

## **Allen and Pike Street Interviews**

Interviews gathered as part of Take Back Your Park Day:

A Community Input event for the Allen & Pike Street Pedestrian Mall Visioning and Redesign

**Amy Milford**

**70 Hester Street**

**Between Allen St & Orchard St**

I've lived in the neighborhood for 20 years...I'm the deputy director of the museum at Eldridge Street. The museum uses the space for all kinds of educational and cultural purposes to use history to teach people about life 100 years ago and why that's important and meaningful today.

I live a half a block from the Allen street mall so I'm constantly crossing the Allen street mall, but I can't say that I actually use them. No, I would never spend time there. I've walked through them and you know I've walked across them. I've used them to walk to get to a place but I haven't, you know, use them to sit and to enjoy in anyway.

There were benches at one point, and I think many of them were then removed, but it's really just not an appealing place to sit. There's traffic going by and the benches were missing planks and so they weren't really an appealing place to stop.

Memories related to the mall... I've been here by the malls only for ten years so they don't feel so much like memories, but really just walking by and seeing people who were using them you know, not many memories no...

A little background about why my background connected to the lower east side... just so you know... my grandmother grew up on the lower east side she grew up on attorney street actually and then my father then, they moved out to Williamsburg, and then my father became an attorney and moved to the upper east side. And I returned to the lower east side, a little over 20 years ago much to his unhappiness.

But , I love the neighborhood, always did, I always found it incredibly vibrant and incredibly full of cultural and intellectual life, and that is what attracted me to the neighborhood when I returned. And for me it's also got in an incredible history and an incredible immigrant history, and a continuing immigrant life. And so in terms of what I feel is so unique about the lower east side is it's very layered, diverse, history with many different kind of communities be they ethnic cultural and economic you have just an incredible range of communities and people who are passing each other as they walk in the street and I find that incredibly energizing. so that's what I love about the lower east side/chinatown/east village it's got a lot of names.

When I moved back to the neighborhood the area I was on was not the safest and there was a definitely lot of drug use in the neighborhood and I don't think any parent would want their daughter living in that sort of neighborhood . at the same time the neighborhood felt exciting to me and there was a lot of cultural life but he didn't see that he focused on the negative.

I'm a member of a coalition that is trying to get the area landmarked. And it's very very important for me as someone who lives in the neighborhood and who works for a historic preservation institution that the layers are preserved that while the neighborhood is evolving and new communities are coming that, and I'm not just talking about the ethnic or cultural communities, but new sort of communities of new affluent people are coming in and building a very different type of building than we are used to seeing in the neighborhood and while that's happening, I don't think we should put a stop to that, but while that's happening that some architectural

character is preserved and certainly that there is housing affordable housing and options for the diverse immigrant groups of the neighborhood. So in terms of what I'd like to see preserved, well I work for an national historic landmark and I worked hard to ensure that that was preserved so I would like to see that those buildings and even those types of building, like those tenements that you see, is preserved and that when you walk in this neighborhood you know a little bit about the history, if you look around you you understand a little bit about the kinds of places and institutions that are important to an immigrant community from 150 years ago to the immigrants of today. And I think the name avenue of the immigrants is very much a tribute to the immigrants who lived here and continue to live here and it makes sense to me .

Well every neighborhood in this city is becoming more affluent. So in every part of this city I think you're seeing rising rents and you're seeing people who have a higher income than maybe previously lived in the neighborhood and that can be a good thing, it can bring in better services for the neighborhood and more markets, but it can also make it prohibitively expensive for people who traditionally lived in the neighborhood to be there. So it's tricky. I am a middle class mother of two and some may say I'm part of that movement into the neighborhood and I benefit by it but it would be tremendously sad I think if this neighborhood were to lose its viability as a place where new comers to America can live. so I think for me it's important that we preserve and try to establish more middle and lower income housing opportunities and, not related to Allen street malls so much but in answer to your question.

