

# THE BUSHWICK OBSERVER

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## My Hero & Me: Learning Leaders Helps Bushwick Fathers Take Initiative

When Evelyn Illelas assumed the position of Parent Coordinator at P.S. 376 in Bushwick, she arrived with more than a few school success stories from her previous job at Head Start, the national organization for school readiness. One program, the so-called "Fatherhood Initiative," Illelas decided to adapt to her new environment.

Last spring, the first annual "My Hero & Me" launched with the goal of increasing male involvement at P.S. 376 and, in Illelas' words, "to inform P.S. 376 fathers on the importance of their role in their child's learning experience." Last year, a modest group of male guardians came out. If 2007 was a moderate achievement, 2008's "My Hero & Me"—also called *Mi Hero y Yo*—is an overwhelming success.

Three additional neighborhood schools have joined Illelas' initiative at 376: P.S. 75, P.S. 377, and P.S. 116. At just one in an 8-week series of evening workshops, nearly 40 fathers, uncles, and mentors crowded the cafeteria at P.S. 377 to join their kids in a Bookmaking lesson led by Learning Leaders Program Coordinator Patrick Scott.

"This community is known for it's single mothers," Debbie Villanueva, Parent Coordinator at P.S. 377 said, "We're showing that not all fathers are absent in their children's lives."

Carlos watches as four of his six children gather around Patrick's craft display, carefully selecting their art supplies. "I barely see my kids," he explains. "I work nights, so when I'm

coming home they're off to school." Carlos likes events like these because "it keeps the kids out of trouble."

Adrian Moro agrees. Sitting with his small daughter, Amiyah, on his lap, Moro expresses gratitude for the school and for Learning Leaders. "I think this is great. They don't have too many of these things going on in this neighborhood. I hope you all have more."

Learning Leaders recruits, trains and supports volunteers to provide sustained help in the City's public schools, mostly during the school day. The organization also recruits parent volunteers who reflect the diversity of the City's population. Analysis of the Learning Leaders' impact indicates that school volunteerism not only provides resources to schools, teachers and students; it empowers parent volunteers to become active partners in their children's education.

Learning Leaders seeks volunteers on a continual basis from September to June to work in elementary, middle, and high schools in Bushwick, Brownsville, and East New York. To become a Learning Leader, contact Heather Whyte at 212-213-3370 ext. 337, or visit the organization's web site at [www.learningleaders.org](http://www.learningleaders.org).