

## **DAILY NEWS**

*Aug. 8, 2008*

### **Brokers Build**

Real estate agents-turned-hardhats help in the construction of condos

By Mallory Carra

It's 10 a.m. in Brooklyn and time for "screw school" - learning about screw guns and drywall, that is. The concept is foreign to me and 23 real estate brokers as we work on Habitat for Humanity's largest multifamily project in the world.

That's right, the sellers of million-dollar properties were installing drywall in upcoming Ocean Hill-Brownsville condos on July 30. They were part of Brokers Build, a year-old organization that has raised \$135,000 for the \$13 million Atlantic Avenue complex.

"This is the first time brokers are joining together across company lines in a program," says founder Stan Ponte, president of Coldwell Banker Previews International. "We compete with each other all day, every day, but planning, raising money and building together for this effort has been extraordinary."

The campaign isn't over yet. The group aims to raise \$1 million to fund 11 of the 41 condos. The three, four-story buildings will be completed next year. Brokers Build is one of many organizations and community groups to volunteer at the only current project by Habitat for Humanity's NYC affiliate.

Brokers who raise at least \$500 are invited to build during outings such as this. Ponte went with a small group to the first one last November, but more participants from New York's top real estate companies showed up on this day. My group was ready to start the day with team leader Annie Ledbury's "screw school."

She began class by demonstrating how to aim and hold the screw gun before pairing us up with a practice piece of drywall. My partner was 63-year-old Claudia Fox, West side office manager of Coldwell Banker Previews International. After an hour of struggling, she lined up the screw, pulled the trigger and pushed it through the drywall and metal. Fox squealed with joy.

"This is so different than doing a sale," Fox says. "I've sold condos in Trump Plaza while in hard hats, but I've never done anything quite like this. It gives you a real appreciation for a trade that requires a lot of experience and practice."

Arcadio Garcia, 25, gets such practice here every Saturday, when he builds with his future neighbors. Habitat-NYC accepted his family's condo application four months ago. Since then, Garcia and his wife are each working off the 300 required volunteer hours.

They can't complain, since that time counts as a down payment. Today, he's laboring with the brokers before he heads to his job as a sales support associate at John Wiley and Sons.

"If the volunteers weren't here, we wouldn't be here," says Garcia, who uses more than half of his \$32,000 salary to pay rent in Ridgewood, Queens. "This place is going to be a great environment for my 2-year-old son to grow up in."

The Garcia family is one of 36 families already chosen for the 53,000-square foot complex. The one-, two- and three-bedroom units received 8,000 requests for applications. Habitat-NYC is the developer, but that doesn't make it easy for applicants to be selected. The organization examines credit scores, income tax returns and the current dwellings of all prospective residents. A committee then approves or rejects applicants, who must be first-time home buyers.

"We serve families based on need," Habitat-NYC executive director Josh Lockwood says. "People typically think of Habitat building single family homes in a field. We build upward in New York because the demand here is so high for affordable housing."

The purchase price depends on how much money the occupants make. Each unit costs about \$325,000 to build. The exact value of each apartment is based on family earnings, and it can be resold for its entire worth after 30 years. In a mortgage as long as that, Habitat-NYC finances payments that are not more than 33% of what the family brings home. Ocean Hill-Brownsville's median income is \$22,000.

More complicated numbers awaited us after lunch, when we applied our morning class to a 4-foot-by-9-foot sheet of drywall. Fox and I formed a new group with Halstead senior vice president Alan Pfeifer, 66, and Coldwell Banker associate broker Michelle King, 46. Team leader Lydia Hicks extended her measuring tape along the metal framing and called out where the "studs" or screws needed to go. I wrote down the details in my notepad while having painful flashbacks to high school geometry.

The math got worse. We had to cut out a spot for a wire to come through the wall. Pfeifer marked the dimensions on the white sheet before slicing it with a razor blade. He and King broke off the excess pieces. With Hicks' guidance, we took turns securing the wall with screws.

