



VIEWS FROM THE HEIGHTS

Jackson Heights – “A Garden in the City”

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Jackson Heights
Beautification Group

www.JHBG.org

JH-Strong: Resiliency in the Face of a Pandemic



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On the cover:

Art by Kirsten Magnani

"This image is inspired by a visionary piece called *Plant Seeds Grow* by Architect/Visual Artist Olalekan Jeyifous, which provokes new ways of thinking about how architectural designs can best serve humanity and local communities. My intention is to portray the signs of growth and recovery all around us as we regenerate as a community."

**En español
páginas 6–7**

President's Message

BY LESLIE ELLMAN

Like many of you, I have spent the past several Sundays at Travers Park enjoying an excellent diverse line up of musical talent. We have all been basking in the balmy summer evenings, delighting in live music in the company of our neighbors. Although each performance has been unique, I have noticed a striking similarity in the audience: when I look around every week, I see happiness and delight on the many faces in attendance.

JHBG is very proud of our concert series because it brings people together in our "town square", Travers Park. Anyone can pull up a chair or blanket and enjoy listening to live music with neighbors on a beautiful summer evening. As we gather there, we are finally able to exhale after a very different and difficult past summer. This year's concerts have more meaning after last year's suspension of programming, and we are just getting started.

Mark your calendars for the return of several of our beloved programs. In the fall, we are bringing back our Historic Weekend and Garden Tour on September 18. I am thrilled to also announce the return of The Halloween Parade in October! Start planning

your costumes and come out to march with us on Sunday, October 31st!

And to add to the excitement, I am happy to share with everyone that the much-loved Jackson Heights Orchestra will return later this year as well. Their first concert is scheduled for December.

The JHBG exists to serve the community. We do so in many ways, aiming to uplift and bring joy to all of our neighbors through our programming. See you at the Garden Tour, at the Halloween parade, at an upcoming performance of the Jackson Heights Orchestra, or maybe simply on the Avenue!

Leslie Ellman
JHBG President



Editor's Message

BY MELISSA ZAVALA

With an Eye on the Pandemic—What Does the Recovery Look Like in Jackson Heights?

Greetings, neighbors! With the city reopening and efforts underway to return to normality, this issue focuses on community life resuming and the state of recovery for small businesses one year later. To do this, we highlight the return of Historic Weekend and the Halloween Parade. To explore how long-time neighborhood retail establishments are faring through the pandemic, we visit Jahn's Diner, Ultima Florals, and Rincón de los Antiques, all located on 37th Avenue in the heart of Jackson Heights. The two retail stores had to close last year while the diner remained open. How are they recovering? What lessons can these businesses offer others, and what can they tell us about our neighborhood's community life?

This edition continues to honor our dedicated and always interesting neighborhood volunteers who donate their time and talent to the Jackson Heights Beautification Group. This issue includes a

story by Ashley Cruce, volunteer coordinator at JH-SCRAPS, our community composting center, where she has been volunteering herself for six years. She is a gardener, educator, and composter at the Queens Botanical Garden, and she is an all-around coordinator extraordinaire. Her story features one of our prized helpful volunteers, Viet Dinh.

The series of articles under our now regular column, "Jackson Heights Notables", remembers Frank Yerby. This section will keep a focus on public figures and neighbors who currently live or have lived here and who represent various elements of life in Jackson Heights. This issue reminds us of the architectural legacy left by Yerby, an African American writer of popular fiction who lived here in the 1940s.

Lastly, this issue also introduces what will be a regular column called "Our Urban Ecosystem" which will consider the effects of human practices on wildlife. From gardening to architectural design choices,

the human impact on the environment is wide-ranging and together we can think more creatively and respectfully about our planet at large and do so from the neighborhood level.

I wish to thank those of you who have been sending comments about our summer issue. We are grateful for your support and your feedback. If you would like to suggest topics for stories or contribute articles, propose improvements to the newsletter, send ideas for enhancements to our programming, and share your overall thoughts on how to further build upon what we are currently doing, please email us at info@jhb.org. You can also write to us by mail at JHBG, PO Box 720253, Jackson Heights, NY 11372.

We hope to see and hear from you this Fall,

Melissa Zavala
Editor



2021 Historic Jackson Heights Weekend

BY DAN KARATZAS

SAT. & SUN.
September
18 & 19

GET TICKETS
TODAY!



Come celebrate the picturesque architecture and lively history of JH



Thirty years ago, the Jackson Heights Beautification Group launched its first Historic Jackson Heights Weekend highlighting our unique garden community. Over the decades, people have come from far and wide (and, of course, close to home) to attend the annual exhibit of original photographs and ephemera, a slide presentation, the garden tour, and the walking tour. Attendance has grown to a total of over 300 for all events over the last few years.

Sadly, the pandemic forced the cancellation of the June 2020 and June 2021 events. However, we are preparing for a scaled back version this September. We invite you to join us. Tickets are \$10 per tour.

GARDEN TOUR: Saturday, September 18th

from Noon to 4pm (rain date: September 25th)

We anticipate 14 gardens will be participating this year. And since we have never had a fall garden tour, here is a chance to see what they look like as the summer ends. **Tickets can be purchased at Espresso 77 (35- 77th Street) beginning in early September. On the day of the event, tickets can be purchased in front of Community Church, on 35th Avenue between 81st and 82nd Streets.** We also plan to have books and T-shirts available for sale.

