

Gratitude is a work of art

Cuban refugee, aspiring sculptor, presents archdiocese with the first piece he has created in the United States.

Ana Rodriguez-Soto

MIAMI SHORES

It started out as a hand, alone, carved in white marble. Then Roberto Perez Crespo saw "The Passion of the Christ."

Now the hand is pierced by a dark granite nail that bends upwards when it exits the back of the equally dark granite crossbeam. A glob of red blood — dyed glue — trickles down.

And Perez Crespo, a Cuban refugee and aspiring sculptor, has created his first work of art in the United States — a prayer of gratitude to God for allowing him to come here, and to Catholic Charities' Refugee Resettlement and Employment Services for their tender care of him once he arrived.

"I want them to know that

I recognize the help they gave me. In the name of the others who don't know how to value the help that they receive, for them I also say 'thank you,'" Perez Crespo said after presenting his sculpture Dec. 22 to Archbishop John C. Favalora.

The 36-year-old Perez Crespo never trained as a sculptor. He never even made a drawing of the hand before starting to sculpt it. His full-time job right now is making granite and marble countertops. But his passion is sculpting.

"He's a natural artist," said Howard Keyes, supervisor of Catholic Charities' refugee employment services.

Unfortunately, in Cuba, there was no marble, no tools, no way to fulfill his dream.

Which is why, for three summers, Perez Crespo obtained permission to travel to Portugal for an artistic fair. He worked in

a marble quarry there, met two renowned sculptors and created two pieces of art.

The third summer he defected, and managed to make his way to Miami in October 2003. He left a wife and 4-year-old daughter in Cuba.

"He is not a religious person," said Keyes. "But when he arrived he told me he wanted to give thanks to God for allowing him to come into this country."

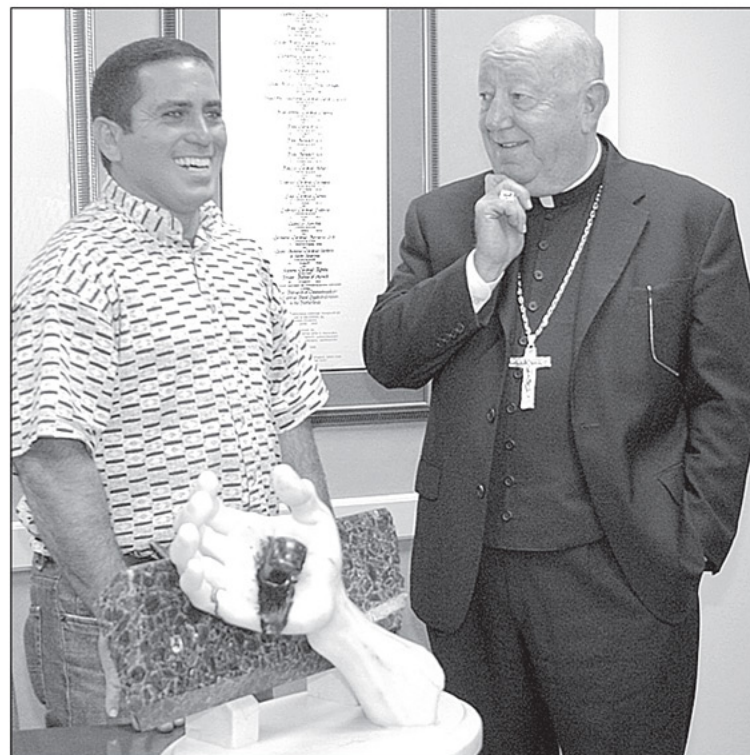
The hand took on all sorts of symbolism: a sign of his personal gratitude to God; a prayer that other refugees will be guided by God's hand; and a general plea for forgiveness from God.

Archbishop Favalora said he found yet another meaning, "a message for all who are afraid of immigrants. When they are allowed to live in freedom, they do contribute a great deal."

Perez Crespo hopes to



"Perdón, Señor" is carved out of marble and granite.



TFC PHOTOS BY ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO

Archbishop John C. Favalora speaks with Cuban sculptor Roberto Perez Crespo, who presented the archbishop with his work, "Perdón, Señor" ("Forgive us, Lord"), as a sign of his gratitude to God for allowing him to come to the United States.

eventually make a living as a sculptor. In the meantime, he keeps asking himself this question: "Why is there no statue of Christ on Biscayne Bay?"

There is one in each of the

harbors of Portugal, Brazil and his native Cuba.

"I am willing to do it, as big as they want it," Perez Crespo said. "That's my dream. It would fulfill me."

Beating back bullies

St. Jerome School initiates STAMP, a social justice program aimed at teaching kids mediation and conflict-resolution skills.

Julie Conrey

FORT LAUDERDALE

The self-appointed captain of the undefeated recess basketball team intentionally excludes a fellow student because she can't play ball that well. A first-grade student tells another there is not enough room on the cavernous playground for him to join in a game of freeze tag. A nasty "instant message" sent anonymously through cyberspace stings a preteen.

