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YOUR
NEIGHBORHOOD

QUEENS

Kids bring history to life

Reenact drama of Indians

By NICOLE BODE
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Fifth-grade student Stephany Hurtado clasped her mother's arm in mock alarm, pretending to defend her from a band of American Indians played by two classmates.

"I played Sacagawea, and she was my sister, Moon Girl. I was trying to save her . . . from the other Native American tribe that was trying to make her a slave," said Stephany, 10, a student at Public School 21 in Flushing.

She and her mother performed the 30-second scene as part of a program called "Making Books Sing," an arts-in-schools initiative organized by the nonprofit group of the same name and funded by a parents as arts partners grant from the Center for Arts Education.

More than 6,000 public school students in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens are participating in Making Books Sing's fifth annual program, centered on Joseph Bruchac's "Sacagawea," the tale of Lewis and Clark's Native American guide. This is the first year that the program invited parents to participate.

Last week, 60 fourth- and fifth-graders from PS 21 headed to Queens Theatre in the Park to watch the group's band of professional actors show off the book's theatrical potential.

Later, back in their classroom, they started translating the story from the page to the stage — with the help of teaching artist and actor Susan Willerman.



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CURTAIN UP Fourth-graders get into the spirit of Making Books Sing by staging part of "Sacawagea," the story of Lewis and Clark's Native American guide. Public School 21 teacher Suzanne Petrilak (center) smiles as she watches the theatrics.

"At the sound of the bell, find the most physical, most dramatic moment to show the capture of Sacagawea," Willerman instructed during an hour-and-a-half session at the school yesterday.

Two dozen kids — and one parent — arranged themselves in a semicircle, and mimed elaborate rounds of tug-of-war, run-

ning-in-place and other motions.

'Lots of ideas'

They then split into small groups and directed their own scenes, like one led by 10-year-old Brian Kim.

"We had lots of ideas," said Brian, of Flushing. "At first we were . . . arguing, but we got everything straightened out. Do-

ing a play is always fun when we work together."

Teacher Suzanne Petrilak said the program works not only because it forces students to comprehend the text in order to act it out, but also because it's accessible for the close to 50% of the class who use English as a second language.

"It transcends the language barrier," Petrilak said. "I have

one student who just arrived — it's made him more verbal."

The same holds for parents, she said, including Stephany's mom, Sadira Mendoza, a Colombian immigrant who speaks little English.

"I don't speak English, but I can participate in this program," said Mendoza, 42. "I hope they put this program in all the schools."