

Pesebre: A Colombian Christmas tradition

By Masha Rumer

It's Christmastime Colombian style at 9 Maple Place in Port Chester. That means there is a nativity scene, a miniature model of Bethlehem, taking up nearly a quarter of the living room where Hector Castrillon and his wife Aurora Velez live with their son Juan Carlos.

The nativity scene, known as Pesebre, a Colombian tradition, unfolds in the family's "Colombian corner," as Aurora calls it, with seven sombreros hanging from the wall, a soccer team banner, and a bright blanket emblazoned with "My country, my people"

in Spanish.

The couple moved to the United States 10 years ago from Venezuela, but they are originally from Colombia. Aurora used to design and make costumes for a film company in Caracas, while Hector worked as manager of a supermarket and for PepsiCo.

"Venezuela is a country rich in petroleum, but has many problems, political and economic, too," said Aurora, explaining why they decided to move to Port Chester.

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Even while in Venezuela, they preserved the Pesebre tradition because Venezuelans put up Christmas trees rather than nativity scenes.

At their home in Port Chester, the family now has both—a tree and a nativity scene. They also hang "Merry Christmas" banners on their doors, a third cultural element.

Their nativity scene is a fusion of cultures which Hector creates every year around Christmastime and has been putting together since he was 19.

The tradition of Pesebre was passed on to him by his father, and now, every year, he builds the Pesebre on Dec. 16 and later packs it away in boxes until the next year.

"He's artist," his wife Aurora says smiling.

The set is built on upward

sloping boxes, covered by green fabric and a multitude of colorful lights.

Mary and Joseph, or Maria and José, are walking uphill to a stable. The three Wise Men are next to them—the three will be moved forward slowly each day, until they reach the stable on Jan. 6, the Day of Kings.

But there is more here than just a model stable with characters from the Bible. It's a real, albeit strange, town, and Hector has thought of everything.

A river made of foil is running through the town, with Lego bridges and plastic fish in its waters.

There are models of buildings and bakeries and cardboard houses with red roofs, green walls, and doors and windows that open, created by Maria and Hector.

Why?

These are houses of the "ricos and pobres," the rich and the poor, Hector explains in Spanish.

There are plastic dinosaurs, rubber snakes, plastic model soldiers, and roaming Santas walking alongside the foil river.

Why dinosaurs? "Snacks for the hunters in Bethlehem. People don't make a lot of money," Hector says in Spanish, and grins playfully.

Next to the stable, there is a tower with an American flag on top. "Because we live in this country," explains Hector.

There are even Hot Wheels cars all over Bethlehem, for the "ricos," and a traditional Colombian Pueblo car model, with bananas and bags of coffee to sell at a market in Bethlehem.

And, naturally, the toothpick tents Hector has made are "casas de los indios," homes of the Indians.

Even a scarecrow and plastic Lego-men found their way into the nativity scene.

"He's crazy," jokes Aurora, throwing her hands up. But she, too, observes every detail, famil-



Hector Castrillon and Aurora Velez in front of the traditional Colombian nativity scene in their home in Port Chester.

iar with them all, and moves the dinosaurs a few millimeters away from Santa.

There is an empty space on the straw where baby Jesus is supposed to be.

Hector walks to the kitchen and secretively reaches on his tiptoes high up to the top shelf. He presents the Jesus doll. He is hiding it until Christmas Eve, waiting to place it in the center of the Pesebre.

"Every year the same," said Aurora. "Sometimes he makes a little different."

Since they moved to Port Chester, Aurora has been selling items from catalogues like Avon and Quixtar, health and beauty suppliers. Hector works in the kitchen at a restaurant in Old Greenwich.

Their 16-year-old son, Juan Carlos Alejaldre, or simply JC, a student at Port Chester High School, used to also help Hector, his stepfather, in making the Pesebre. JC built towers and bridges out of Legos.

But he has not participated the last two years, exploring his own beliefs and culture and wanting to

take everything at his own pace.

"I'll probably end up doing it," JC admits. "If I come back from college and I'm homesick, I'll probably do it with them, just for old times' sake. It's a work of art, it's really amazing," he said of Hector's creation, which he has observed since he was a kid.

JC is thinking of continuing the tradition with a family of his own. "Maybe I'll make a small little thing, I wouldn't make it such a huge part of our living room," he said.

For Hector and Aurora, the Pesebre is a significant religious symbol. The two pray next to the scene.

"We remember when Jesus was born," Aurora says.

But for Hector, Pesebre is more than just Christmas. It is a part of his family and of his old country, a continuation of the past into the present. And he designs it religiously every year.

He hopes that Juan Carlos, even in the United States, will make it, too, someday. It's "tradition, familia" he says, words that mean the same in both languages.

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