WALKING TOUR: Sunday, September 19th at Noon

Tours will meet at 11:45 in front of the Community Church, on 35th Avenue between 81st and 82nd Streets). **We ask that you register in advance by calling 347-766-9129** to ensure that enough guides are available to keep each tour group to less than 20 people.



JACKSON HEIGHTS NOTABLES

This series highlights former Jackson Heights residents of notable interest for the ways in which they represent some of the elements of life in our neighborhood.

Frank Yerby Remembering a Forgotten Author BY DANIEL KARATZAS

For any Jackson Heights residents who have travelled down 86th Street between Northern Boulevard and 34th Avenue and marveled at the one house that is unlike any other on the block—or in the neighborhood, for that matter—there is a reason for the uncharacteristic style of this home. No longer a vernacular 1920s-era brick house, how and when was this one house so “modernized”? The house at 33-28 86th Street was purchased by Frank Yerby and remodeled in 1949 by the architects Jedd Reisner and Max Urbahn. A dramatic two-story living room lies behind the large glass windows that cover most of the front façade. Complementing this clean, modernist renovation, is dining room furniture produced by George Nakashima.

Who is Frank Yerby? Today, the name is not familiar to many. But that was not always the case. He was a well-known writer of historical fiction and the first African-American to sell over one million copies of a novel entitled *The Foxes of*

Harrow, in 1946. Yerby's early success and his desire to escape racism in the South resulted in the family purchasing this house just a few years following the profitable sales of *Foxes*. Yet, as one can imagine, a smooth transition to such a homogenous community like Jackson Heights was in the late 1940s was unlikely. In fact, even with his continuing success—seven novels published between 1946 and 1952—Yerby continued to feel the sting of discrimination and left the United States for France in 1952, eventually settling in Spain, where he died in 1991. His first wife and children remained in the house for a number of years after his self-imposed exile with a new family.

Yerby published over 30 books between 1946 and 1985, with his 1971 novel *The Dahomean* considered his masterpiece. Some of his early novels were optioned by Hollywood and made into films. Despite the popularity of his books, he remains an elusive figure in 21st century America. An excellent and



The Yerby family home on 86th Street, modernized in the 1940s

entertaining summary of Frank's life and importance can be accessed online at: www.main.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/1914-you-never-can-tell-about-a-river

And while Frank Yerby's presence in Jackson Heights was limited to just a few years almost 70 years ago, the house he renovated remains as striking and distinctive as it did the day he and his family moved in back in the 1940s.



So Cool: Battling Climate Change in NYC with Trees

BY LEN MANIACE

A coalition of civic, environmental, government and business groups unveiled a plan this summer to make our city more environmentally sustainable, resilient, and equitable in the face of climate warming by growing our urban forest. If this sounds familiar, that is because this is what the Jackson Heights Beautification Group's (JHBG) Tree LC brigade has been working on in Jackson Heights for most of the last decade. In fact, JHBG is a member of the leadership committee for [Forest For All NYC](#), the umbrella group leading the effort.

The committee's main goal is to increase city coverage by 30% from the current 22% by 2035. That may seem a distant date, but to accomplish this, we need to start now. New York is not the first city exploring such an increase. Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington DC are already on their way. Unlike those cities, however, the NYC Urban Forest Agenda, as the campaign is called, does not yet have the city's support.

Right now, you may be asking, didn't Mayor Bloomberg's Million Trees program already do this? While Million Trees is helping, that project focused on planting one million trees with the idea that this would improve NYC's air quality. Cooling the city, especially in the face of global

warming, was not the target in itself. As a result, missing from the plan was the care required of those newly planted trees to ensure their growth to maturity when trees are best at capturing carbon and have more robust canopies. Getting them to that stage cannot depend on volunteer care work alone. JHBG knows that is not enough. City government must do more to maintain our trees. While [JHBG's Tree LC—the city's most active volunteer tree stewardship program](#), surpassing even those led by professionals—has been caring for Jackson Heights' trees, we can only regularly tend to a fraction of them. Maintaining all trees is another major component of the NYC Urban Forest Agenda.

If you want to help keep Jackson Heights and NYC livable in the future, read more about the NYC Urban Forest Agenda and request that the following officials support the effort:

Queens Borough President Donovan Richards,

info@queensbp.org

25th District Council Member Daniel Dromm,

dromm@council.nyc.gov

25th District Council's Democratic nominee

Shekar Krishnan, shekar.krishnan@gmail.com

21th District Council Member Francisco Moya,

FMoya@council.nyc.gov

WHY PLANT TREES?

Many studies have shown that city neighborhoods with big trees are significantly cooler than places lacking them. That should not be a surprise. Consider how you feel about walking across a parking lot on a hot summer day or, in contrast, along a tree-lined street that same day. Two big things make it cooler. The obvious thing is shade, but the more subtle and even more powerful effect is evaporation of water from the leaves on the trees, a process called transpiration. Think about it this way: remember the chill you feel after emerging from the ocean or a pool; that is the cooling effect of water evaporating from your skin. Generally speaking, the more leaves and the bigger the leaves, the more evaporation, and the more cooling. Together the shade and transpiration make trees Mother Nature's natural ACs.

