

Artist turns laundermat into immig classroom

BY ERICA PEARSON
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

FOR THESE English classes, students had better break out the soap and fabric softener and start hunting for quarters.

Inwood artist Hector Canonge is taking over his local laundermat and turning it into a classroom for immigrant neighbors.

In August, he'll teach two free English as a Second Language classes a day among the bright yellow tables for folding clothes, near a wall of washing machines inside Magic Touch Laundromat on Thayer St.

Registration begins tonight — and prospective students are already puzzled about the setting.

"This woman that called me, she said, 'In the Laundromat? We don't have to go anywhere?'" Canonge said.

He added that he loves how a laundermat can naturally turn into a community space. He hopes to build on that with his public art project, as students learn and tell stories during the spin cycle.

"Some people just drop off their clothes and get out, but others really make connections here," said Canonge. "Women start talking about their families."

He's calling his school "The Inwood Laundromat Language Institute" and will eventually create an interactive, touch-screen kiosk to screen class videos and install it next to the laundermat's quarter-gobbling arcade crane game.

Canonge's school is sponsored by The Laundromat Project, a nonprofit that sets up artist residencies in laundry storefronts.

Canonge is hoping his classes draw newcomers from Mexico, Ecuador and Central America who have been moving to his traditionally Dominican neighborhood over the past few years.

The first vocabulary lessons will be tailored to the setting, he said.

"We'll start with 'soap,' 'shirts,' and then go from there. Then, 'This is my husband's shirt,'" said Canonge, who was born in Argentina to Bolivian and Catalan parents. He grew up in Astoria.

He's been a customer at Magic Touch Laundromat for years — and admitted he often gets stuck doing load after load after letting dirty laundry pile up for weeks.

"Sometimes I spend five hours," he said, laughing.

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VIDEO: Teaching English at the



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Mariela Lombard for News

New media artist Hector Canonge will be teaching English classes to immigrants at "Magic Touch Laundromat" on Thayer Street in Inwood.