his mind within the first day,” says Boks. “Clearly, he’s a very astute politician.”

The AC&C’s branch at 464 E. Fordham Road, (212-593-0078) is only open Tuesdays and Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. However, the Manhattan office at 326 East 110th Street is open daily between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m.
When Latina Power Meets Womanpower

Comic Alba Sanchez Makes ‘Em Laugh — And Think

Alba Sanchez is something of an enigma. The Puerto Rican comedienne, labeled “the female John Leguizamo,” is as funny and raw as she is painted. Yet what informs all her work, and her persona as well, is the fact of whom she comes from. “I love the Bronx; it’s very special to me,” she says. “I’ll always be a Bronx girl.” Sanchez has crammed a multitude of acclaimed, original comic pieces into a career that is just picking up steam. One of her most highly praised shows, “The Bronx Witch,” opened the esteemed La Mama Theater Company’s 40th anniversary in 2002. She was also selected as the face of HBO Latino’s “Half-Life Campaign” and as a NELLO (Bronx Recognition for Own) award winner in 2003. And this fall, coming straight from a college tour and a gig at the Betsy Lounge on the Lower East Side, she will be opening at the famed Apollo Theatre in Harlem in an ensemble show, “Latino Don’t F**k.”

A self-described “change-of-life baby,” Sanchez grew up with three much-older siblings and parents who had immigrated to New York City in 1940 from Puerto Rico. They always balanced each other out, she says, for her father, a sometimes-unruly and sometimes-lean-shark, would be tolerant, wise, understanding, spiritual and full-time marine, who would jokingly characterize herself as a “white woman slave of a black man,” would lay down the law — and vice versa.

Sanchez claims to have inherited her flair for performing from her father, whom she describes as a cross between Ricky Ricardo in “I Love Lucy” and Bill Cosby. Sanchez’s father was an entertainer and singer who was an active member of the growing mambo music scene of the 1940s through 1960s. As a girl, she spent many nights in delloirs watching him perform and believes that through listening to his stories and singing along with him, she was able to learn how to craft her own comedic, from the pacing to the punchline. “He really should have been a comedian because I spent so many hours laughing with that man,” she has said.

Sanchez says that she admires her parents for the struggles they endured and also for their hard work. “When they moved to New York, Puerto Ricans were not the flavor of the week,” she has said. “It forced me to become a better writer,” she says. “It forced me to dilute my ethnic views and music, a little bit of everything,” she says.

Shuttling between upscale suburban schools during the week and the South Bronx on weekends was not always easy. The neighborhood kids, says Sanchez, were turned off because “they thought I was trying to be ‘white,’ whatever that means.” Yet they worked hard to provide their daughter with a first-rate education, sending her to Catholic boarding schools in Westchester County and then New Jersey. When she wore the smoked “avent,” as she says, “I thought, ‘What are those kids complaining about?’ My parents were paying good money to have me on scrub floors.”

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Still living in two different worlds may not have done much for her self-esteem. “I spent too much of my youth not feeling okay, like I just wasn’t good enough,” Sanchez told Miss Magazine. “Thank God I am over that. It’s a lot more fun now, just be who you are, and let that be okay.”

For the tenth grade, Sanchez — happily — returned to New York and attended high school at the Professional Children’s School in Manhattan. Although she was continually involved in theater, both as an actor and writer, after graduation she pursued other career avenues, just as in the world of show biz and stand-up did not gross her with open arms. She even attended summer school and says that she is an ordained inter-faith minister. At the moment, however, it looks like Sanchez won’t need a fall-back career. She has said. “I find that a lot of Latina women shy away from being funny professionally because they’re afraid of looking ugly.”

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DANCE, DANCE, DANCE!
Keeping Students At A Bronx Middle School On Their Toes—-And On Point

Our students come to us raw,” says dance teacher Sarah Sanford-Perez of the Bronx Dance Middle School 308. Here, a class warms up in the dance studio.

LITTLE girls who have visions of sugar plum fairies, pink tutus, and toe shoes, and little boys who prefer to leap and jump rather than walk or run, may dream about attending a program like the one which the Bronx Dance Academy Middle School 308 offers.