IN MEMORIAM: Joe Ricevuto, Pillar of Jackson Heights

BY MELISSA ZAVALA



William Butler Yeats' phrase that a stranger is a friend one has not met yet, describes Joe Ricevuto's manner. He was a special presence in the neighborhood. Along with Steve Knobel, who also passed away this year, Joe was one of the "Mayors of Jackson Heights". Both contributed to the community, adding personality to the neighborhood. Councilmember Daniel Dromm plans to rename a street honoring both Steve and Joe, two pillars of the community, later this year. (To read more about Steve, see the [Summer 2021 issue of Views from The Heights](#).)

Joe passed away at age 88 in January. He was a hairstylist, a Korean War Army Veteran, a community organizer, a regular in the Macy's

Thanksgiving Day Parade for over 30 years bringing cheer as a clown, and he was one of the JHBG's own. As President of the Garden Club, he beautified 37th Avenue, planting flowers and over 100 trees. Dedicated to serving seniors, Joe helped prevent their isolation by organizing the Men and Women's Club of Jackson Heights which provided meals and engaged residents in the sort of lively conversation Joe sparked. Beyond JHBG's Board of Directors, Joe served on Community Board 3 and for different Catholic organizations. As a devout Catholic, he also functioned as a member of the Board of Trustees for St. Joan of Arc.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to his widow, Nancy Hernandez-Ricevuto, and everyone who loved him.

A NEIGHBORHOOD CELEBRATION: Our Annual Children's Halloween Parade Turns 30!

BY EDWIN O'KEEFE WESTLEY

**SUNDAY
October 31
at Noon!**
37th Ave. from
89TH to 76TH
Streets

Last year would have been the 30th anniversary of our annual Halloween Parade. The city shutdown meant the parade's cancellation, but we are bringing it back! We are grateful to local merchants and contributors for always providing both in-kind donations and financial support. Ultima Florals, Dime Bank and Foodtown provide us with decorations, treat bags, and drinks, respectively. Armondo's Italian Restaurant, Momma Rosa's Pizza, and Lety's Bakery and Café supply us with food. Photographer Patti Lowenhaupt documents our events for free.

We are thankful for the financial support from Joseph Lock and Alarm, 82nd Street Partnership, Queens Chamber of Commerce, Capital One Bank, Apple Bank, Garden Heights Property Mgmt., Kiwanis of Jackson Heights, Costco, Jackson House Restaurant, Happy Kitchen, 82nd Street Tenants, La Boina Roja, The India Long Term Trust, Koepfel Auto Group, Frank's Pharmacy, Abetx International Brokers, Jackson Heights Jewish Center, Steve and Suzanne Knobel, Brown's Army Navy, TD Bank, New Peking Kitchen, Seba Seba, Olivos Opticians, Black Tie Cleaners, Dr. Abe Dyzenhaus, Downtown Nature Health Foods Inc., Espresso 77, Jahn's diner and San Andresito Jewelry.

We would not have a Children's Halloween Parade without children from IS 230 and PS 145 students with their marching bands and Cheerleaders; Jackson Heights Early Learning Center; 82nd Street Academics; PS 69, PS 280, St. Joan of Arc, PS 212, the Girl Scouts, PS 148, PS 92, Renaissance Charter, PS 222, PS 228, PS 89, PS 398; the Performing Arts Conservatory of NY; the Lexington School; and Forte Prep Charter School. Community Board 3 members also march with us.

Our behind-the-scenes volunteers blow up balloons, stuff treat bags, line up marchers, keep everything organized during the march, hand out 3,200 goodie bags, and serve food, drinks, and cake at our celebration party. They are too numerous to mention individually, though the Newtown HS Key Club deserves special mention.

A shout-out also goes to the police officers of the 115th Precinct who keep us safe, especially Detective Johnson and PO Robby.

Our Parade Committee does the rest. John McCaffrey packs and distributes treat bags; Len Maniace covers our press release. John Cebollero has been creating our beautiful posters and now Kirsten Magnani will take over. Edna Vera, Barbara Kunkel, and Melissa Zavala help out with hospitality. Edwin O'Keefe Westley is the overall parade organizer.



EN ESPAÑOL

Mensaje de la presidenta

POR LESLIE ELLMAN

Queridos vecinos, como muchos de ustedes, he pasado algunos de los últimos domingos en Travers Park disfrutando una gran variedad de excelentes talentos musicales. El JHBG está orgulloso de los conciertos porque reúnen a la gente en nuestra "plaza": Travers Park. Los conciertos de este año significan mucho después de la suspensión de los eventos programados el año pasado, y esto es solo el comienzo. En el otoño regresa nuestro Fin de Semana Histórico y el Recorrido por los Jardines el 18 de septiembre. ¡Regresa también el Desfile de Halloween el 31 de octubre! Asimismo, la Orquesta de Jackson Heights regresará a finales de año. El JHBG está para servir a la comunidad. Mediante nuestro programa aspiramos a alentar y llevar alegría a todos nuestros vecinos.

Mensaje de la editora: Con un ojo en la pandemia, ¿cómo pinta la recuperación en Jackson Heights?