Teasing and bullying take many forms. What's a school to do?

At St. Jerome School in Fort Lauderdale, administrators decided to innovate and educate.

Responding to an evaluation conducted by St. Jerome's Home and School Association, which focused on teasing and bullying in third through eighth grades, the school adopted a social justice program, STAMP, which stands for Student Teacher Assistive Mediation Program.

STAMP involves every student in every grade, and features a

curriculum designed to discuss and diffuse conflict and increase tolerance of others. A middle-school peer mediation group also was established. It lets kids talk to kids and helps them work through a wide variety of relationship difficulties in a confidential, non-threatening environment.

"I don't think that we have something (bullying) that is out of the ordinary," said Caroline B. Roberts, St. Jerome's assistant principal. "The whole program is a way of dealing with issues before they escalate into more serious problems."

The peer mediation group is made up of 11 students who were chosen by teachers. The group was put together and trained with the help of a psychologist from Barry University and a professional conflict mediator.

Peer mediators work in groups of two. Peer mediation sessions take place during lunchtime. Students, teachers and parents can refer students to peer mediation. Information exchanged in the sessions is confidential.

Students involved in peer mediation agree to action that resolves the conflict. Peer mediators follow up with the students at regular intervals to make sure they honor their commitments.

"I think it's fun. I like to help people," said Amanda Joseph, 13, a peer mediator. "When we did our first peer mediation session

we followed the guidelines."

"I'm able to help kids and help them solve problems," said Amanda's mediation partner, Patrick Scherer, 13.

What is the group seeing so far?

"Mainly disputes that have been left unresolved, incidents that can lead to a physical altercation," said Karney McNear, middle school social studies teacher and faculty moderator of the peer mediation program.

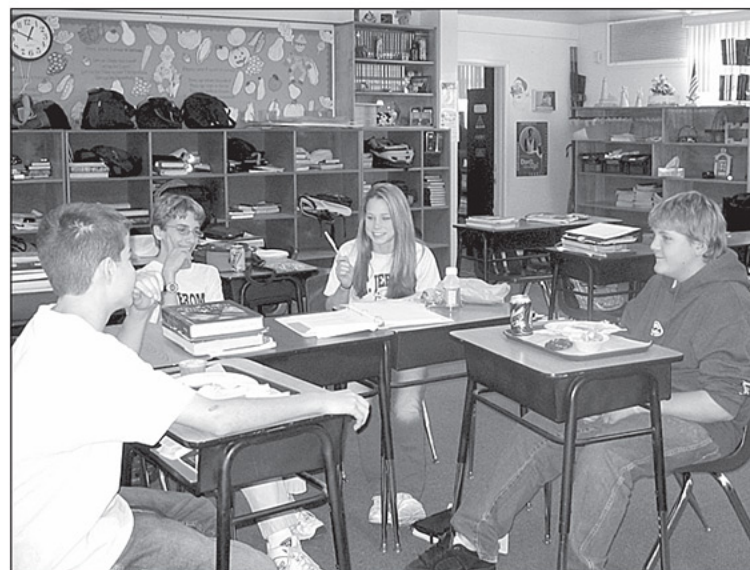
"Name-calling is a typical example of what we see, also using instant messaging improperly," Roberts said.

The school implemented two other programs in the lower grades to address teasing and bullying.

The Home and School Association purchased copies of the book, "You Can't Say You Can't Play," for teachers in pre-K3 through second grade. The book was written by Vivian Gussin Paley, a Chicago kindergarten teacher who describes how children include and exclude others during play in her classroom, and the measures she takes to ensure fairness.

St. Jerome's teachers have been encouraged to incorporate ideas from the book into their classrooms.

Students in grades three through five participate in SUPERB (Students United with Parents and Educators to Reduce



TFC PHOTO BY JULIE CONREY

Peer mediation group meets during lunch at St. Jerome School in Fort Lauderdale.

Bullying). Faculty and graduate students from Nova Southeastern University meet every other week for a total of eight weeks with students from St. Jerome to teach them leadership and conflict resolution skills.

As part of the program, students filled out surveys to gauge the skills they had at its beginning versus the skills they had acquired by its completion. Parents had to fill out a consent form for the children to participate in SUPERB.

The social justice program was developed by the school's School of Promise Task Force, which includes parents, administrators and community partners. St. Jerome School registered as a School of Promise in 2002.

A School of Promise vows to

work with the community to ensure that every young person has access to five fundamental resources: An ongoing relationship with a caring adult; a safe place during school and non-school hours; a healthy start and lifestyle; a marketable skill; and an opportunity to give back to the community through service.

"The School of Promise task force is an effective way of pinpointing what needs the school has that are not being met and determining how we can meet those needs," Roberts said.

Schools interested in learning more about St. Jerome's social justice program can call Caroline B. Roberts at 954-524-1990, or e-mail her at jersch@miamiaarch.org.