Maspeth Priest Resurrecting Ancient Language

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Queens priest seeks to preserve ancient language

BY ERIC JANIKIEWICZ

The Rev. Joseph Palecak says more than souls.
The parochial vicar at St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Maspeth is trying to save the ancient language of Aramaic, said to be spoken by Jews and early Christians.

This summer he plans to revisit the unlikely home of the last Aramaic speakers — in the southern Indian state of Kerala, where many Christians trace the origin of their faith to Thomas the Apostle.

“Few people know this, but up until recently Christian Indians held religious services in the ancient language Aramaic,” Palecak said.

He explained that since the 1960s the churches in India hold masses in the ancient language that much of the Middle East spoke in the early Christian years. Much like Latian, the spoken language has since lapsed into history.

“Yet even then, the language was kept in a time capsule,” he said, explaining that Christians in Kerala, unlike those in the Middle East, weren’t persecuted and could thus speak the language freely. “And so I’ve been trying to record as many people as possible who have knowledge of the language.”

The trick, Palecak said, is finding people who were born no later than the 1960s and attended the local church, where Aramaic was used for songs and worship. People born after that time wouldn’t have been exposed to the language because the church adopted the local language of Malayalam.

“It is a very time-sensitive project and I have to hurry before all those who remember the language are gone,” Palecak said, explaining that he tracked down Indians who were part of the Syri-Malabar Church, the largest of the St. Thomas Christian denominations which has its own forms of worship and theology. Many were able to sing the Aramaic religious songs of their youth.

Palecak hopes to have enough recordings of the language, which is preserved through religious song, to submite to the Library of Congress.

“Yet as a gold mine of musical motivation,” he said.

And if he succeeds in his quest, the movie “The Passion of the Christ” won’t be the only place where Aramaic is heard or appreciated.

“The movie is a gold mine of musical motivation,” he said.

And if I don’t do it, no one else will. It will be a complete loss for humanity.”

St. John’s selects new president, first layman in university history

BY LIAM LA GUERRE

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A group of Woodside parents have lost the fight to keep their children close to home.

The Department of Education (DOE) voted Wednesday, April 9, to temporary relocate 250 students from P.S. 11 in Woodside to P.S. 171 in Astoria for the next three years.

The relocation of the students, expected to begin for the 2014-15 school year, comes as the School Construction Authority (SCA) plans to build a brand-new P.S. 11 with a capacity of 856 seats.

“I have maintained that the expansion of P.S. 11 is a necessary investment in our children’s education and is vitally important to alleviating our overcrowded schools,” Congressman Joseph Crowley said.

“I am disappointed and troubled by the DOE’s lack of forethought to avoid this terrible situation.”

Crowley added, “The DOE’s poor planning and judgment will now place a significant burden on 250 of our youngest students and their families. Our children only get one real opportunity at a great education and it is unfortunate our city can not do right by them.”

Seven members of the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) voted in favor of the proposal, while two were against and one abstained from voting.

Since December, parents and elected officials sought to keep the students closer to their Woodside homes and last month asked the DOE to consider renting space in the nearby former St. Teresa School building.

But P.S. 11 parents say the DOE told them the former Catholic school would not be practical for the students due to lack of adequate resources at the site.

“We were never given the opportunity to discuss the site,” said Martin Connolly, whose youngest son is expected to start kindergarten at the school next year and faces being bused to Astoria. “We are just disappointed and feel the DOE is not thinking through the long-term ramifications of their decisions.”

Connolly also has two other children currently at P.S. 11, a daughter in second grade and son in kindergarten.

After extensive outreach to the community, we decided to move forward on delivering a state-of-the-art addition to P.S. 11 that will enrich students’ academic experience and reduce overcrowding,” DOE spokesman Harry Hartfield said.

DOE votes to bus over 200 Woodside students to Astoria

The Department of Education voted on the temporary relocation proposal that will send P.S. 11 students, such as incoming kindergartner ends, to P.S. 171 in Astoria for the next three years.

Photo courtesy of Miami University