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A Relay From Mexico To Qns. Carries Torch For Immigrants

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Runners from Mexico delivered torches and two paintings from the Mexican capital's Basilica de Guadalupe to the Blessed Sacrament Church in Jackson Heights.

A delivery that traveled 3,133 miles arrived at the Blessed Sacrament Church in Jackson Heights, giving special meaning to the area's large Mexican community.

About 6,000 runners between Mexico City and New York formed a symbolic chain known as the Carrera Antorcha Guadalupeana, crossing the border to carry a torch and two paintings from the Mexican capital's Basilica de Guadalupe.

Two months after its start, the relay stopped at St. Patrick's Cathedral last Friday, the Mexican holiday celebrating the date in 1531 when the Virgin of Guadalupe is said to have appeared to a poor indian named Juan Diego.

After ceremonies at St. Patrick's, the torch and two images – one of the virgin and the other of Juan Diego – were brought to their final location in Queens.

The relay run, first organized last year by New York-based immigrant rights coalition Asociación Tepeyac, is based on a Mexican tradition where pilgrims dressed in white run from the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City to churches in their hometowns, bearing torches to symbolize the light of their religious message.

But in addition to its religious significance, the run also has political goals.

"The purpose of the run is so we can have legalization," said José Vargas, 28, a Jackson Heights resident originally from Mexico. Vargas, a case manager at Asociación Tepeyac, felt that last year's run helped inspire the introduction of a bill enabling undocumented workers to gain legal status in the United States by creating a new work visa category.

The bill, known as the Border Security and Immigration Improvement Act, was

introduced by two Arizona State Representatives in July. When the torch crossed the border between Matamoros and Brownsville, Texas on November 7th, nine Mexican lawmakers crossed with it to show support of the bill.

All of the runners who came across the border with the torch carried the appropriate paperwork to enter the United States. But for Jackson Heights resident Martin Luna, the image of the virgin crossing the border is symbolic as well.

"The virgin is crossing the border without papers," said 24-year-old Luna, who moved to New York from the Mexican state of Puebla four years ago. Luna spent the past year recruiting people to participate in the run, and coordinated 90 runners to represent the Blessed Sacrament on December 12th.

"It's difficult to get runners because it's hard for people to get the day off," Luna said in Spanish. "When people of other religious backgrounds want a day off they can get it. But because we're immigrants and we don't have papers they don't give it to us."

The Blessed Sacrament was chosen to house the images and torch because of its large number of Mexican parishioners, who pastor Monsignor Raymond Kutner says comprise about a third of the 6,000 who regularly attend weekend mass. The church is also located in an area with a growing Mexican population, at the heart of Community Board 3, which includes Jackson Heights, East Elmhurst and North Corona.

The number of Mexicans living in New York City tripled from just over 60,000 to 187,000 between 1990 and 2000, according to a report published in September by Teachers College. The study noted the most striking growth in Queens, where the Mexican population exploded from less than 5,000 in 1980 to over 55,000 in 2000, and where the highest concentration—not only in Queens but in the entire city—lies in Community Board 3.

Ten years ago Monsignor Kutner noted increasing numbers of Mexican parishioners and started holding masses and *mañanitas*, early morning ceremonies that include mariachi music, to celebrate December 12th.

"It was only 10 to 15 degrees out, and 500 people came in the freezing cold," said Monsignor Kutner, recalling the church's first event. "The next year we couldn't fit everyone—1,100 people came." He estimates that celebrations during recent years have attracted as many as 5,000 people.

This year, Blessed Sacrament celebrated the arrival of the torch and icons with a welcoming ceremony, a procession through nearby streets, the hanging of the images on the church walls, and a closing fiesta of traditional dances and food.

"I've been to the celebration. It was wonderful," said Ralph Moreno, executive director of the Jackson Heights Action Group and a member of CB 3, who has lived in the area for more than 45 years. Yet the Colombia native also voiced concern about the intentions of the *Carrera Antorcha Guadalupana*.

"Behind this they are trying to look for other benefits for their nationality," said Moreno. "I believe this particular ethnic group is using the church."

But the church's pastor points out that the virgin is considered an inclusive figure, known as the "patroness of the Americas." Monsignor Kutner is clear about what the event represents, saying, "It's to symbolize that there is no barrier."