Standing in the northeastern part of the Bronx just below Yonkers, this boutique school for grades six through eight has occupied an airy three-story red brick building at 3617 Bainbridge Avenue since July of 2003. Here is where tomorrow’s Paloma Halles, Julio Boccas, and Arthur Herreras, legendary dancers of the past and present, may be rehearsing in one of the school’s spacious dance studios. But don’t be fooled. The BDA, as it is known by students and teachers, is not a school that teaches hip hop, tap, or even Broadway-style dance. Its program is designed to train serious classical dancers, says Betzaida Fuentes, the BDA parent coordinator, whose two daughters graduated from the school, “is small school, and my daughters received personal attention from the teachers.”

This unique center of learning, which originally opened in a theatre space of the Bronx Dance Theatre in 1995, accepts about 300 students; this year 83 percent are girls and 17 percent, boys, but their numbers are growing.

The curriculum covers basic academic studies but emphasizes a “learning through the arts” program. Through it, students use exhibitions, projects, performances, and portfolios to report on their work. They are also expected to take classical, jazz, and modern dance classes three times a week, each in a 90-minute time block, and one visual arts class such as painting, sculpting, or drawing.

It is little wonder that with such an environment, the school is highly competitive. Although only students in Region 1 may audition for BDA, it accepts approximately one of ten applicants. Even so, students do not need to have prior dance experience to gain entrance.

The audition is held at a group Open House. Here, girls and boys participate in basic movement exercises and drills. Faculty members then invite those who show significant potential to a second audition. At this time, teachers evaluate the children’s academic records and discuss the candidates. Guidance counselors and an assistant principal make the final selection.

Once students are accepted at BDA, they must be willing to wear uniforms and pull their hair back in a bun every day. No jewelry or long nails are allowed. Dance-wise, sixth graders are schooled in the Martha Graham technique and “foundational” dance moves such as body positioning. By seventh grade, they begin school performances, and by eighth, they are expected to learn ballet terminology, and, occasionally, to give public performances.

“The Bronx Dance Academy is my baby,” says Yvette Williams, the school’s dance director, who has been with M.S. 308 since its inception. “I have seen it grow into what it is today.” Williams puts the school into context when she adds, “I wish there had been a school like the Bronx Dance Academy when I was growing up. I went to Catholic school and I had to pay for dance lessons.”

Sarah Sanford-Perez, one of the school’s dance teachers, says, “Our students come to us raw. They have never seen a ballet slipper and don’t have a clue what dance is really about. In two years we have to prepare them for high school auditions and turn them into well-rounded dancers. It has been difficult.”

Some students are surprised at the discipline required to keep up with their classes, and occasionally, they bow to the pressure and drop out of the school. Generally, however, the BDA has legions of young fans. Natasha Marquez, an eighth grader, is one. “My parents encouraged me to audition for the school, and they gave me a lot of confidence,” she says. “I am very proud of the program here, and it is a lot of fun.”

Her friend, Candace Saunders, a seventh grader, adds, “I never learned about ballet before coming to this school. Besides, the teachers, we have demonstrations and videos. It’s good to learn something new.”

Bonica Freeland, an alumna, is grateful for her time at BDA. “This school is a great influence on you when it comes to enhancing your passion and desire for dance,” she wrote on the website, Insideschools.org. “There were a number of schools that I went to before I found BDA, but BDA was worth the travel time and effort.” Besides, she added, “Bronx Dance Academy helps keep kids off the street.”
At El Museo Del Barrio, Photographer Agustin Casasola Captures Mexico’s Turbulent 20th Century History

Though many in the Bronx community are not even aware that El Museo del Barrio exists, others derive great benefits from it. “It’s great to find a museum in New York City that enhances Latino culture,” says Arelis Lachapelle, 29, an Argentine exchange student majoring in history, who visits El Museo regularly. “The current Casasola photo exhibition is an excellent example of our heritage. It transports you to those revolutionary times in Mexico.”

El Museo del Barrio, located at Fifth Avenue and 104th Street, is the only museum in New York City dedicated to showcasing Puerto Rican, Caribbean and Latin American art. Its current exhibit, “Mexico: The Revolution and Beyond, Photographs by Casasola, 1900-1940,” which runs through July 31, features the photojournalism of Agustin Victor Casasola, who captured the tumultuous events of the early 20th century in Mexico with a style that ranged from the celebratory to the unforgettably graphic.

Organized by the leading Mexican photographic specialist, Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, the exhibit showcases 92 photographs acquired from the image archives of the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History. One of the most dramatic images, in black and white, shows police detectives triumphantly holding a child they have rescued from a kidnapping. In another, Casasola captures the precise moment when the Mexican revolutionary, Francisco Madero, and his troops storm a Mexican town on horseback.

