

Delaware Avenue resurgent

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A communal effort reclaims this decaying neighborhood

By **PAUL GRONDAHL**, Staff writer

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Albany

Not so long ago, Delaware Avenue was being written off.

The once-proud, working-class neighborhood of Irish and Italian immigrants who had moved "uptown" from the melting pot of the South End during the early part of the 20th century had begun a long, slow slide into urban decay.

It was known as "a neighborhood in transition," a polite way of saying it had grown sketchy and undesirable. Homeowners and merchants were fleeing an area marked by empty storefronts, rising street crime, rundown rental properties and a general pessimism.

And then, about two years ago, ordinary people did something extraordinary. They decided to reclaim their neighborhood.

"We've always had some of the same challenges as other neighborhoods in the city, but we've got a lot of committed people and true neighborhood pride," said Louise McNeilly, who heads the Delaware Area Neighborhood Association, or DANA. "It's a story of human capital."

Today, on Delaware Avenue, old-guard Irish and Italian homeowners who didn't move to the suburbs are teaming up with a diverse group of people of color including African-Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, Asians and newly arrived Burmese and Iraqi immigrants. The ethnic shift is found in the English-Spanish dual language program at Delaware Community School, the only program of its kind in the Northeast.

"I just like this neighborhood. It's pleasant, people are friendly and it's so handy for everything," said Jan Van Alstyne, who has lived in the neighborhood for more than 40 years and belongs to St. James Church.

Although still a work in progress, positive signs abound along the mile-long stretch from Delaware Avenue to the

city line at the Normanskill bridge that a renaissance is under way.

Despite the temporary inconvenience that comes with heavy construction equipment and traffic delays, the most obvious example of Delaware Avenue's comeback is an ongoing road rehabilitation project expected to be completed at the end of the summer. Paid for with \$14.9 million in federal stimulus funds, the roadway is being repaved, trees planted, granite curbs and wider sidewalks installed and street lamps with LED lights put in. Long-standing businesses including Spectrum 8 Theatres and Cardona's Market have made multimillion-dollar investments. Several new shops have opened. A beat cop walks Delaware Avenue and works closely with a newly formed neighborhood walk-and-watch group. A new library branch opened in January. A merchants' group formed one year ago and is working cooperatively with a revitalized neighborhood association.

"There's a definite optimism you can feel on Delaware Avenue," said Joyce Keenan, who has lived on the avenue for more than 70 years.

"I remember its beauty and grandeur when I was a young girl. I was here when it had declined and I can honestly say I'm seeing the beginning of a renaissance." Keenan's family owns Keenan Funeral Home on Delaware Avenue as well as several rental properties. She also is a board member and a driving force behind DANA.

The 77-year-old retired art teacher can recall when trolleys ran along what was known as the Delaware Turnpike and the last of the family farms gave way to clusters of two-family residences and commercial buildings. Keenan has recently rolled up her sleeves alongside neighbors young enough to be her grandchildren and helped create a friendship garden, organized a farmers market, planted 250 trees and restored a blacksmith's forge at the city's Normanskill Farm.

Fueling the upsurge is a newly active and engaged Delaware Avenue merchants group headed by Charles George, owner of Davey Jones Locker, a fish store and art gallery. He lives nearby on Whitehall Road.

"I was walking back and forth to work, getting tired of the problems I was seeing and just decided that we can do better than this," George recalled. He and David Lolik, a retired high school English teacher and Twiller Street homeowner, signed up business owners who pay \$100 or \$200 dues, depending on their size. So far, 39 of 44 businesses are on board.

George, who grew up in Wabash, Ind., is an evangelist for Delaware Avenue who staked his claim 13 years ago by purchasing the former North River Book Shop. "Our diversity and our eclectic businesses are what make us strong," he said.

Many praised the addition of Officer Kevin Singh, who began walking the beat 11 months ago and now seems to

be on a first-name basis with most everyone.

"What I've found is that there are a lot of good people here on Delaware Avenue and it's a strong neighborhood," said Singh, a 16-year veteran of the force. The native of Guyana immigrated to the Bronx when he was 10 and then to Clifton Park in 1986 with his family at 16. He lived in an apartment on Delaware Avenue in the early 1990s.

"I get to know the people walking the beat," he said. "They've come to trust me. They tell me things so I can step in and deal with a problem before it becomes a crime."

A project that transformed the neighborhood is the new Delaware Avenue branch library, which replaced a dingy space in a strip mall. The multimillion-dollar renovation transformed the former Chicorelli Funeral Home into a bright and airy Arts and Crafts-inspired space of oak furnishings and earth tones.

The library nearly tripled the square footage, greatly expanded the collection, increased the number of computers, added a large after-hours community meeting room and three private study rooms. In just four months, its circulation and number of patrons have doubled, said branch librarian Rebecca Lubin. "It's been remarkable the number of people we're seeing and how we've become a true community center," she said.

"I've seen Delaware Avenue go through many transitions and this is the best it's ever been," said Keith Pickard, a partner in Spectrum 8 Theatres. Over the past two decades, they have expanded and added screens, improved parking lots and created the Ultraviolet Cafe adjoining the theater. Spectrum partners Scott Meyer and Annette Nanes teamed with chef Ric Orlando to open New World Bistro Bar a few doors away.

The Spectrum, a regional destination, draws 5,000 people a week, and has helped boost new businesses along Delaware Avenue.

"Before, business owners were trying to leave Delaware Avenue and now they're saying, 'Let's go to Delaware Avenue,' " said Rob Cardona, 33, a third-generation family member running Cardona's Market, a deli and Italian specialty store founded in 1945. He grew up on Delaware Avenue.

His family made a \$1 million investment to expand and upgrade in 2005 that doubled the space and caused a sharp uptick in business for the shop's 12 employees. "We had opportunities to move to Stuyvesant Plaza and other locations, but we decided to stay on Delaware Avenue and we're very glad we did," Cardona said.

New businesses that have opened in the past year or two include Lauren's House of Hot Dogs, Burger Centric, Emack & Bolio's ice cream, Wine 'N Diner restaurant, Able Bakers, Cisse's Shoe Fetish and Save a Lot grocery store.

"I'm so excited about everything that's going on here," said Emack & Bolio's owner Amy Riddell, who was a guidance counselor at Voorheesville High School for 18 years. She teamed with her former art teacher, Christine Shea, a part-time nurse, who runs an adjoining mosaic shop. Their businesses are adjacent to an outdoor seating area for eating and music performances. Riddell long envisioned such a complex.

"This is the best move I ever made," Shea said. "It all fell into place because of Amy's vision."

Shea's dazzling mosaics are made up of a thousand shards of colorful glass, artfully arranged. Up close, they are a bright jumble. Step back a few paces, and the beauty of the creation is revealed.

That's an apt metaphor for Delaware Avenue, which is being painstakingly restored, one small piece at a time.

Paul Grondahl can be reached at 454-5623 or by e-mail at pgrondahl@timesunion.com.

To view a video of Delaware Avenue, go to <http://www.timesunion.com>

DELAWARE AVENUE NEIGHBORHOOD (12209) STATISTICS

Population: 10,100

Area: 1.8 square miles

Median age: 36.28

College graduates: 44%

White-collar workers: 81%

Avg. household income: \$48,645

Own homes or condos: 4,423

Apartment units: 1,743

Median house value: \$169,497

Avg. household size: 2.3 people

Source: Delaware Ave. Merchants Group/U.S. Census