Hillsider is crowned in teenage pageant

By Eric A. Bryant
Managing Editor

Jachele Velez is one high school student that students across the nation can look up to.

Or should one say, bow down to?

A Hillside resident who attends Kent Place School in Summit, Velez was recently crowned Miss Junior National Teenager 2006. She was honored at the Nov. 29 council meeting.

"I'm glad I belong to a town that acknowledges the accomplishments of its youth and gives them ways to use their talents," said Velez.

The America's National Teenager Pageant recognizes young women who excel in academics, community service, leadership skills, personal expression and public speaking.

Since winning, Velez has met the governor and NJ Nets guard Jason Kidd, and has assisted at state pageants in Florida, California and Washington.

This summer, Velez went to Nashville, Tenn., to represent New Jersey at the national competition. Young women from all across the nation — including Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands — compete for $15,000 in cash scholarships and the coveted crown of America's Miss Junior Teen.

Not only did she win the competition, but Velez was also selected as first runner-up in the essay competition.

Throughout the year of her reign, she will have the opportunity to travel the nation as a spokesperson for the prestigious National Teenager Scholarship Program.

"In many ways, Jachele is a typical teen, but in other ways she is anything but typical. Her grades, school activities and community service exemplify everything that this pageant is about," said Candy Brenner, NJ pageant director.

Velez's family has been incredibly supportive of her achievements. Her mother, Michele, a Hillside resident of 32 years, went with her to Nashville for the competition.

In addition, her father, Nick, brother, Nikko, and grandmother, Mary, also attended.

"My husband and I are very supportive of both of our children. We just encouraged them and prayed for them to succeed," said her mother.

Velez is a stellar student who excels in a wide variety of academic and extracurricular pursuits.

She was the recipient of the Highest GPA Award and the Overall Essay Winner at last year's National Teen Pageant.

A National Merit Scholar, Velez has been a biology tutor, is a member of the Hispanic Culture Club, and is the Editor-in-Chief of Project LISTEN Newsletter.

In addition, she plays varsity basketball and softball, volunteers as cheerleading coach at her high school, is a member of the Church of Iselin Choir, and spends much of her time doing various community service projects. She is the founder and president of "A Single Thread," a crocheting and knitting project that makes shawls for women in nursing homes.

She also founded and sponsored the "Food for Holidays Drive" in conjunction with the Hillside Community Food Bank.

Jachele Velez

She has participated in hurricane relief efforts for Haiti and Grenada, and has been active in the Susan G. Komen Foundation for breast cancer.

Velez is dedicated to being a leader in her community. She was part of a select group invited to attend the Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C.

The conference emphasizes leadership skills in young adults in order to motivate and empower them to make political and social improvements within their communities.

"We are extremely blessed and proud of our children. As long as God keeps blessing them, they will be all right," said Jachele's father, Nick Velez.

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Menendez takes Corzine's seat

By Doug McNamara
Staff Writer

On Friday afternoon at Liberty State Park in Jersey City, Rep. Robert Menendez, D-13, was officially appointed by Governor-elect Jon Corzine to fill Corzine's vacant U.S. Senate seat.

The 13th Congressional District includes parts of Linden and Elizabeth, including the port area, much of Hudson County and parts of Essex County, including Newark Airport.

Corzine said Menendez's progressive agenda — including his opposition to the war in Iraq — was the prime reason he picked Menendez to fill the vacant spot.

With Ellis Island, once the starting place for millions of United States immigrants, serving as a backdrop, the venue couldn't have been more appropriate for this son of poor Cuban immigrants. Menendez, 51, is the first Hispanic senator from New Jersey and only the sixth ever in the country.

He began his acceptance speech by referring to his humble roots. With his seamstress mother and carpenter father present, Menendez remarked, "My own parents came to this country fleeing tyranny and searching for freedom. ... We never had more than just enough money to pay the rent and put food on the table."

A life-long resident of New Jersey, he explained to the crowd of several hundred, "I have walked in the shoes of the average New Jerseyan all my life, and I know the challenges they face."

In a later interview, Menendez called the appointment a "privilege," saying it was "an opportunity to create change ... I'm going to work my heart out every day ... to create a different American agenda."

In particular, he singled out a number of issues as being particularly salient, chief among them the war in Iraq, which has already cost the United States $200 billion.

He also wants to address cuts in federal funding for college education. "I understand how important and powerful a college education can be." Menendez is a product of New Jersey's public schools, having earned his bachelor's degree from St. Peter's College in Jersey City and a law degree from Rutgers.