“This exhibition is as important for the Hispanic community as for the Mexican community because it is a way to get closer to our culture,” says Julian Zugazagoitia, director of the museum. “It shows that we Latinos have a lot of talent.”

The photographer, Agustin Victor Casasola, was born in Mexico City in 1874 and began working in typographic workshops as a boy. By the age of 20, he had become a reporter; it was later on that he began to establish himself as a photographer. In 1912, Casasola, in partnership with his brother, Miguel, opened the Mexican Information and Photographic Agency, one of the first professional photography agencies. This agency helped Casasola to realize his lifelong obsession: the creation of a photographic archive that would record the turbulent history of Mexico as it unfolded. In the course of his long career, the artist photographed all the major figures on the Mexican landscape – from Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa to Mexico’s first Republican president, Benito Juarez, to the acclaimed painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, and even Leon Trotsky during his Mexican exile.

This Casasola exhibition also contains pictures that Casasola either contracted or purchased from other photographers. In all, it focuses on eight themes: Pax Porfiriana, Democratic Rule, The Revolution at Work, The Eagle and the Serpent (according to a myth, the Aztecs settled on a rock in the center of a lake, where they discovered an eagle devouring a serpent), Modern Times, Night Life, and The Famous. The images document a positive view of a modern Mexico that emulated Europe.

During the Mexican Revolution, Casasola captured federal troops at the Buenavista train station in 1914. Casasola photographed the revolutionary leader, Emiliano Zapata, circa 1915.

The exhibition runs through July 31. For information, call 212-831-7272, or visit the website, www.elmuseo.org. Under 12 accompanied by an adult may enter free. For information, call 212-517-7272, or visit the website, www.elmuseo.org.
Movie Review

"Million Dollar Baby" and "The Sea Inside"

Louise Valentin
The Bronx Journal Reporter

"Million Dollar Baby" pretty much swept the Oscars this year, winning honors for Best Picture, Best Actress (Hilary Swank), Best Supporting Actress (Olympia Dukakis), Best Supporting Actor (Frankie Dunn, who has been estranged from his own daughter. Although he never discusses why, when he takes on Maggie Fitzgerald (Swank), a 31-year-old hillbilly waitress who has the notion that she can box, it is clear that she becomes a second chance for him to get this family relationship right.

Swank portrays Maggie, a spunky young woman who is all heart and muscle. A waitress since she was 13, Maggie believes that with Frankie's help, she can become a champion, but he tells her bluntly, "I don't train girlies." Still, she works out in his gym, and eventually, with a little prodding from his pal, Scraps (Freeman), he relents.

Frankie, needless to say, gets Maggie into fighting shape, and together they work their way up to a championship match. Here, she takes on the German woman known as "Billie the Blue Bear." The fight wreaks of backhanded brutality because Billie fights dirty, jabbing at Maggie's head and neck even after the referee calls a time-out. The results, as it turns out, are devastating.

But the power of the film is not in its fight scenes, rather, it is in how Frankie and Maggie bond, and how a sudden tragic turn of events leads them to confront the true meaning of love and dignity. Eventually, Maggie becomes the daughter whom Frankie never got to know. Which makes the characters' final choices that much more poignant.

Spanish director Alejandro Amenabar's "The Sea Inside," the Oscar winner for Best Foreign Film, is based on the true story of Spanish author, Ramon Sampedro, a quadriplegic, who for 30 years fought for the right to assisted suicide. Javier Bardem, who in 2002 starred in "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" and the 1981 movie of the same title, starring Richard Dreyfuss? Yet both films move gently and sensitively.

As Sampedro says, "A life without freedom is not a life." Maggie Fitzgerald may come from a strikingly different world than his, but she clearly shares these sentiments.

Bridge: Knowledge is power

Julian Ladriman

One of the first conventions new bridge players learn is Blackwood. Most tournament players use some variant of Blackwood. A popular alternative is called Roman Blackwood, where the king of trump suit is treated with the keycard Blackwood, where the king of trump is treated with the implied trump suit is treated with the keycard Blackwood, where the king of trump is treated with the implied trump suit is treated with the keycard Blackwood, where the king of trump is treated with the implied trump suit is treated with the keycard Blackwood, where the king of trump is treated with the implied trump suit is treated with the keycard Blackwood, where the king of trigger with the intent of discarding a diamond if the ace does not appear is called a ruffing finesse. The information that declarer learned from East's 1 NT bid made it a sure thing. Even if East had not opened the bidding, and declarer had no information about which defender held the club honors, the same technique should be used in the club suit. This method has approximately a 75% chance of success. It will only fail if East holds the club queen and West holds the club ace. A ruffing finesse usually involves two touching honors (such as, king-queen) opposite a void.