When we were done, my brain hurt from all the measurements. King, however, looked as if she had more than enough energy for Brokers Build's next outing, in November.

"You should try being a broker for a day," she says to me. "It's way more exhausting than this."

## **DAILY NEWS**

*July 18, 2008*

### **Park Land**

Local alliance spurs a turnaround at West Village park

By Mallory Carra

Mary Vaccaro knows almost all the angles of Jackson Square Park.

For the past 10 years, she has painted the view from every corner of her neighborhood park and has gotten to know most of the homeless people who've hung around there.

Among those, the 46-year-old Jane St. resident recalls Donna Rossomando and the "guy from the South" - each of whom no longer calls the park home.

In the past year, drunks and the homeless have been ushered out by the Parks Department. Flower beds have replaced dying trees; litter, especially the number of broken bottles, is down. The number of people using laptops in what's now a Wi-Fi hot spot is up. Visitors to the park carrying Balducci shopping bags are now a common sight.

At the same time, a parking lot across the street was cleared for the 35-unit One Jackson Square condominium, scheduled to open next summer.

"It used to be rough and dingier here," says Vaccaro. "The homeless guys who hung around were usually the same faces. They would come here, crap all over, urinate all over and it used to be a little bit stinky."

Transformation of the park, bordered by Eighth and Greenwich Aves. and Horatio St., began with the formation of the Jackson Square Alliance, a nonprofit comprising local residents and businesses. Matt Weinreich, who serves as president of the JSA, is vice president of Hines Interests, the firm leading development of One Jackson Square.

Since its formation, the JSA has installed an irrigation system, replaced benches, replanted about \$100,000 worth of flowers and plant materials and made wireless Internet available to park visitors. The organization also replaced some of the park benches with the \$50,000 it raised.

The enhancements have attracted a new following to the park. On a recent sunny day, a young girl, dressed in pink, chased pigeons around a fountain. Hipsters chatted on their cell phones at the base of the fountain. Former Manhattan resident Betty Simms, 73 and visiting from Florida, relaxed and read a newspaper while waiting for a friend.

Brooklyn high-school teacher Eric Pyontek, a 30-year-old Chelsea resident, has been eating lunch in Jackson Square Park for the past three years on days off and when school is out for the summer. He appreciates the changes.

"It's much cleaner now," says Pyontek. "It used to have a lot of litter and was very dirty. The park used to always have a problem with vagrants, but it's better now. One thing I noticed is there are more children and mothers. It's much more comfortable now."

The JSA plans to add more green space in the stone-filled triangle and a full-time gardener. Repairing the cracked blue stone pavement inside the park as well as in the sidewalk surrounding it is on the agenda as well.

Weinreich also hopes to host community events in the park.

"It's a wonderful little oasis, but it needs a lot of maintenance to keep it looking as good as it does," he says.

The JSA also worked closely with the Parks Department to institute patrols in the park on a random basis. Park Department officers will begin around-the-clock patrols next month.

"We have contracted for PEP officers, part of the Parks Department, to make sure all the improvements put in place are respected and that it feels like it's a comfortable environment for people to spend time in," says Weinreich.

So far, it has been effective, he says. Nonetheless, on some days a few homeless can be found sleeping in the park. According to Vaccaro, anyone found lying on a bench, drinking alcohol or being loud is removed from the park.

For instance, Rossomando recently had to leave the park when she was caught drinking beer inside the fences. Rossomando, 51, has been around Jackson Square for 20 years and has called it home most of that time. For the past year and a half she has been living with her boyfriend in the Bronx, but still comes by to visit her friends - those who are left.

"We don't like the cops here," she says. "They're rough on us. Some [of the homeless] don't do anything wrong in this park, while others do, and [the police] don't leave us alone. I don't like hanging around here anymore. I come, see my friends and that's it."

Rossomando offers to introduce me to all the old regulars, who have since relocated to a corner on 14th St. We walk along Eighth Ave. and she points out the spot along the fence where she and her friends would panhandle.

