As winter’s cold weather and glittering lights descend upon us, the New Americans Welcome Center ushers in the holiday season reaffirming its commitment to each and every person who comes through its doors. The holiday spirit inspires us to think about who we are as part of the human family. And in the spirit of the season, and the purpose of the Y, the NAWC continues to be a place of opportunity, of refuge and community; always—and especially now, when it is particularly needed. It’s a time to gather, celebrate, and renew. Community often means people in the same local neighborhoods who have particular things in common. The YMCA is that and more. It is also a global community—recognizing that our larger neighborhood is our world family. The feeling of fellowship is extended beyond in English, citizenship, and computer literacy studies, there is an atmosphere in which bridges are built, and walls are torn down. Individuals whose countries might be at war are here together in peace. Whenever one person extends a hand across a table—or an ocean—a treaty is made. Students gather and learn in a place where not everyone speaks their language—literally—and some have customs that are unfamiliar. We are all sometimes uncomfortable confronting things or people we don’t understand. With familiarity we realize that, at heart, we are all the same. Strangers become friends. It turns out that our similarities are much more profound than our differences. And in time, we come to appreciate that we are fortunate to be a part of this world village we call our home. It is within the best of ourselves that we truly embrace others outside our own close-knit circle. At NAWC our circle is expanded. Our language is the language of humankind and it is universal. At the YMCA, giving and serving are at the core of every program. Those who come to the NAWC to improve themselves become ambassadors of good will, able to go out into the world with their gifts. They are armed with meaningful connections, and new understandings; not only about English, or American history, but about the diverse peoples that make our city and our country unique. As we enter into this joyous holiday season we wish for peace and light. As we reflect on the past and make our resolutions for the coming year, we have infinite hope. The NAWC students remind us daily, in everything they accomplish and work for, that mutual understanding is a state of grace. Let us all rejoice in them and celebrate!

NAWC participants enjoy themselves during the Holiday Event.

Tiffany Dunbar and daughter, Dylan at the Halloween festivities.
As 2016 comes to a close we look back at a very productive year for The Prospect Park YMCA's New Americans Welcome Center. In June we celebrated New Americans Day, where we had one representative from the New Americans Initiative at each of the 24 YMCA branches throughout the city. We aimed at spreading the news of the great work we do, and how we affect the communities we inhabit.

In July we joined our neighbors in the South Slope Summer Stroll, a street fair where local businesses and organizations open their doors to the community. This is all done in an effort to bring the community closer together while informing the locals about the services and resources available to them.

September saw the Citizenship Prep class visit the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. Everyone had a great time with their friends and families. Later in September we celebrated Welcoming Week. This day brought the immigrant community closer to the local residents by sharing in a music and dance event. Fun was had by all!!

As the weather began to get colder we heated things up in October with the Halloween Event. Participants brought their friends and families to eat, dance and get spooked in the Haunted House. The children had a wonderful time and took home some goodies, while the adults filled their bellies with great food from around the world.

Giving Tuesday, at the end of November, was yet another opportunity to inform members and the community about the good work we do at the NAWC and the YMCA in general. Donations were collected to help fund the Annual Campaign, and all were encouraged to add their thoughts about how to contribute to the community by adding a handprint to the “Giving Tree,” now on exhibit in the main lobby.

By mid-December we were ready to celebrate the holidays. The NAWC once again took over the gymnasium and held the Holiday Event for all to attend. Cheers and joyfulness filled the air as families and friends gathered to share in the holiday spirit. The food was plentiful and delicious, as the participants brought dishes from their native countries for all to try. The music brought some to their feet and the dancing began. The children were entertained with some physical activities, as well as an ornament decorating arts & crafts table. Treats were handed out to the many young attendants and a great time was shared.

All in all the NAWC had a great 2016, filled with a lot of sharing and growing. We look forward to 2017 with open arms and optimism.
A Christmas Story

By: Marzia Messina

Last year, a few months before Christmas, my 7-year-old daughter, with her most serious face, asked my husband: “Dad! Look at me straight in my eyes and tell me if Santa Claus is real!” My husband was surprised, and answered with another question: “Why do you ask me that?” He looked at me for support. Someone at school had told her that maybe it was the parents who brought the presents, not Santa Claus. It wasn’t the first time that our daughter showed doubt. But now it was different. She demanded the truth!

In a blink of an eye, we decided to tell her the true story. First, we congratulated her for the important moment. We explained that parents wait for this moment. It means that their children are growing up. With that with doubts and reasoning, they can discover new things. We told her it’s also an indication of her very good intelligence.

This is one of the most important transitions in the lives of children, so we spent a lot of time answering her questions. She listened very carefully and the expressions on her face changed continuously. At first, she was a bit disappointed, then confused, then surprised. But at the same time she watched with clear eyes, so finally her face became proud and satisfied.

The next day was Veteran’s Day and the schools were closed. So my daughter and I went to a bookstore, and she bought her first Christmas present for her dad!

About the Writer:
Marzia Messina, who’s from Rome, Italy, came to the U.S. in 2012 with her husband and now 7-year-old daughter, Penelope. Marzia enjoys learning English at the New Americans Welcome Center at the Prospect Park YMCA because “they give people an excellent opportunity to learn English. I like the other students in the class and the teacher is very professional.”