On this hand, however, it was necessary to drive out the queen with the 10 in order to discard a diamond if the ace does not appear is called a ruffing finesse. The information that declarer learned from East's 1 NT bid made it a sure thing. Even if East had not opened the bidding, and declarer had no information about which defender held the club honors, the same technique should be used in the club suit. This method has approximately a 75% chance of success. It will only fail if East holds the club queen and West holds the club ace. A ruffing finesse usually involves two touching honors (such as, king-queen) opposite a void.

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My Cancer, My “Evil Twin”

ANNIKA HARRIS
The Bronx Journal Reporter

I lived together for over a year. We were inseparable. I fondly referred to her as “Mini Me.” She liked to rest her head on a little section of my left side. She was my secret, a tiny treasure—a lump about the size of a silver dollar that I discovered on my left rib cage. But, then the pain began and she turned into my “evil twin.” When the pain became unbearable, I sought help. After six months of being poked and prodded, my “evil twin” was finally gone. But, of course, she had the last word. That word was CANCER.

When I was diagnosed, I was extremely angry for three reasons. First, I had been misdiagnosed a year earlier. A doctor had told me that my tumor was just extra cartilage and that it was easier to live with it than to have it removed. Then, I was further upset that I was diagnosed with a particular type of lymphoma, an illness which usually occurs in the elderly and spreads slowly. If I had been 40 or 60 years older, the doctors told me I probably would have died of natural causes before the cancer had a chance to kill me. Since I was 21 and in pain, my oncologist decided it was best to treat me.

And most distressing of all, I would have to put my life on hold for medical reasons. Two years earlier, I had undergone major surgery for endometriosis and was, consequently, on bed rest for six months. Although I am the type of person who rolls with the punches of life, my diagnosis meant that I would take me even longer to graduate from college. I thought I should have accomplished more during my 21 years and felt like I was being left behind by others my age. How would I catch up?

I later learned that my feelings about my diagnosis were similar to other cancer patients who were my age.

“This is a tough age—this is the beginning of your adult years when you’re getting to do a lot of going out and hopefully meet your future spouse; it’s also the beginning of your career… All this gets put on hold when you are receiving chemotherapy,” said Joanna Mikhail-Powe, a nurse-practitioner at Sciode Medical Center in the Bronx, where I received my treatment. I found it difficult relating to the other cancer patients at Sciode because they were much older than I. As Mikhail-Powe said, “We don’t see too many people between the ages of 20-30.”

As I went through chemotherapy, I had many questions: What was the best way to cope with side effects of treatments that are worse than the symptoms? What resources were there for young people affected by disease that usually afflict older people?

I, like most cancer patients, feel that the side effects of chemotherapy are worse than the symptoms of the cancer. According to the National Cancer Institutes website, these side effects are caused by damage to normal cells as a result of the chemotherapy and include nausea, vomiting, anemia, infections, mouth and throat sores, and constipation, among other unpleasant and sometimes debilitating conditions.

Although the side effects can be severe, they are much more manageable today than they were even a decade ago. “We have a lot more drugs, and they are more effective,” explained Mikhail-Powe.

Cancer and chemotherapy can also affect the patient emotionally. I found that the best way to cope with the emotional side effects is through the help of family, friends, and health-care providers. According to Mikhail-Powe, “Many people without support lack the encouragement and daily support that people getting chemo need.” In addition, the National Cancer Institutes advise that families and friends are able to “comfort and reassure you in ways that no one else can.”

During my chemo experience, I surrounded myself with supportive people. Those who did not support me, I eliminated from my life. Small gestures from my family and friends meant more to me than they would have before my diagnosis. I looked forward to the times when my mother would bring me a burger from McDonald’s while I was having a treatment. I also treasured my friends for taking me to run errands or for just calling to make me laugh.

At one point, because I had been constipated for more than two weeks, my family actually prayed for me. Okay, that was rather weird. But they all understood how uncomfortable I was. Each morning, a different person would tell me that she or he had prayed for me. I was grateful.

