

# American Indian discusses tribe at local school

By Stephanie D. Esters

Staff Writer

Sixth-grader Sherman Yang still thinks Monday's visitor to his school was evading his question about Christopher Columbus.

"Do you think Columbus was a hero or a just a lucky guy who got off course?" the 11-year-old asked Bobby Gonzalez, a member of the American Indian Taino tribe who was visiting the Chatsworth Elementary School in Larchmont.

"He had his good qualities, and he had his bad. He was a product of his times," Gonzalez said.

After his presentation, Gonzalez said, "I'm not going to go into Columbus bashing — he was a product of his time."

The exchange came during Gonzalez's presentation on the tribe, the first indigenous people Columbus encountered in the Western Hemisphere, a district administrator said.

His visit was arranged as part of the school district's approach to teaching the Columbus quincentenary, Gonzalez also has visited the district's three other elementary schools in the past three weeks.

Gonzalez discussed the culture and lifestyles of the Taino tribe — indigenous to such Caribbean islands as Puerto Rico, Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Barbados and

Bahamas — answering the children's questions along the way.

"Would you get offended if someone called you an Indian?" one little girl asked.

"No, I wouldn't get offended. I would just inform them that I'm a Native American," said Gonzalez, a co-founder of the Tainos del Norte organization in New York City.

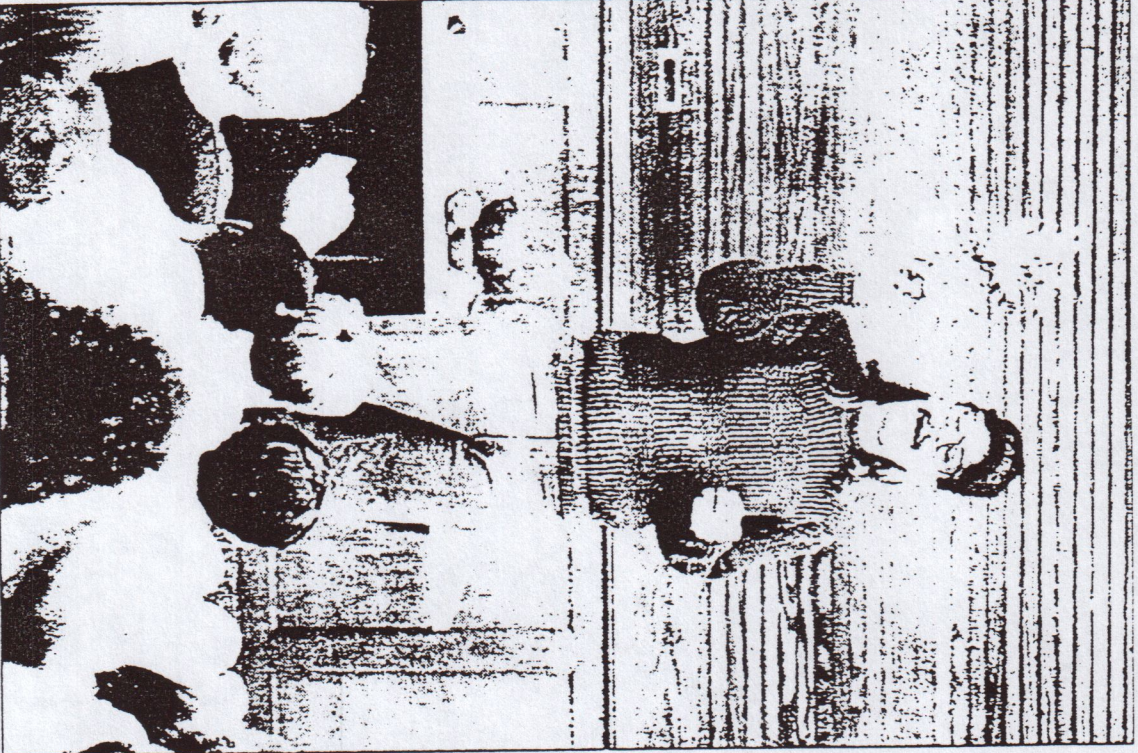
Though Gonzalez calls himself a Native American, the debate over which term is correct is far reaching. Gannett Suburban Newspapers follows The Associated Press style, which says to use American Indian instead of Native American.

He also talked about foods and plants, like pineapples and tobacco, such animals as sharks and toucans and words, like hurricane, indigenous to the Taino homelands in the Caribbean. And yes, his people did walk around nude.

"For one thing, we didn't wear clothes, and it didn't make sense for us to wear clothes because it was crazy hot where we lived," he said.

And even though Sherman said he found Gonzalez's presentation interesting, he still had his own opinions about Columbus.

"I think he just got lucky," Sherman said. "I think he just got lucky and got blown off course and became a lucky guy."



Staff photo/Stephen Schmitt

Storyteller Bobby Gonzalez tells students at Chatsworth Elementary School in Larchmont about some of the fruits the Taino Indians eat.