

January 27, 2008

BROOKLYN UP CLOSE

Braving the Cold to Hang Out With the Rock Star of Science Class

By GREGORY BEYER

SEATS in Carmelo Piazza's summer science classes are much coveted and, in the minds of those who lined up to register their children on Tuesday morning, worth getting up early for.

This would be illustrated by Rob Thompson, an urban planner from Park Slope, who at 4:25 a.m. was first in line outside a storefront on Atlantic Avenue near Smith Street in Boerum Hill. He was there to sign up his 5-year-old son, though registration for Mr. Piazza's program would not begin until 9 o'clock.

The streets were deserted, but Mr. Thompson was not alone for long. Mr. Piazza, a 33-year-old science teacher at Public School 261 on Pacific Street, has amassed a devoted following through a series of after-school classes and science-themed birthday parties in his native Brooklyn, where for 11 years he has been known as Carmelo the Science Fellow.

With his exuberant personality, emphasizing humor above all, Mr. Piazza has earned the reputation as the archetypal cool teacher among the younger set. That popularity has spread to parents, as was evident in Tuesday's frigidly cold early hours.

"Carmelo is it," said Aviva Shapiro, a Park Slope mother who arrived to sign up her 6-year-old son. Ms. Shapiro shivered near the front of a line that by 8:45 a.m. included 90 people and would grow to 150 by noon.

It was a time for drinking coffee, reading newspapers and, for some, doing jumping jacks to keep warm. One woman nearly fainted from standing in the cold and was helped into a nearby restaurant to warm up.

"We call this urban parent hell," grumbled a woman who had been on line since 6:30.

Mr. Piazza runs his after-school program, called Cosmic Cove, from several rented rooms beneath a print shop. When the doors opened around 8:50, parents rushed inside, standing shoulder to shoulder in a large, low-ceilinged room furnished with chairs not suitable for people with such long legs.

"This is crazier than I anticipated," muttered Mr. Piazza, who said he had expected maybe 50 people.

The turnout was flattering but also disappointing; he would have to turn away many parents. "I'm afraid to go out and make that announcement," he said. By 11:30, all the spaces in his eight weeklong summer classes were filled. "Please," he implored the remaining parents, in the manner of one whose popularity is secure. "Whatever you do, don't attack me."

Mr. Piazza's relentless playfulness was on display later that afternoon in an after-school class called "Roar, Roar Dinosaur," in which children from kindergarten through second grade assembled small dinosaur bones from a kit. A chronic improviser of chants, Mr. Piazza asked the children to join him in professing: "We are vertebrates!"

During a break, he acknowledged the strain of his schedule, which consists of full-time teaching, his daily after-school programs, and three birthday parties every Saturday (he is booked until June). "My problem," he explained, "is I really love to teach."

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

-