POR MELISSA ZAVALA

¡Saludos, vecinos! Con la reapertura de la ciudad y los esfuerzos puestos en regresar a la normalidad, este número está dedicado al retorno de nuestra comunidad a la vida normal y al estado de recuperación de los pequeños negocios un año después del comienzo de la pandemia. Para esto, destacamos el regreso del Fin de Semana Histórico y el Desfile de Halloween. Para explorar cómo la han pasado los establecimientos comerciales durante la pandemia, visitamos Jahn's Diner, Ultima Florals y Rincón de los Antiques, todos ubicados en la Avenida 37. Esta edición continúa honrando a

nuestros dedicados y siempre interesantes voluntarios. Asimismo, la serie de artículos de la ahora columna regular, "Jackson Heights Notables", conmemora a Frank Yerby, escritor afroamericano que vivió aquí en la década de 1940. Finalmente, este número introduce la que será otra columna regular, "Our Urban Ecosystem", dedicada a los efectos de las prácticas humanas en la vida salvaje. Quiero agradecer a todos aquellos que nos han enviado sus comentarios sobre el número del verano pasado. Si te interesa proponer temas o contribuir con artículos o ideas, envíanos un correo electrónico a info@jhb.org o escríbenos por correo a JHBG, PO Box 720253, Jackson Heights, NY 11372.

Fin de Semana Histórico de Jackson Heights en 2021

POR DAN KARATZAS

Hace 30 años el JHBG lanzó su primer Fin de Semana Histórico de Jackson Heights para destacar los jardines que hacen única a nuestra comunidad. Tristemente, la pandemia forzó la cancelación de los eventos de junio de 2020 y junio de 2021. Sin embargo, nos estamos preparando para un gran regreso en septiembre. Te invitamos a que te unas al Recorrido por los Jardines el 18 de septiembre de 12:00 a 4:00 de la tarde; los boletos cuestan \$10 por evento y puedes comprarlos en Espresso 77 desde inicios de septiembre o el día del evento frente a la Iglesia Comunitaria de la Avenida 35, entre las Calles 81 y 82. El Recorrido a Pie tendrá lugar el 19 de septiembre a las 12:00. El punto de reunión para ambos recorridos es Iglesia Comunitaria de la Avenida 35, 15 minutos antes



Celebración del desfile de Halloween.



Voluntarios ayudando con las preparaciones para el día del desfile.

de la hora programada. Puedes registrarte con anticipación llamando al 347-766-9129.

Una celebración del vecindario: ¡nuestro Desfile Infantil Anual de Halloween cumple 30 años!

POR EDWIN O'KEEFE WESTLEY

El año pasado habría sido el Aniversario 30 de nuestro Desfile Anual de Halloween. El cierre de la ciudad significó la cancelación del desfile, ¡pero este año lo traemos de regreso! Agradecemos a los comerciantes locales y a los patrocinadores por sus donaciones en especie y su apoyo económico. Gracias también a todos los negocios que colaboran, así como a los niños de las escuelas públicas, sin quienes el evento no existiría, a nuestros voluntarios, a los policías de la Estación de Policía 115 y a al Comité del Desfile, que se encarga de la organización: John McCaffrey, Len Maniace,

John Cebollero, Kirsten Magnani, Edna Vera, Barbara Kunkel, Melissa Zavala y Edwin O'Keefe Westley, organizador general.

Seguimiento a la recuperación de nuestros negocios pequeños

POR MELISSA ZAVALA

A diferencia de las grandes tiendas de marca, los pequeños negocios dan al vecindario un carácter local y anclan comunidades. Pero ¿qué tan bien preparados están para soportar los impactos de la pandemia? Los propietarios de tres de estos negocios nos comparten su experiencia: Nick Moukas de Jahn's Diner, George Spetsieris de Ultima Florals y María Zapata de Rincón de los Antiques, que fueron seleccionados con base en la adecuación de sus negocios a las categorías de esencial y no esencial. Los tres lugares proporcionan distintos servicios a la comunidad.

¡Qué chévere! Combatir el cambio climático con árboles en la Ciudad de Nueva York

POR LEN MANIACE

Este verano, una coalición de grupos civiles, ambientalistas y gubernamentales dieron a conocer un plan para hacer que, mediante el aumento de los bosques urbanos, nuestra ciudad sea más sostenible, fuerte y equitativa en materia de medio ambiente y de cara al cambio climático. Si suena familiar es porque esto es en lo que la brigada Tree LC del Grupo de Embellecimiento de Jackson Heights (JHBG por sus siglas en inglés) ha estado trabajando durante la mayor parte de la última década. De hecho, el JHBG es miembro del comité dirigente de Forest For All NYC, el grupo central que lidera el esfuerzo. La meta principal del comité es incrementar la cobertura a 30% para 2035 del 22 % actual.

In memoriam: Peter Magnani, una fuerza para el cambio en Queens

POR PATRICIA AUSPOS

Peter Magnani, dedicado servidor público que trabajó para mejorar el bienestar y el ambiente de Jackson Heights y muchos otros vecindarios en Queens, murió el 23 de junio de 2021 a la edad de 82

años. Arquitecto, planificador urbano y residente de toda la vida en Queens, Peter sirvió como director de la Oficina de Planificación Urbana de Queens en la década de 1980. En 1986 Claire Shulman lo nombró presidente del Condado de Queens y con éxito abogó para restaurar y plantar árboles en la franja central de la Avenida 34. En 2002 se convirtió en director del Programa de Gestión de Capital de la Biblioteca Pública Queensborough donde sostuvo la expansión de nuevas sucursales. Le sobreviven su esposa, Dorothy, e hijos, Kirsten e Ian. Se pueden hacer donaciones a la memoria de Peter al JHBG.