Looking back at his 13-year career in the House, he was particularly proud of the Hope VI funding in Elizabeth for affordable housing which "transformed the face of public housing and the lives of people in public housing."

He also mentioned the transformation of the port area. Though "today the port is thriving," 13 years ago it was losing business to Halifax, Canada and in desperate need of dredging, he said.

Elizabeth Mayor J. Christian Bollwage agreed, saying Menendez "has been an advocate for issues important to Elizabeth. He has chapioned dredging" to increase the port's viability.

Though he is "incredibly proud" of his Cuban heritage and recognizes the Hispanic "community is very proud," he stressed 75 percent of his voters aren't Hispanic and he will represent "everyone" while in office.

Union County Freeholder Angel Estrada agreed, saying "I truly believe he's a man who cares for people who have needs."

"I can't think of anyone more qualified," said Linden Mayor John T. Gregorio, who added "he's become not only a representative, but a friend. ... I think he'll be great."

Menendez plans to run in 2006 for Senate. He vowed to "bring ... the campaign to a higher plane" by making it "about ideas." Referring to the particularly nasty gubernatorial campaign between Corzine and Doug Forrester, Menendez said "I think the people are turned off by the politics of personal disruption."

His likely opponent will be Republican Tom Kean Jr., son of former Gov. Tom Kean Sr. and currently the State Senator for the 21st District, which includes the western half of Union County.

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Politics hamper city council vote

By Doug McNamara
Staff Writer

The best, or worst, of legislative politics was on display Tuesday night at Elizabeth's City Council meeting when an ordinance authorizing the sale of city property to Union County was voted down.

The ordinance, which was on final passage, meaning that if passed, it would become law, authorized the sale of city property on the corner of West Jersey Street and Sterling Place, to the Union County Improvement Authority for $989,310.

The county would use the property, which is across the train tracks from Union County College, for additional classroom space, said Councilman Angelo Paternoster, Ward 6, afterward.

The confusion started when council members Patricia Perkins-Auguste, at large, and Robert Jaspan, Ward 3, asked to suspend the meeting's rules to allow representatives from the UCIA to make a presentation explaining the project. "I don't have a clue what they want to do with this property," said Jaspan.

However, Council President Frank Cuesta and Ed Jackus, both at-large members, balked at the idea of the representatives making a presentation, pointing out that there was no debate over the ordinance at the previous week's pre-meeting.

Cuesta eventually compromised, asking the council to vote if they wanted a presentation. Only three members — Perkins-Auguste, Jaspan and Bill Gallman, Ward 5 — did, while the remaining four members — Cuesta, Jackus, Paternoster and Carlos Alma, Ward 4 — didn't, meaning the county representatives wouldn't make their presentation. The council then put the resolution to a vote, with Cuesta, Jackus, Paternoster and Alma voting for the ordinance, while the other three abstained. Since neither Manny Grova, Ward 1, nor Carla Mazza, Ward 2, were at the meeting, however, the council failed to reach a quorum.

However, before the meeting ended, Gallman asked to change his vote, but only if the county could make its presentation.

At that suggestion, however, Paternoster erupted, rhetorically asking, "What is the problem here?"

Cuesta again agreed, limiting the council's vote to only the issue of Gallman changing his vote. The same four in favor of the ordinance initially — namely, Alma, Cuesta, Jackus and Paternoster — voted to allow the vote, while Jaspan, Perkins-Auguste and Gallman voted against the change.

Customer robbed at American Chicken

By Doug McNamara
Staff Writer

On Saturday night at around 9 p.m., a customer of American Fried Chicken on the corner of North Broad and Magnolia streets was robbed at gunpoint by three men.

According to Singh, who was working at the restaurant and asked to give only his last name, the three men entered and took a wallet and cell phone from the only customer. Though they claimed to have a handgun, "they didn't really show it."

Curiously, the men didn't take anything from American Fried, instead targeting only the customer. Singh speculated they picked the customer because he was working on a laptop.

Singh estimated the entire robbery took no more than 2 to 3 minutes. He recalled, "It was quick, you know. ... We were just standing here looking, like, 'What is going on?'"

Immediately after robbing the man, the three ran into a GMC Jimmy Truck parked outside and sped off, possibly in the direction of Newark, according to a Union Township police report. One of the robbers wore a baseball cap and another wore a mask. All three wore black jackets.

Once they fled, the customer called the police. It is the first time such an incident has taken place at American, said Singh.

Police spokesperson Lt. Gary Lewis could not be reached for comment by press time.

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