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LIVING IN/WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

## Drawn by the Prices, Betting on the Neighborhood

By NANCY BETH JACKSON

**W**ITH a good eye for real estate, Mother Cabrini, later the patron saint of immigrants and the first American citizen canonized, traveled by horse and buggy to northern Manhattan in 1898 to acquire a tract of land at 190th Street and Fort Washington Avenue.

In the fresh air near the highest point on the island, she established a boarding school for daughters of the Italian immigrants Pope Leo XIII had dispatched her to serve.

Today about 50,000 pilgrims annually visit the Washington Heights shrine where Mother Cabrini is entombed. This weekend, the saint's feast day will be celebrated with masses in five languages, including Spanish, now spoken by about 70 percent of the neighborhood, according to the 2000 census. Mother Cabrini High School thrives as a day school for 400 girls, most from Dominican families, and says it sends almost all of its graduates to college.

Washington Heights traditionally has been where immigrants seek refuge and a future. Noted for its European Jewish immigrants in the 1930's and 1940's, including Henry Kissinger's family, and for the Dominicans who made the neighborhood the unofficial capital of the Dominican Republic in the 1980's, Washington Heights continues to welcome immigrants. The latest to come are other Hispanics, Russians, Africans, and Asians. Newcomers also include gays, biracial couples, doctors, graduate students, young professionals, musicians, actors and anyone looking for more space than they can afford farther south in Manhattan.

"There is such an amazing mix here that anyone can fit in," said Lynne Herndon, a public school teacher who moved from the West 40's with her husband, Akbar Ali Herndon, a private school administrator, when their 5-year-old son, Liam, was a toddler. "For us, the kind of mix we have up here is part of the appeal."

Washington Heights occupies two ridges, with Broadway, once an Indian trail, running down the valley. The neighborhood is well connected to the rest of the world with six bridges (including the George Washington Bridge), three major highways, Bronx and Manhattan buses, the A train express subway line and the 1 and 9 lines.

The Hispanic Society of America museum and library on Audubon Terrace and the Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park bookend the neighborhood, which also has Fort Washington Park, an extension of Riverside Park, and High Bridge Park to the east. Smaller green spaces include J. Wood Wright Park, with its playground bridge a model of the George Washington, and Bennett Park, where American patriots lost the Battle of Fort Washington on Nov. 16, 1776.

Restaurants have moved beyond mouth-watering Dominican chicken to sushi and brunch but don't rival those downtown. Christina Harris, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at City University of New York who rents a large studio for less than \$1,000 a month, regrets that few friends trek up to visit her.

"There's not much nightlife, although the Monkey Room at 187th and Fort Washington has an excellent karaoke night on Thursdays, and the D.J., Willard Loue, does a great Elvis," she said.

That there's any nightlife at all will surprise anyone who remembers Washington Heights in the 1980's and early 1990's when it was considered one of the city's most "murderous" neighborhoods and drug gangs ruled the streets. Since 1994, when the 33rd Precinct was created out of the 34th, crime rates are down almost 70 percent in the 34th and almost 60 percent in the 33rd. But last month, residents at a community meeting complained that crimes like burglary were rising in the 34th while dropping elsewhere.

Anne Born, a Columbia University administrator and divorced mother of four, couldn't be happier with the changes she has seen since she bought a four-bedroom on 180th Street for \$120,000 in 1998 after renting for a year. "I am so crazy about the police because I've been full cycle," she said.

Education is also a hot-button topic. Two years ago, the Herndons, the couple who moved up from Hell's Kitchen, worked with other parents for more school choices in a neighborhood known for crowded classrooms and low test scores. This fall their son is one of 19 kindergartners in the fledgling Washington Heights Academy, a parent-involvement program housed at Public School 178. The families reflect the educational, economic and ethnic diversity of Washington Heights.

Some parents try for Public School 187 (Cliff Heights), which sends graduates to the most competitive public high schools. At lunch, first through fourth graders listen to classical music. Other options are alternative public school offerings in Inwood, and parochial and private schools in the Bronx and Manhattan. Under a recent reorganization, some intermediate schools have been divided into smaller units. George Washington High School now houses independent programs in international business, communications, law and public service, and health careers and science.

The report card is still out on how effective the changes will be.

Dr. Ileana Vargas-Rodriguez, a pediatric endocrinologist, can walk to work at the Naomi Berrie Diabetes Center at Columbia Presbyterian. In 1998, the job drew her back to the neighborhood, rich with memories: her family's first home after moving from Puerto Rico, her school days at Mother Cabrini, the one-bedroom apartment where she and her husband, Dr. Jose A. Rodriguez, an orthopedic surgeon, had begun their family before moving to the East Side. Four years ago, the couple and their two school-age children moved into a three-bedroom apartment.

"But when we say we live in Washington Heights, we do get some looks," she said. "Two physicians, and you live in Washington Heights?"

Housing stock is mostly five- and six-story prewar apartment buildings, many still in their original configurations. "They were considered modest, but they were not modestly constructed," said Simone Song, the principal broker at Simone Song Properties in the Hudson Heights section, where most co-ops are situated. Among the best known are Hudson View Gardens, a Tudor-style complex built in 1924, and Castle Village, five towers constructed in 1939.

Hudson View apartments sell in the half-million-dollar range and Castle Village units for around

\$750,000 or higher, Ms. Song said, noting that a four-bedroom Castle Village apartment was recently under contract for \$1.15 million.

Other apartments can be had for far less. Gary Seligson, the drummer for "Wicked," the Broadway musical, and his wife, Lucy, a former actress, bought a two-bedroom apartment two years ago for less than they would have paid for a one-bedroom on the Upper West Side.

Condos and new construction units are rare, but the Cliffside Condominium, a 20-unit development with apartments priced at \$340,000 to \$895,000, opened recently on Cabrini Boulevard, at about 188th Street. The Bennett, 55 units at 736 West 187th Street, initially priced between \$295,000 and \$653,000, is expected to be finished next summer.

Owners who bought in the neighborhood only a few years ago report they've been approached to sell their apartments for twice what they paid. Perry Payne, a former actress who became an agent with Stein-Perry Real Estate and president of her co-op board after buying an apartment south of the George Washington Bridge, said one junior four-room apartment bought from the sponsor for \$90,000 in 1998 was sold in 2002 for \$375,000. And the second buyers just sold it for \$425,000. Reasons for selling were less flipping than transition. The first buyers moved upstate, the second had a growing family.

Most of the co-ops and more upscale rentals are west of Broadway, although Louis Pulice, a Stein-Perry agent who grew up east of Broadway as a son of Italian immigrants, sees deals in his old neighborhood. Bargains can also be found in low-owner-occupancy buildings where sponsors have put units on the market, said David Purdy, a mortgage consultant and Washington Heights resident.

Always in transition, Washington Heights is no longer a default neighborhood. It has become a destination all its own.

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