In memoriam: Joe Ricevuto, pilar de Jackson Heights

POR MELISSA ZAVALA

Junto con Steve Knobel, quien falleció este año, Joe fue uno de los "Alcaldes de Jackson Heights". Ambos hicieron contribuciones a la comunidad y dieron personalidad al vecindario. El concejal Daniel Dromm está planeando renombrar una calle en honor de Steve y Joe para finales de año. Joe murió en enero a la edad de 88 años. Fue estilista, veterano de la guerra contra Corea, organizador de la comunidad, dedicado a servir a los adultos mayores, y miembro

de la junta directiva del JHBG. Enviamos nuestro más sentido pésame a su viuda, Nancy Hernández-Ricevuto, y a todos sus seres queridos.

In memoriam: Janet M. Kelly, celebrar una vida.

Mis recuerdos de Janet

POR SEAN WESTLEY

A principios de la década de 1990, mi padre se encontraba en una situación difícil: no sobrellevaba bien la soltería, así que decidió unirse a la Red de Acción de Padres Solteros (SPAN, por sus siglas en inglés). Necesitaba con quien formar equipo, una animadora, una pareja de viajes, una activista de los derechos LGBT, amante del teatro y, más importante, alguien que viera el romance en la vida con su madre en Jackson Heights. Janet era el complemento perfecto. Estuvieron juntos por 29 años. Janet me enseñó a seguir adelante y a nunca rendirme. Siempre recordaré los legendarios largos abrazos de Janet.

LOS DESTACADOS DE JACKSON HEIGHTS **Aquellos que llamaron hogar a Jackson Heights:**

Frank Yerby POR DAN KARATZAS

Aunque su nombre no resulta familiar a muchos, Frank Yerby fue un conocido escritor de ficción histórica y el primer afroamericano en vender más de un millón de copias de una novela titulada *Débil es la carne* (*The Foxes of Harrow*), de 1946. Su éxito y su deseo de escapar del racismo del sur llevó a su familia a comprar la casa en el 33-28 de la Calle 86, que fuera remodelada con un estilo modernista en 1949 por los arquitectos Jedd Reisner y Max Urbahn. A pesar de su creciente éxito —siete novelas más publicadas entre 1946 y 1952—, Yerby siguió

padeciendo la discriminación, por lo que dejó Estados Unidos y se mudó a Francia en 1952. Finalmente se estableció en España, donde murió en 1991. Yerby publicó más de 30 libros entre 1946 y 1985. Aunque algunas de sus primeras novelas fueron adaptadas al cine por Hollywood, *Negros son los dioses de mi África* (*The Dahomean*), publicada en 1972, es considerada su obra maestra.

La magia del compostaje explicada por un excelente voluntario: Viet Dinh

POR ASHLEY CRUCE

Esta es una entrevista a Viet Dinh, quien comenzó a trabajar con nosotros durante la pandemia, el otoño pasado. Tiene 19 años, vive en Elmhurst y estudia una licenciatura en ciencias de la comunicación, con énfasis en bioinformática, en Hunter College. Nuestros voluntarios son realmente invaluable, con su ayuda hemos sostenido el aumento de desperdicios de comida desde la reapertura de JH-SCRAPS en julio del 2020.

JH-SCRAPS expande sus esfuerzos para el compostaje

POR LENNY OLSSON

JHSCRAPS se enorgullece en anunciar un nuevo proyecto de construcción que incrementará la capacidad para realizar de manera local el compostaje de los desechos de alimentos del vecindario. Un nuevo contenedor similar al construido el año pasado para reemplazar el original está en la etapa de planeación. Este proyecto es posible gracias a un financiamiento otorgado por el Comité Ciudadano de Nueva York (CCNYC, por sus siglas en inglés). Agradecemos a CCNYC por cubrir los costos de este proyecto.



Comercio en locales históricos en Jackson Heights.

Tracking the Recovery of Our Small Businesses

BY MELISSA ZAVALA

Evolving storefronts over the past two decades reflect changes to the city's economy and demographics with the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic exacerbating trends.

Different from large brand name stores, mom-and-pop shops provide neighborhoods with local character, anchoring communities. How prepared are they to sustain the pandemic's impacts?

Three local store owners share their experiences below. Nick Moukas of Jahn's Diner, George Spetsieris of Ultima Florals, and Maria Zapata, of Rincón de los Antiques, were selected based on their businesses fitting essential and non-essential categories. While American diners are disappearing, Jahn's remains a local staple, serving as a regular meeting place and offering a broad, reasonably priced menu. It was deemed essential during the pandemic. Ultima Florals marks special occasions and is considered a non-essential luxury business despite selling living "products" for expressing feelings like sympathy and gratitude felt profusely throughout the pandemic. Antiques and household items represent more general retail stock selling irregularly. All three places provide distinct services to the community.