The first thing I would like to see with the malls and really the most important is more beautiful green and just a more beautiful mall and it might be nice to see that some of the malls or all of them because now it is such a Chinese neighborhood, if there was some way to incorporate some sort of designs or garden designs that sort of pay tribute or sort of reference that community. It would be interesting actually, and I'm just sort of riffing, that given the diversity of communities that are here that if each mall could sort of reference each community, maybe they all should have a uniform look but certainly greenery and beauty and a place of refuge amidst what is a very busy area and Allen street certainly if even if the malls are made beautiful is a place that traffic runs by but if there was some way to make them more palatable if there were places where that we're missing planks where people could sit and enjoy the malls that would be an incredible step forward

If there was one thing I could change it would be that there was more green and plantings in the Allen street malls

What would be nice to happen in the malls if there truly was and it seems that there is a real community dialogue in terms of the way that planning is going for them but if that continued so that this is an artistically rich neighborhood so that there was some kind of way that artists and other creative people in the neighborhood could contribute to those malls alongside all of the beautiful plantings that I'm sure will be put in place. But if there was a way that the community could be involved with those malls and could help create artistic projects for them even programming within the malls kids programming like what's going on today, you have art projects that are taking place, it's a little bit tricky because it's a traffic area, but to beautify it and make sure that the beautifying connects with the neighborhood and the community both the immigrant community and the artistic community that lives along the mall.

**Mary Spink**  
**195 East 2<sup>nd</sup> St**  
**Between Ave A & Ave B**

I live on the lower east side. What I refer to as the lower east side but now part of it is referred to as the east village.

I've lived at 195 for eleven years and I've lived in the neighborhood for roughly 43 years and I did a tally very recently and added up that I have lived at roughly 24 different apartments in that 43 years in order to remain in my neighborhood

I am the executive director of the lower east side people's mutual housing association, I am also the director and the controller. My organization started out of a fight that the community began back in the 80's to try save the city property that had become vacant and the land that was vacant from auction. It took thirteen years and eventually a plan was wrangled out which came to be known as the cross subsidy plan. The cross subsidy plan came out of members of the community board. Community board number three. There were problems with members of the community one that literally lived below Houston street where this plan was concerned and they were concerned about low income housing etc. they really didn't like the idea of rentals and they came up with a compromise and the compromise was that there would be a lead organization that would be formed. It would be mutual housing and that organization would spearhead the renovation of the existing buildings that become the organization that I now run and it was incorporated in 1990. The first 21 buildings which were really all that they wound up with at the time were done finished and occupied by 1995. There were many ups and downs. I was a member of the board for quite some time. I watched the ups and downs, didn't have a tremendous control of the ups and downs and I worked for a living at the time at a for profit market real estate company. And I started at the bottom as a superintendent and I had worked my way up. I got a telephone call one day from the president of the board saying that they had just lost the executive director and they were doing a hiring campaign and they wanted to hire me as the director of housing management, not the executive director. I came I interviewed for the job, and they hired me in 15 minutes and I went to work. I was thoroughly shocked and dismayed my first couple days at work because as a board member you think you have a clue as to what's transpiring at an agency or an organization and I realized that I didn't and that no one did. It was very difficult the beginning the job, within ten months they fired the executive director they had hired because all he was doing was worsening the situation from where it had been when they hired him. At that point the agency was about to go out of business. They were bankrupt, there was no money and they were involved in a corporation with the lower east side people federal credit union and an organization called it's time. It's time had no money, housing had been paying to support that, the housing organization had been paying 20% of expenses for the credit union. in order to save the housing organization we more or less had to pull back and tighten our belt and at the time no one would have taken this job if they had paid them to take the job because it seemed to be a job that was not going to work, that couldn't be done. And I was there. I believed in it, and I took the job, and since then we have thrived, we have continued to develop new housing in the community and that is sort of it in a nut shell.

Personally, I don't really use the malls. I don't know many people who do, they're dirt they're ugly, with all of the traffic and smoke etc. exhaust, they are not a pretty place to spend some time. In fact they have not been for a good portion of their existence.

There's no reason to use them at this point. I think they're a little dangerous. Concrete is broken. Different levels. They are easily trip hazards. Definitely not something that I would use.

I have a lot of bad unfortunately I have a lot of bad experiences where the malls are concerned, during the heavy drug use down there the malls were more or less like the needle park and basically that's all you'd find on the malls the addicts and paraphernalia left over it wasn't a

place where you wanted anyone near. Especially children. But I have memories of people actually trying to plant and add some greenery to the malls. And I think it was basically out of desperation because they were living in apartments they had no place to do that. That's basically the memory I try to keep in mind.