Christmas in NY & Navidad in Mao Valverde, DR

By: Mery Valerio

When I came to New York, it was October 1981 soon to be Christmas time, I was very surprised when I saw all the streets full of Christmas lights, beautiful Christmas trees in stores and at the houses that I visited, from that time on I loved Christmas season more and more.

In my native city, “Mao” Dominican Republic, where I grew up only rich people decorated their houses like in New York and their children would get lots of presents on December 25th, they’d called it presents from “Baby Jesus”. However, children from poor families were told by theirs parents that their presents would come from the three kings, Melchor, Gaspar and Baltazar, in Spanish “los tres reyes magos”. But because our parents were so poor we would always get only one toy. I remember once I got a very skinny doll, with no clothes on her and it was worth 15 cents, my brothers got little guns with rolls of gun powder and that would cost 10 cents, but despite all of this, we were very happy. A very typical tradition was that all children got a roll of hay which had to be placed under the bed for the three kings’ camels. On January 5th, we would give a roll of hay to our godmothers and godfathers and then in the morning of January 6th, we’d go back to their houses and they would give us presents, brought to them by the three kings, I would always get a dress from my godmother.

In other situation some families had to even rely on a different solution, which was to tell their children that they would get their presents from “La vieja Belen” (The old lady from Bethlehem). In later years I found out that it was nothing but a white lie, because the presents would never end up arriving, it was a way for the parents to keep their children’s’ hope alive, since they could not afford the Christmas presents.

I remember those times were so beautiful and angelical and I will always value those memories that I shared with my family in the early years of my life.

About the Writer:
Mery Valerio was born in the Dominican Republic and has lived in Sunset Park Brooklyn New York Since 1981. She has three children, all graduated from college and also five grandchildren. She currently works as a school bus driver which she loves. She is very grateful and thankful to all the staff at the YMCA, specially Nabila, Alejandro and her computer teacher, Daniel Tortoledo.

Maria Guaricela joined the NAWC in the Fall of 2016. She enrolled in the Computer Literacy class.

Maria Guaricela... How do you feel about the Computer Literacy Class?
I learned a lot of computer basics, including Power Point and Excel. The class is very beneficial for its participants.

How do you feel about the instructor?
Daniel is a wonderful person. He’s someone who anyone can talk to. He is patient and knows his materials well.

How do you feel about the NAWC program in general?
It’s a great program that helps its participants find the resources to improve our lives. In particular the work the NAWC does to serve the immigrant community is awesome.

How do you feel about the work done by the YMCA?
The YMCA helps people in the community with free classes and programs. The work they do with teenagers and families is greatly appreciated by those it benefits.

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A young man from Aguadilla’s county side and a young woman from an island named Viequez, both of them from Puerto Rico, met for the first time in New York City and fell in love with each other, love at first sight. I am the second born of six children that my parents gave life to in 1965 Brooklyn, New York. I have four brothers and one sister but they respect me as the oldest one, I guess because my parents picked me as the sheep dog to gather up the sheep, so to speak. Thanks to my parents I speak Spanish and English and I understand both languages very well. Most of us first generation Latinos who are born in the main land United States understand Spanish very well but we speak it with an American/Brooklyn English accent.

My parents once took us all to live in Puerto Rico for one year and they put us all in school. In the beginning it was very difficult for my brothers, sister and I. We did not know how to read or write Spanish, and we couldn’t speak it as good as the other kids, they would call us “americuchi” or “New-Yo Ricans”, thank God we all learned how to fight and defend ourselves in New York City. The good news is that our English accent which is hard to shake off.

Spanish improved and I became a very skillful man who enjoyed and studied Heating, Air Conditioning, Refrigeration and Appliance Repair in Manhattan Vocational & Technical High School. I graduated in 1985 and went back to NYC with a strong sense of self, now I know more about myself. Great Experience, now I know who I am.

About the Writer:
Jimmy Crespo is from Brooklyn, New York. He became a very skillful man who enjoyed and studied Heating, Air Conditioning, Refrigeration and Appliance Repair in Manhattan Vocational & Technical High School. He graduated at the top of his class and attended some college in Brooklyn. “I really enjoyed tinkering with tools and fixing things since I was a boy growing up in Brooklyn. Now I want to master the computer and thanks to the YMCA, and our instructor Daniel, I’m on my way to a new career”.

A Son of Immigrants from NYC, WHO AM I?

By: Jimmy Crespo

The beach with her she taught me that in our family many of us were born with a birth mark they called the map of “Viequez” which was located on a different part of our bodies; I responded that’s nice because I had no idea what she was talking about. She then called over one of her grandsons and told him to show me his map of Viequez. When I saw it I was amazed, she must have seen mine on my leg. I told her with a big smile on my face “I have this on my leg”, she then nodded her head with a smile and they all continued to celebrate my arrival. I did not get to meet my mother’s father for the last time but I did get to meet his sister, my aunt, for the first time, and she grabbed me when she learned who I was and taught me that my great grandmother was from Spain and that my grandfather was a highly known businessman and respected in Viequez. I came back to NYC with a strong sense of self, now I know more about myself. Great Experience, now I know who I am.