Jahn's Diner: 81-04 37th Avenue

For some, growing up in the outer boroughs means memories of Jahn's Ice Cream Shop from 25 locations throughout Queens, Brooklyn, and Nassau. Jahn's is known for its ice cream and as a family restaurant owned by the Moukas family for the last 52 years. Previously owned by their father who went from waiter to owner from 1960 to 1970, Nick and Peter Moukas grew up helping their dad, taking over management in 1995. Jahn's attracts media attention considering they are a success story among ice cream shops and diners as the last shop standing of a chain unable to survive cultural changes and as a family business with a long history in the neighborhood. Loved for their free birthday ice cream, weekend brunches, and nostalgia associated with its



Nick Moukas, co-owner of Jahn's, a 70-year-old neighborhood institution

1940s Tiffany-style lamps and luncheonette counter, on the morning of my visit, regular diners steadily trickled in while I talked to Nick Moukas. He made time between settling bills and welcoming everyone, filling in for his hostess who was out. With only 75% of staff back this summer, they are still short-handed but increasingly rebounding while working shorter hours. "Everyone's hanging in there, and that's all you can do," is how Mr. Moukas puts it.

The pandemic hit businesses in different ways. At Jahn's, staff was laid off, Nick and his family fell ill, and financial losses were substantial. The Moukases relied on Paycheck Protection Programs, or PPP loans, since qualifying for other federal programs was not possible considering these target special populations like veterans, minority groups, and businesses with smaller budgets. Mr. Moukas notes that federal grant programs ran out in June and various businesses were unable to qualify for assistance. Places like Jahn's must apply for loans and later for loan forgiveness, which can range in savings depending on what is deemed forgivable. "Recovery has been hit or miss," he says. Some businesses have been able to enhance their income by adding outdoor eating, but the eat-in culture of diners has meant that limited seating, outdoor space, and take-out have not resulted

in returning income to pre-pandemic levels. Additionally, Nick Moukas says, "It's a different dynamic. Quite a few people have moved from the neighborhood."

Thankfully, Jahn's enjoys the support of regular diners and helpful neighbors like Ultima Florals and NYC Food Mart which provide extended outdoor space. But customers must first regain confidence and return. Jahn's block alone has experienced several losses: the owners of Bakery La Casa de los Antojitos and Servientrega (across the Avenue), and a friendly delivery person from the Colombian steakhouse nearby, all passed away from COVID-19. The neighborhood was hit hard, and recovery efforts are unfolding in disparate ways.

Ultima Florals: 81-02 37th Avenue

Born in the Lower East Side and raised in Astoria, George Spetsieris owns one of the few flower shops in the neighborhood and has been in the flower business for over three decades. Beginning his training in the shop of a childhood friend, they went into business together, expanding from Astoria to the current location in Jackson Heights in 1988. What was a ladies' dress shop, became Ultima Florals and has remained so, despite the fluctuating market for flowers—which even before the pandemic was erratic. Mr. Spetsieris has

“Tracking the Recovery Of Our Small Businesses” continued

been sole owner of Ultima Florals since the mid-1990s, working well with other neighborhood flower shops before their ultimate closures, leaving only a store on Northern Boulevard with which Mr. Spetsieris still remains friendly. He says of the neighborhood, “Jackson Heights has been great to me. I have a very loyal clientele”. This has enabled his business to support him and his family, as well as that of his long-time employees, one of whom has been working for him since the store opened.

When non-essential businesses closed last year, Ultima Florals was among them. In the midst of so much death, especially in Jackson Heights, a flower shop could hardly be deemed non-essential. “‘Essential’ is a relative term”, says Mr. Spetsieris. This closure represented a conspicuous neighborhood absence during difficult times. Deaths and celebrations delayed by the pandemic are commemorated with flowers, but these remain in low supply. With farmers producing less products following massive losses in the spring of 2020, this year’s planting season has meant diminished availability of different flower varieties. This, preceded by event cancellations, coupled with inhibited movement of goods and people, have amounted to growing difficulties for the flower sector hitting Ultima Florals hard. Payment protection aid has allowed Mr. Spetsieris to pay his employees, after an extended period of unemployment and wage-loss.



George Spetsieris, owner of Ultima Florals, based in JH for over 30 years

Flowers voice feelings in ways that words sometimes cannot, helping express complicated emotions sparked by extraordinary times. Things are improving for Ultima Florals; they are doing better now than earlier this year. Mr. Spetsieris’ innate optimism is reflected in his tone and outlook as he keeps working overtime to get Ultima Florals back on track.

Rincón de los Antiques: 83-05 37th Avenue

Rincón de los Antiques in some ways reflects Jackson Heights’ idiosyncrasies. A quirky medley of services and artifacts, this narrow outlet is home to three businesses: the antiques store giving the shop its name, a money transfer service called Ria Envíos de Dinero located in the back, and a jewelry repair station by the store’s entryway. Maria Zapata is the head of this motley group. A Colombian immigrant who raised her three children alone in New York City, Ms. Zapata sings and works as a cleaning person to keep her store and family afloat. She has experienced hardships, including being swindled for thousands of dollars for an album never produced. Despite her

heartbreaks, she shrugs and affirms that she must keep working. This attitude keeps her store going—that, and her partner shopkeepers. She says in Spanish about her business model: “Hay que compartir [We must

all share]”. Her ability to share room and expenses allowed her take over the lease from the previous owner who helped her open her own stand in the corner of his business before going into credit card debt, leaving the locale to her.