I'm amazed sometimes how long I've lived in this neighborhood. What brought me to the neighborhood was the same reasons that has brought thousands of people. It was freedoms a sense of freedom you could more or less be yourself whoever that self was going to be and it could be anywhere. And then of course at the time that I came here it was also inexpensive housing. And it was just so alive. The neighborhood was so vibrant. So many different nationalities so much going on. The street life was amazing and I have loved the street life forever I fought I was losing the flavor of what we have it's something that I feel very strongly about. I continue to fight. And I unfortunately find myself fighting both sides. Maybe because I'm a little older. Certain parts of reality seep into me where change happens. There are certain things that you don't really have control over, so you have to try to compromise. I do not want my sense of community to disappear. I want that to stay forever and the only way that you can be sure that you are going to maintain some semblance of that is that you have to have community minded people and people have to care about the things that engender community that bring people out into the streets. You have to be concerned about parks and bike path. Places for children so that generations continue and people don't just get lost in apartment buildings and that's why the work on the mall interests me as well.

Good and bad. Some of the bad of course has been the rampant development. But then I can go to the other side and talk about the good part of that was a community banding together and fighting for re-zoning to try to make sure that some of what was out of our hands will not happen again. You should not have 23 story mega towers on a mid block not an avenue where you have all this beautiful, people hate it when we talk about architecture, I mean some people do, because they are very concerned about the housing aspect, I'm concerned about housing, and I like to build housing that fits in a community, but I'm concerned about what keeps it vibrant which is street life, and if you don't have street life and you don't have people out and about shopping in stores, etc. and every building is huge and has it's entrance right there at the front where people can come and go and care less about what's happening on the street it takes away what we've literally had for years which is a lot of street life, and that's some of the good and bad.

We're losing our commercial aspect, our small mom and pop stores our small businesses, the ability for someone to decide they have an idea or they want to open a shop. They used to be able to do that, it's very difficult to do now because of the rents. I'm hoping there is a movement going on now to discuss formula retail zoning which hopefully can keep the area from being chain driven and keep some semblance of community. The diversity more or less depends on all of this. It's unfortunately a lot of times driven by money, but we have to engage everyone. because when I talked about change, engage the people who have moved down here to live in apartment that are \$4,000 a month, engage the people that buy co-ops that cost 2 million dollars. They are not all terrible ogre. They are human beings. A lot of them have families and have children and moved down here for a reason. So engage them so they understand that the reason they moved down here can disappear. That's the good that I think has happened along with the bad.

Well the avenue of the immigrant means a lot to me because technically we are all immigrants on one level or another. Even if we're third generation usually our parents came from somewhere. They're immigrants; they weren't born in New York. We have, even with the housing shortage and even with the expense we have immigrants moving to this neighborhood consistently and this neighborhood was basically built by immigrants. By eastern Europeans.

Irish, Germans, the Jewish community down here that thrived for years and years that has hung on by the skin of its teeth. It goes to what I spoke about before as far as community because community to me, to be vibrant, is a little bit of everything. I hate the fact that you talk to a child today and they don't have an idea of history and history should really include everything. You should be very aware of where you live and where it came from and what helped build it and it shouldn't disappear. There are part so f this neighborhood were one of the ten most endangered sites in terms of preserving immigrant heritage and I think we all need to fight to keep what we can of that because it integrates who we are and it keeps community. And as far as the malls I think the malls need to speak to in one sense the history but they also have to speak to the change and who we are and what's here now and they need to reflect all the nationalities that are going to use it and all the age groups that are going to use it. It can't just be a place for people to sit on a bench. I hate that.

Oh boy, ways to use the malls, I can go really far afield out there in la la land and then I can get back down to earth. Going really far afield since all the housing I build is energy efficient and sustainable and I am a big proponent, have been before most people were, to saving the planet I think about wouldn't it be wonderful if there was a way to incorporate some kind of fast transit on allen so that all of the trucks and cars disappeared and then you would actually have not just a mall but you would have a huge open space for children for merchants it would be wonderful. I don't think at this point the city is going to opt for rapid transit, you know, above ground, on Allen street. But you never know. Some things that are little more down to earth, I've talked to people about what the children do. I think we need a skateboard park. So we need a skate park down by the river. People tend to go closer to home, and even if they don't, it's a nice idea to think that your kids are two blocks away as opposed to them having to go twenty block to do what it is they want to do, to play ball to skateboard. I love to se part of it be a skateboard park. I would love to see them connect it. Similar to where you go from the east river all of the housing there you have to go over the FDR to the par and you have to walk over. If you're not gonna do rapid transit and you're not gonna close it off then all of the malls should be connected and there should be a way to walk to each one. I think the idea of gardening and having open space for people to garden is a good one. The hard part with that is that we're not as far thinking as the Europeans where we can have bikes and park them all and someone can just grab a bike and go to the next spot the same thing can happen with gardens but if people gardened and grew food, what would protect it. I mean it's a sad state of affairs but if there was a way to do that it would be wonderful. And then to have spaces for common use. Not just benches there should be places just like they have in national parks where people can bbq. You have the bbq pits embedded in cement and you have tables not just chairs. It should be really people oriented all ages.