Another way that I coped during my chemotherapy treatments was to dress like a knockout. I always made sure I looked my best and never like I was undergoing serious medical treatment. Toward that end, I would put on a full face of make-up, wear high heels, and completely accessorize my outfits.

My favorite activities during my treatments were reading fashion magazines and watching makeover shows. Getting a weekly manicure and pedicure also made me feel better. My philosophy was “The better I look, the better I feel.” And it worked.

No wonder that one of the most important doctors to me, apart from my oncologist, became my dermatologist. I had struggled with acne throughout my teenage years and had finally grown it out. But one of the side effects of my chemotherapy was the break-out of huge pimple-filled zits. When I complained to my oncologist, he asked me which I would rather have: a cure or clear skin.

I surprised myself by replying, “Clear skin.” Luckily, my dermatologist prescribed medications that once again put my acne in check. So in the end I did not have to choose between my health and appearance.

Although I have been in remission for almost two years, I am still dealing with some of the side effects of chemotherapy, things like seasonal allergies and a post-nasal drip that causes constant coughing. Also, I still have the catheter in my chest that was used to administer the chemo. And I am picking up the pieces of my life by finishing college.

I will never before or had added my name to another prayer circle. And I was grateful.

My oncologist asked me which I would rather have—a cure or clear skin. I surprised myself by saying, “Clear skin.”

In MY VIEW

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The Bronx Journal Reporter
always thought of myself as a citizen. I was born here and have lived here my whole life. But I never took part in the history of my family — especially my mother’s history.

I have come to wonder about my mother and how she felt about coming to America. And so I asked her.

Gladys Garcia, my mother, was born in Guatemala City, Guatemala. Even as a young girl, she did not spend a lot of time with her parents, who went back and forth between the United States to Guatemala for work. They told us stories about how much better the United States was than Guatemala. My mother listened and started to wonder about the good life in America.

She compared the job opportunities in Guatemala to those available here. She felt that she could have found a decent job in Guatemala. She could even have gone to college there. However, she would not have improved herself over the years if she stayed there. The chances to learn new skills, or any skills, for that matter, were limited. The United States, she felt sure, would be a better teacher. So my mother came here and learned English easily. She had many tutors within the ESL classes who wanted her to learn.

In 1999 my mother finally became a citizen. She studied the United States history with a real curiosity for it. But the reason why she became a citizen was somewhat different. She knew that by not being a citizen, she was not eligible for many important benefits such as healthcare.

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my mother’s candidate. As a single mother of two boys, she has devoted her life to her children. She works long hours at Cookie’s Department Store in the Bronx and sometimes feels guilty that she cannot spend time with me and my little brother, Miguel. Still, she understands that she is the breadwinner, and some things just need to be done. Food, clothing and shelter are all that matter. And her job makes that possible.

My parents separated seven years ago. Ever since then, I have been living with my mother. Still, I see my father about three or four times a week.

My mother has been able to take care of my brother and me financially. But now I have started working so that I can help her out. At 21, I figure if I need something, I have to earn it myself and give my mother a break.

Last summer, during my break from Lehman College, I went to work with my mother at Cookie’s. I was a stock guy and would have to be there by eight in the morning; I would come home at eleven at night. After two weeks, I quit and never went back.

My mother is a manager there, and she is twice as old as I am, but she has those same hours. She has been working there for as long as I can remember. My experience at Cookie’s has helped me to be able to relate to her. What I feel about that is that my mother works hard to make my brother and me smile, and I really appreciate it.
who saw that the young boy was always getting into scrapes and suggested that he channel his anger and spunk in the boxing ring. Once Rios visited the Bronxchester Boxing Club, where he still trains, he was hooked.

Alejandro, a Golden Gloves boxer who is Rios’s trainer, remembers how “Lil Joey” used to clean spit buckets and do other odds-and-ends jobs “because he just loves being around the fighters.” As fate would have it, Alejandro broke his nose during an amateur bout and had plenty of time to teach his willing young student the basics of the sport known as “the sweet science.”

More to the point, while Alejandro was recovering, young Rios hounded him for instruction. He was, from the first, eager to learn.

“This is a home away from home for these kids,” said Luis Camacho, who helped train Rios as a boy. “This is their neighborhood gym, this is where they learn boxing, this is where they learn what life is all about.”

Rios attributes his own toughness and determination to growing up in an area which, he says, is synonymous with slums, gangs, and violence – the Throgs Neck Project in the Bronx. “It plays into my persona,” says Dave Malavé, 23, a center fielder on Lehman College’s baseball team and a 15-year friend. “He was aggressive and sometimes violent, but boxing helped him to control his anger.”