Ms. Zapata enjoys offering things of interest to residents, saying that people need to have a place to look around and find attractive items. Her inventory is eclectic. The jewelry repair station was very busy at the time of my visit despite repair shops going nearly extinct



Maria Zapata, head of the antiques, jewelry repair and money transfer shop

while needs for mending skills grow during unstable times. Being non-essential businesses, both the jewelry restoration and antiques shop closed during the pandemic while the money transfer station continued operating as immigrant workers sent remittances home to sustain extended family abroad during a critical period. As Ms. Zapata puts it, “With God’s blessings, one can help one’s family”. She continues to struggle to keep her business going. Asked about what the community can do to help, she says with a slight laugh: “Come by and shop here!” She also accepts donated items in good condition. Her music is accessible on YouTube under “Celmira Zapata”.

Businesses are doing all they can, but more investments in shops employing our neighbors and contributing to neighborhood life is vital. The city has spent \$1.1 million on advertisements encouraging all New Yorkers to shop locally, a message with special resonance here.

As Mr. Spetsieris says of the importance of remaining flexible during hard times, “Flexibility is crucial to life. If you don’t bend, you break”. We have all been bending in different ways during this pandemic and supporting each other can help us keep from breaking.

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OUR URBAN ECOSYSTEM

This is the first installment of what will be an ongoing series on the impact of urban gardening and landscaping practices on city wildlife and open spaces

Gardening for Humans and Others

BY MELISSA ZAVALA

Earlier this year, neighbor and former editor of *Views*, Lila Stromer, shared a note of warning for gardeners circulating on the internet. The warning highlighted the dangers of the plant commonly referred to as heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*) on cedar waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*). With these birds being voracious berry eaters of native flora like wild cherries, junipers, and others, a winter-fruiting shrub like heavenly bamboo represents an attractive new food source. Unaccustomed to this introduced species, these birds are unable to digest the plant's berries which contain high levels of cyanide. Autopsies of dead birds show undigested fruits in birds' intestinal tracts, with high levels of cyanide causing hemorrhaging and swift deaths. Can the plant's effects be curtailed? Some gardeners recommend cutting all berry clusters. Will this prevent their possible spread into wilder places? Exotic organisms take advantage of new ranges, ending up in areas well beyond the home gardens where they are originally introduced. In the case of heavenly bamboo planted around the neighborhood (there are several on my block alone) and with few cedar waxwings around, the plant may not be harmful to birds but can still proliferate.

Gardeners are drawn to plant species based on cultural tastes for certain charming elements. Species from distant environments offer new color palettes, fascinating morphological features, alternating seasonal displays (like fruiting when other plants are dormant), and more. Plants adapted to very different environments represent glamorous substitutes to native wildflowers and plants often deemed nuisances (like dandelions



in lawns) or simply less than attractive (like naturalized plantains). But what do aesthetic benefits mean for our regional ecosystems? What kind of criteria can we set up to continue the beneficial effects of gardening in the city?

What are your thoughts? Write to us and let us know if you have plant questions, would like to contribute to discussions about plants and gardening practices, as well as ecosystem services around the city!

Email us at info@jhb.org or write us by mail at **JHBG, PO Box 720253, Jackson Heights, NY 11372.**

IN MEMORIAM: Peter Magnani, a Force for Change in Queens

BY PATRICIA AUSPOS

Peter Magnani, dedicated public servant who worked to improve the wellbeing and physical environment of Jackson Heights and many other neighborhoods in Queens, died on June 23, 2021. He was 82.

Residents who never had the good fortune to know Peter may not fully appreciate the critical role he played in our community and borough.

An architect and city planner, and lifelong resident of Queens, Peter served as director of the Queens Office of City

Planning in the 1980s. He developed a plan for mixed zoning in Long Island City, preserving public use of the waterfront. In 1986, Clare Shulman named him Deputy Borough President for Queens. He successfully advocated for restoring and planting trees on the median strip along 34th Avenue between 69th St and Junction Boulevard (the original median was removed in the 1960s). He also oversaw



the development of Queens West waterfront and coordinated capital development for the new Queens Hospital Center, the Flushing Meadows/Corona Park swimming pool and ice rink, and the Queens Hall of Science addition.

In 2002, Peter became Director of Capital Program Management for the Queensborough Public Library, initiating an expansion period for new

branch libraries, including plans for the innovative Hunters Point library.

Peter was also a key force in the Towers Co-op, where he lived for nearly 53 years. In the 1970s, he helped tenants organize to purchase the property and convert it from a badly deteriorated rental building into a self-managed cooperative. His legacy touches us all.

He is survived by his wife, Dorothy, and children, Kirsten and Ian. Donations in Peter's memory can be made to JHBG.

THE MAGIC OF COMPOSTING: Exceptional Volunteer Viet Dinh Explains All

BY ASHLEY CRUCE

Viet Dinh started working with us during the pandemic last Fall. He is 19 years old and lives in Elmhurst. A student at Hunter College, Viet majors in computer science with a concentration in bioinformatics. Recruited by his friend, Elva—another exceptional volunteer!—he has enlisted a helper himself! Our volunteers are truly invaluable in helping us keep up with increases in food scraps since re-opening in July 2020. Here is what Viet has to say. . .



bins and bags sometimes feels like opening a green Taco Bell toilet, but that's an indicator to stuff more leaves and sawdust. The experience is great, and the environment makes everything much easier.

AC: What have you learned about composting that surprises/ed you?

