



The New York Times

Bronx Journal; Once a Hospital and Again an Anchor

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Published: April 30, 2000

From the outside, the old Morrisania Hospital in the Bronx looks much as it did 20, or 70, years ago: blond brick, lots of it, coating the neo-Renaissance facade of an 11-story building that takes up much of a square block.

But inside, there are no patients, or doctors, or nurses, no emergency room or maternity ward. What was the ambulance garage is a fitness center; where rabbits were once used for pregnancy tests, there is a community room; what was a waiting room is now a lobby, with a lunch kiosk, for a community economic development center.

After more than 20 years of sitting empty, the grand building on East 168th Street between Gerard and Walton Avenues in the southern Bronx is once again an institutional anchor for its neighborhood, much as the municipal hospital once was.

On one side, 132 apartments for low-income and formerly homeless families have been carved out. From the light-filled lobby to the arched windows and the 12-foot ceilings in some apartments, they retain the beauty of the original structure.

"The best apartment I've ever lived in," said Antonio Cortijo, 67, who moved to the apartment in 1997.

On the other side of the building is the Urban Horizons Center, which offers residents of the neighborhood an array of social services, from job training and child care to counseling. Many of the services are intended to help welfare recipients, including those who face the greatest difficulties moving into the work force.

The faces who come through the door are, of course, different from those who came through in the hospital's early years. When it was built in 1926, Morrisania Hospital served a population of mostly second-generation immigrants, many of whom were Jewish, German or Irish, said Lloyd Ultan, the Bronx borough historian. The hospital, he said, saved his own life in the 1940's, when he had a severe asthma attack.

Over the years, the faces became mostly black and Puerto Rican, and poorer. Then the Bronx's well-catalogued troubles and the building of Co-op City drained the area around the hospital of much of its population. In 1976, a city facing fiscal crisis decided to close the hospital. There were protests, even a doctors' sit-in, to no avail. Morrisania Hospital was shut.

Nancy Biberman, president of the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, which runs Urban Horizons, led the effort for the building's rehabilitation, starting in the early 1990's. The redone building opened in 1997, after the organization received \$23 million in state, federal and private funds.

"Its closing was very symbolic in a very, very negative way," Ms. Biberman said. To make matters worse, the building stood empty for 20 years. It drew drug users and rats and dumpers, so that when Ms. Biberman first climbed under a fence to explore the building, the debris in the building was up to her chest.

"It was horrible," said Carla Baldelomar, 25, who has lived in the neighborhood for 12 years. "You didn't want to walk by here."

The light-colored exterior of the building helped keep the outside from becoming too forbidding. And now there is an interior to match: sconces and pilasters in the residential hallways, solid oak cabinets and ceramic tiles in apartment kitchens. And on the other side, there is an array of services offered by the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation.

There is an upscale catering business that trains the unemployed in preparing everything from canapes to marketing plans; a day care center; a program to train and license at-home child care providers; a fitness center; a computer center; family support and counseling services and job readiness programs. A new city school, the Rafael Hernandez Dual Language Magnet School, on the site of what was the hospital's laundry, opened last fall.

The activity within the walls, although full of promise, also shows how hard surviving poverty, let alone surmounting it, can be. Ms. Biberman's organization, which was founded to help low-income women, is committed to working with the hardest-to-place welfare recipients, and that requires fitting together support for every aspect of life.

In one classroom, students pepper Lizette Roman, their English-as-a-second-language teacher, with questions and complaints that their English class is scheduled at the same

time as their workfare requirements. For many of the adults in her class, most of whom are Dominican, language is the greatest barrier to entering the work force.

In a job-readiness class, Didria Brown helps a man who can barely read as he fills out a job application, showing him what to write when he sees "MI" or "SSN."

Numerical illiteracy is a problem as well, particularly for students looking for jobs in the food-service industry. Many have sixth- or eighth-grade math skills at best, yet cooking relies on numbers: calculating portions for a dinner of four, or knowing how many people a pound of asparagus could serve. The students take basic math as part of orientation.

The catering business, Urban Horizons Food Company, which is overseen by two former pastry chefs from Lespinasse, primarily serves Manhattan businesses and organizations. Ms. Biberman is practical: the Bronx, she says, has always been a bedroom community. People must be trained to go to jobs, not wait for them to materialize close to home.

So Deborah Horne, who lives a few blocks from Yankee Stadium, will probably commute to work in the food business.

She is well prepared, having learned to saute, to handle raw meat with sanitary care, to glaze vegetables to a shine, to sear tuna, not just scoop it from a can, and to run the lunch kiosk in the lobby.

Ms. Horne said that when she came to the center as a public assistance recipient last year, and heard that it offered a free culinary training program, "I just stood and held onto the counter. You don't get culinary for free," she said.

After six months in the program, she has gained skills but lost weight -- almost 40 pounds, thanks to classes in the fitness center required by the training program.

"People like us, we don't go to gyms; we can't afford gyms," Ms. Horne said.

But she can afford this one. Already, more than 400 residents of the neighborhood have joined her.