We pass the One Jackson Square construction site, but when we turn the corner, no one is there. There's also no one by the North Village Delicatessen and at the entrance to the 14th St. subway station - like she said there would be.

Have they been asked to leave here, too?

"Sometimes," she says. "They probably just went back to the Bronx."

Park Department officials, however, believe the changes benefit the entire community.

"I don't think the park has ever looked this good," Weinreich says. "We got to know our neighbors and we formed the Jackson Square Alliance to work together to promote the park and make it a better place."

## **DAILY NEWS**

*July 31, 2008*

### **Cut Brooklyn**

Gowanus knife-maker seeks slice of U.S. market

By Mallory Carra

Would you give up your day job to make a knife? Joel Bukiewicz did. Four years ago, the New School graduate student who relocated to rural Georgia for a change of scenery traded writing a novel for making his first knife.

"I always had an interest in knives and thought since I was living in the South, it was the kind of thing you get into, like hunting and fishing," the Albany native said. "I thought, 'Let's try to make a knife.'"

Today, Bukiewicz is back in New York, making knives for his company, Cut Brooklyn, named for his love of the borough.

The Prospect Park resident crafts his cutlery to order for local chefs and home cooks in a tiny workshop in Gowanus alongside other fine artists. The brand sells at Bowery Kitchen Supplies stores and the Brooklyn Kitchen in Williamsburg. Since the Daily News Brooklyn edition covered the story in January, Cut Brooklyn has gone national, receiving orders from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Miami and Chicago.

The brand's quick rise comes from its quality. Bukiewicz makes his knives with Crucible CPM 154, an expensive tough steel that holds a thin edge longer than others. He applies a convex edge, which promises a more precise cut. The handle is made of a glass fabric laminate called G10 that doesn't swell, shrink or crack. He offers free maintenance for the cutlery's entire lifetime, or as long he himself lives.

Bukiewicz tries to meet with all of his customers beforehand, to shape the knife to their hand and customize the product. Brad Farmerie, head chef at Public restaurant in Nolita, enjoyed following the process of his 9-inch chef knife.

"You almost have too many choices," said the chef. "I got a red handle black inset, and then he asked me to pick my rivets. A lot of chefs only pull out three knives at the beginning of the day and that's one of them for me. Joel really builds a knife with substance."

Handmade and custom cutlery, however, doesn't come cheap. The 9½-inch chef knife costs \$395 and an 8-incher is \$350. A utility knife is \$250, and a small paring knife is \$180. The prices run higher than high-end Wusthof, Henckels and Global knives that sell at Williams-Sonoma for a little over \$100, a fee that could also buy a large set of infomercial-famous, can-cutting Ginsu knives.

"Knives are made to cut food, not cans, and no Ginsu knife you get is going to be handmade," Bukiewicz said. "I treat each knife like a project and make sure everything's perfect. I understand that \$350 is not for everyone, and there are lots of knives everywhere to choose from. I tell folks to try out as many knives as they can. If others don't fit them, I can make them one that does."

Park Slope resident Dave Cleary looked everywhere for such a fit, but couldn't find it until Bukiewicz made him a special-order 12-inch chef knife.

"I wanted a heavier knife to get through a lot of chopping, and this one's designed for heavy usage," said Cleary, an amateur cook and researcher at NYU Hospital for Joint Diseases. "He told us everything about the process."

Bukiewicz uses a design technique he honed for four years through books, Internet research and talking to other knife-makers. He spends 10 hours a day in his workshop, shuffling between two dusty grinders, a chop saw and a small corner for his laptop. He also shares the space with an intern, who will help him to produce a reduced-price line this fall with Lamson & Goodnow, a Massachusetts-based knife-making company.

So how's the writing coming? It's safe to say he's enjoying the break from words and letters.

"Writing fiction is so abstract and making a knife is so not," he said. "When you're done, you've got something useful and beautiful. Something basic and real that you can hold in your hand."