Early on, Rios’s youthful neighborhood struggles mirrored problems inside his home. His mother, Rosie, from Puerto Rico, played the role of both mother and father to Joey and his five siblings, raising them and simultaneously working at Albert Einstein Hospital in the Bronx. “My father was hardly ever around,” Rios said.

Young Rios loved to raise hell. “Joey would get into scuffles around the neighborhood,” says Dave Malavé, 23, a center fielder on Lehman College’s baseball team and a 15-year friend. “He was aggressive and sometimes violent, but boxing helped him to control his anger.”

Rios graduated from St. Raymond’s High School in the Bronx and briefly attended Old Westbury College on Long Island before deciding to throw his body into the ring and turn pro.

Boxing has proven to be Rios’s ticket out of the projects. In his fifth professional bout, he fought in his neighborhood at Jimmy’s Café on West Fordham Road. He was so popular, says Alejandro that the Fire Department threatened to shut down the fight because so many people were trying to gain entrance to the venue. “We used to coordinate buses so Joey’s fans could travel to fights,” Alejandro adds. “First it was one bus, then two, and finally three. It got so crazy that we had to stop chartering buses.”

Rios is grateful to “Team Rios,” his tight group of supporters who have been in his corner since the beginning, for helping him to maintain his focus. First and foremost among them is Alejandro. The other members are Rios’s manager, Rusty Ansell, and his trainer, Carlos Ramirez. All have weighed in on such career-shaping decisions as Rios’s opponents, his fight venues, and the size of the purses he should accept.

Because this group is so nurturing, says Alejandro, the aspiring champ is well-grounded and cannot be lured away by the promise of bigger fights or larger pots of money from promoters looking to exploit young talent. “When Joey turned pro,” says Alejandro, “not one manager wanted to sign him to a contract — until Rusty Ansell put up the money.” Ansell was the only one who had enough faith in Rios to lay out the cash.

Until “Team Rios” thinks it is time for Rios to challenge for a title, the men will continue to handpick opponents who are respectable in the rankings and have the financial backing to make a bout feasible. “Joey doesn’t fight for a slice and a soda,” trainer Alejandro said. “We’ll fight King Kong if they have King Kong money.”

Rios realizes that he is approaching his window of opportunity to challenge the likes of Zab Judah or Arturo Gatti for a championship. Wilfredo Benitez, the former junior welterweight champion from Puerto Rico, won the title at the age of 18. Rios estimates that he is perhaps two years away from contending for a title. “There is no rush,” he said during a training break at the Bronxchester Club. “When my manager and trainers say I’m ready, that’s when we’ll make our move.”

Mention the name Edgar Santana, and Rios quickly dismisses the idea that the other junior welterweights is the same class. Santana boasts a record of 13-2, but Rios claims that some of Santana’s wins came only a few weeks after Rios had already taken the wind out of his opponents’ sails.

“He has fought the same boxers I defeated, and he has had better results because I wore them down first and gave Santana an easy win,” Rios gripes, then adds, “I respect Edgar as a boxer, but personally I feel that he is trying to make a name for himself by challenging the fighters who have not had the chance to train thoroughly to fight him.”

A fight in the professional ranks seems like an inevitability, and Rios awaits the day when he can beat Santana a second time. He refuses to let on just how he plans to dominate his current archrival, but a mild smile crosses his face when he suggests that he will soon put to rest any confusion about who is the better brawler.

In the meantime, Rios trains six days a week, with Team Rios watching his every move and guarding him against shark promoters and fighters that do not serve his best interest. His last fight was on May 6. At the Westchester County Center in White Plains, he pounded Derrick Moon and won a unanimous decision. “Joey gets a lot of offers to fight other junior welterweights, but when it comes time to signing the contract and securing the money, the offers go by the wayside,” Alejandro says.

Rios would like to make an impact in a division that has recently restored life to the sport of boxing, thanks to such colorful fighters as Floyd Mayweather Jr., and the Australian, Kosta Tsyu. “My first professional fight was a head rush,” Rios says. “I look forward to an opportunity to fight the guys I’ve been watching on TV.”

His goal? “You want to go as far as you can in this business,” he says. “Put simply, I want respect. And a world title.”
With an 11-0 Winning Streak, Joey Rios Is Hot Hot Hot!