

DAILY NEWS

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Kid authors trace history of Jamaica in book of photos

BY LEIGH REMIZOWSKI

BY THE TIME they enter high school, a group of Queens middle school students will be published authors.

More than 30 Aquinas Honor Society students at the Immaculate Conception School in Jamaica are putting the finishing touches on their latest book, which chronicles the history of their school's neighborhood. The honor society has written four other books since 2005.

The group of sixth, seventh and eighth graders has been diligently working since June to compile hundreds of historical photos and facts about area landmarks and celebrities. The finished product, "Images of America: Jamaica," is set to be published early next year.

"It took a lot of work," said Kimberly Ramcharitar, 11, who researched the Rialto, Hillside and Savoy movie theaters with fellow sixth-grader Gabrielle Hollant.

Each student researched one subject and wrote a detailed caption to accompany a corresponding photo. Subjects ranged from jazz legend Illinois Jacquet to the history of Jamaica Ave.

During her online investigation, sixth-



Lia Lewis, 11, spoke to great-grandma Marguerite Jacobs, 91, for book. Photo by Pearl Gabel

grader Tracy Singh learned that the land where Prospect Cemetery is today once belonged to the Yemecah Indians.

"You don't really think of a cemetery as a historical place. You just think it's creepy," said Singh, 11. "I learned you can't judge a book by its cover."

The book was funded by donations from alumni and the Alive in Hope Foundation, a

nonprofit group that supports Catholic parishes and schools in Queens and Brooklyn. Its introduction will be penned by Queens Borough President Helen Marshall and the final chapter, about the future of Jamaica, will be written by the Greater Jamaica Development Corp.

The first four chapters were compiled over the summer by students, who gathered at a community center at the Maple Grove Cemetery in Kew Gardens, sometimes with Queens historians.

"It was a historic, sacred site where we wrote a historic book," said Carl Ballenas, a teacher at Immaculate Conception and moderator of the honor society.

Marguerite Jacobs, 91, who has lived in the same house in Jamaica since 1930, was one area expert who spoke with students. Her great-granddaughter, seventh-grader Lia Lewis, wrote about her family history to accompany a photo of Jacobs when she was 3 years old.

"She showed me photos of her childhood and photos of her past," said Lewis, 11.

Several classes of the honor society have collaborated under Ballenas' leadership to write books, including two about photojournalist Jacob Riis.