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Redlands teacher keeps up hope for Camarena stamp

By DAVID JAMES HEISS
Staff Writer

REDLANDS — At Lugonia Elementary School the life of slain Drug Enforcement Agency officer Enrique “Kiki” Camarena has been virtually immortalized: his visage peers down from a wall overlooking the school’s garden. His bust, unveiled during Red Ribbon Week in 2004, graces the school library.

In keeping the spirit of his life’s work alive, fifth-graders in retired teacher Diana Holly’s

classes — and as many community supporters — have signed dozens of petitions and sent countless letters over the past several years encouraging the Postal Service to issue an Enrique Camarena stamp.

It is a campaign that Holly, who retired from teaching in 2003, has not given up on.

And almost every other year, it seems, the Postal Service offers Holly and her followers a glimmer of hope, exchanging its own correspondences acknowledging her efforts. The most recent one arrived last month, dated Jan. 16.

The Postal Service seems to agree that Camarena is worth consideration for a U.S. postal stamp.

Camarena was an undercover agent for the Drug Enforcement Agency who was kidnapped, tortured and killed while on assignment in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1985 by drug traffickers. His life was the inspiration behind October’s Red Ribbon Week.

His widow Mika and his sisters Niki Jimenez, Myrna Camarena and Bertha Tamayo have visited Lugonia School on a couple of occasions to recognize the school’s dedication to remembering Camarena’s life.

The Postal Service informed Holly in January that her proposal has been passed on to the Citizen’s Stamp Advisory Committee — as it has twice before in the past seven years.

“I was shocked” to receive the latest letter, Holly said. “I felt something good about it before I even opened it.”

According to Holly, “Every year when we send in signatures and letters — usually after Red Ribbon Week — we receive a letter acknowledging our stuff.”

To add incentive for the Postal Service’s consideration, Lugonia School has sent along signed red ribbons, T-shirts, newsletters and newspaper articles.

Alex Romero, a former colleague of Camarena’s, first contacted Holly after a newspaper story appeared in 1998 highlighting the initial efforts of Holly’s class to write to the Postal Service on behalf of Camarena. At the time Romero, an alumnus of Lugonia School, was an agent for the DEA in Fresno. It was through him that Camarena’s family came to know the Lugonia School community.

In its latest letter, Terrence McCaffrey, Postal Service’s manager for stamp development in Arlington, W. Va. wrote, “You may be pleased to know that this proposal will be placed before the Citizen’s Stamp Advisory Committee. The Committee is responsible for reviewing stamp proposals and making subject and design recommendations to the

Postmaster General ... Currently, the 2007 and 2008 stamp programs are completed, and stamp subjects for the 2009 program and subsequent years are being selected.”

Edward Carmona, a diversity development specialist for the San Diego district of the Postal Service, which covers Redlands, shares in Holly’s enthusiasm.

“Postal employees are not allowed to campaign” for stamp designs or commemorations, said Carmona, who has met Holly and follows her progress. “It’s supposed to be strictly a public activity, but I’m certainly in support of this worthy cause.”

According to Carmona, the U.S. Postal Service receives nearly 10,000 submissions for stamp ideas every year. “I wish I had a mathematical formula for the chances” that a stamp for Enrique Camarena would be issued, he said. “They issue 20 to 30 stamps a year, and chances for selection are small. But she made it to the actual board, which is a promising event.”

Perhaps “three time’s a charm,” as the saying goes. Holly certainly hasn’t lost hope.

“We’re looking at a time frame now of maybe 2009,” Holly pointed out. “I’ve noticed before when they’re selecting stamps they tend to do a theme for the whole year. I once received a letter telling me they were working on stamps to honor all law enforcement.”

Holly has received subtle hints, though she declined to say from who, that this time is for real.

“I know they’re working on a stamp. I know a design has been approved for 2009,” she said. “Maybe that will be the year for community.”

Whether a stamp is issued or not, Holly simply hopes that future generations remember the man

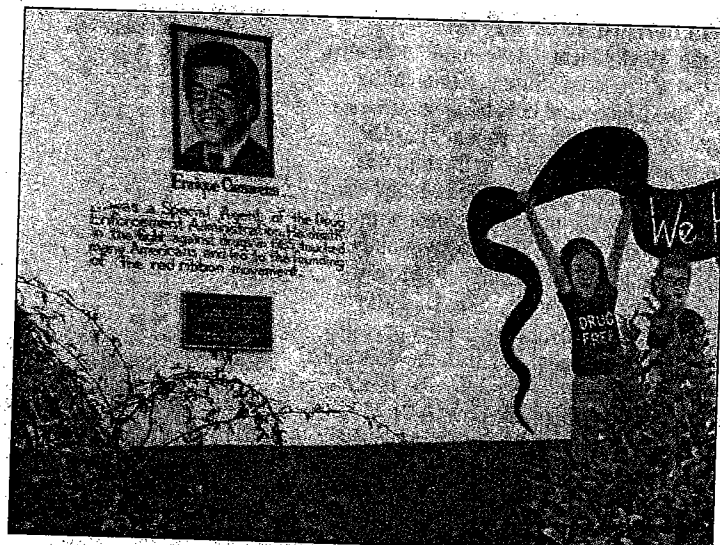
behind Red Ribbon Week.

"Most kids thought it was just about drugs," Holly said. "His name would be mentioned here and there, but kids didn't really know much about him. Every year I did my best to let them know there was a real person behind Red Ribbon Week, and that it was more significant than wearing a ribbon."

If readers wish to campaign for a stamp honoring Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, correspondence may be sent to the Citizen's Stamp Advisory Committee, c/o Stamp Management, U.S. Postal Service, 475 L'Enfant Plaza, SW, Room 4474EB, Washington, D.C. 20260-6756.



Diana Holly
Lobbies for stamp



Photos by **DAVID JAMES HEISS/Redlands Daily Facts**
Enrique Camarena, as painted by Redlands muralist Christine Curry, overlooks the Lugonia School garden.



DAVID JAMES HEISS/Redlands Daily Facts

This bust, donated by the Enrique Camarena Educational Foundation of San Diego in 2004 to kick off Red Ribbon Week, graces the school library.