VD: Learning that a good ratio between browns [i.e., leaves, sawdust, twigs] and food [scraps] is necessary to create good, dry compost was the most surprising. I used to think

you just shove food into a hole and that's how compost is made, but that's not the case. I've been a food fan for a while, and I love watching people cook and talk about food science. Creating compost is similar to that. Mixing the right ratio of organic material is like using ingredients in cooking processes like baking, and that's been fun.

AC: How did you recruit your friend Damaris? I ask thinking of how Elva recruited you!

VD: I met Damaris through Elva. Composting has been a great way to meet up, volunteer together and learn about creating a healthier Earth. Damaris enjoys composting as much as I do. According to her, "Getting involved with composting has really taught me more about the process for developing a more sustainable attitude about food waste, reconsidering what can be recycled". She is a major help ... her dedication to composting makes her an awesome volunteer.

Much like other compelling environmental work, composting is contagious, and volunteers bring not only energy, but also their friends.

To volunteer, email jhscraps@jhbg.org.

AC: What do you like best about volunteering at JH-SCRAPS?

VD: The best thing about volunteering at JH-SCRAPS is getting to see the compost making process. My favorite thing is filling up the bins with piles of scraps that look like food, leaves and sawdust, and coming the next week to find the bins all brown and decomposed. It's like opening a time capsule every time. I never get to see the progression of food becoming the half-finished compost I see. It's almost like magic, but it's actually just science mostly due in part to bacteria, and sometimes little and fat worms.

AC: What do you find most challenging about volunteering at JH-SCRAPS?

VD: The hardest thing about [working at] JH-SCRAPS is keeping the area clean. It seems like no matter how frequently we detrash the sidewalk and brush, there's a trash hurricane that comes through ... but I know eventually the street will be cleaner than we ever imagined. As for composting, there isn't really much that is hard. Opening the

JH-SCRAPS to Expand Composting Efforts

BY LENNY OLSSON

JH-SCRAPS is proud to announce a new construction project that will enhance our ability to locally compost our neighborhood's food scraps. A new bin similar to the one constructed last year replacing our original one is currently in the planning stages. This project is made possible thanks to a grant awarded to us by the Citizens Committee of New York City (CCNYC).

With the double whammy of a global pandemic that shut down New York City for months and the budget crunch that forced the New York City Department of Sanitation to scale back funding for existing composting efforts like that at our local Greenmarket on Sundays, residents have been dropping off their scraps with us in record numbers since we reopened last July. Even with the eventual return of the drop off stand at the Farmers Market, neighbors have continued to utilize our operation in greater numbers than before the 2020 shutdown. Building a new bin will allow us to keep more of our scraps on site.

One of the benefits of compost is its ability to store water for later use by plants. With so much rain this year, especially in July, what benefits plants has hampered our ability to sift the finished compost. Without continuously sifting, our pile grows and leaves us with nowhere to put the newly finished compost to dry. An additional bin will allow us to continue to absorb the steady stream of scraps and compost it on site. This project will give us six bins of one cubic yard as well as the four Earth Machines. We are grateful to CCNYC for covering the costs of this project.

IN MEMORIAM: Janet M. Kelly - Celebrating A Life, My Memories of Janet

BY SEAN WESTLEY

In the early 1990's, my dad was in a difficult place; he wasn't good at being single. So, he did what everyone does: bought himself a waterbed and joined the Single Parents Action Network (SPAN). He needed a teammate, cheerleader, travel partner, LGBT rights activist, theater buff, and importantly, someone who saw the romance in living with his mom in Jackson Heights. Janet was a perfect complement. They were the best thing to happen to each other.

Whether dealing with Parkinson's, memory loss, or financial problems, Janet took things on, making the necessary sacrifices to keep going. She did everything with the belief that eventually things fall into place and the right path shows itself, which certainly happened for Daddy and Janet. For 29 years, they were attached at the hip.

I'll always remember Janet spinning around the dancefloor to Motown, so young and happy on her wedding day. I also remember how proud she was at her daughter Diana's wedding to Matt



at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden.

Janet was steady and reassuring when my wife and I were trying to have kids. When we spent seven weeks in the NICU, like clockwork, Janet was there with the kids on her chest. She then knitted caps and gloves for all the other preemies there.

Janet taught me to keep trying, keep showing up, and moving forward, to never give up, settle, or feel sorry for myself. I will always remember the Legendary Long Hugs from Janet from another planet.



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VIEWS FROM THE HEIGHTS – Fall 2021

ONGOING EVENTS

Saturdays, 11am-1 pm

JH-SCRAPS (composting)

69th St. & 35th Ave.

For info on what is compostable,
contact info@JHBG.org

Most Saturdays, 10 am

Tree LC

Meets at the NE corner of
80th St. & 37th Ave.

Schedule may vary and include
some Sundays. Check the
[JHBG Facebook page](#)
for complete information.

Saturdays 10 am

Clean and Green

For complete details,
go to www.jhbg.org.

Daily

JH-CREW dog run

69th St. between 34th & 35th Aves.

To join, go to www.jhbg.org
for application. Suggested
donation, \$25/year.

FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS:

Please join us or renew your membership (there are 2 ways):

Go to www.JHBG.org/donate and pay by credit card.

It's quick and easy! Mail a check with this form
for the membership level you select to:

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Membership includes a subscription to *Views from the Heights* and helps fund our numerous
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If you're interested in being contacted about any JHBG activities, please email
info@JHBG.org.