If I could pick one thing from all of my wonderful ideas and it was only one you would let me do then it would have to be family use. And the powers that be would probably love that because it is one of the cheapest ideas. Well how family use in my mind is having a place for people to bbq. Having tables as well as chairs so people can sit and eat. That they can come out of the small teeny apartments where they have no space and on a Saturday or a Sunday they can bbq and that there's a place for the kids to play and it means that yes you have a skateboard park and maybe that's three blocks away from the place where you are bbqing but you're out there and you're out with your family. And it's a pleasant space to be.

To add to my vision I think I got pretty wild already. I would love that no matter what gets dumped at the malls that we have definite bicycle paths and not just a green stripe. Bicycle paths as is being done on the west side so that bikers are protected and since you can't have rapid transit there would still have a place for cars and trucks. The avenue is wide enough to do this. I would like to see that.

**Rev. Deacon Edgar W. Hopper**  
**St Augustine Church**  
**290 Henry Street**  
**477 FDR Drive**

I've maintained a legal residence on the lower east side now for 52 years. Aside from my liturgical and pastoral duties at the church I'm the executive director of the St. Augustan's project which is an organization which is dedicated to the restoration and preservation of the two historic slave galleries at St. Augustus church. And for the last nine years or so I've been trying to lead that effort to raise that money to restore and preserve and lead tours of the site and currently working on an educational curriculum for the state of New York so that teachers who want to bring their students will have some materials to study before their visit and to use after their visit. It's an interesting project in that before I started I had no idea what a preservationist does. ...

Our relationship with the parks and green space came from Anne and the Hester Street Collaborative. It seems as though a couple years running, Anne brought students to take tours of our gallery space and here was one year where these students were doing art installations with street signs and things of that sort and so we got kind of interested in that particular project itself. I got involved in a group that was very much concerned with the way the mall was being developed and restored and I look at it from a different perspective than perhaps anyone else, my concern was, now as a historian, I say now, I was a business person, now I'm a card carrying member of the national trust for historic preservation but never the less I was interested in this particular phenomenon. You say lower east side, everyone thinks of the great immigration of the Jewish population, the Irish population, the Italian population. Hardly anybody recognizes the fact that the first non-indigenous persons here were African-Americans, and after that came Hispanics, and after that came a number Asians, when slave ships were banned from coming into New York harbor in 1827 they turned to they call the coolie trade and bringing a lot of Asian immigrants. And so the point that I've been working with the hypothesis is in order for immigrants in the middle late 19<sup>th</sup> century to move to the lower east side there had to be infrastructure in place in order for them to get from Ellis island to over here .and so somebody did that and so I was concerned with that lost part of our history the absence of any specific mention of those particular populations. So I've been involved in trying to uncover that research of that particular phenomenon. So when they started talking about the redevelopment of the mall I got concerned that the three populations I'm most concerned with African Americans Asians and Hispanics have some representation in the mall development itself as a continuation of the contribution to the whole character of that particular part of Manhattan

Well I've used it for a place of relaxation and reflection frankly. Because I just like the fact that I can walk a few blocks from my house and here's a place where you can restore yourself I like that, I also like that when I think about the historical aspect of the particular area of Allen street. The fact that Allen street just a little north of say grand around orchard was a notorious red light district. the first avenue el used to come all the way down that far and for years all the poor people in lower Manhattan they lived along side that el. I've seen photographs that show that children used to play on fire escapes of the tenements that were torn down to make it a wide mall, and they were maybe ten feet away from the whole train as it was going by and it was a very dark very dingy space. And the fact that now it's opened. That the tenements on the south side have all been taken away and the street has been widened so now there is a mall and there is a different opportunity. So there has been an amazing transformation, but what I'm

concerned about is gentrification, is upon us like a plague that this amazing transformation might become a transmogrification, it might be something we don't even know or recognize or seems to fit in with out life previously or presently.

I only have the verbal history. I run into people who say there was a time when Allen street was the dividing line between Asian populations and Hispanic populations. On the west side of Allen street that was china town on the east side of Allen street that was Hispanic land. And that the two groups, I heard people talk about their father's and their mother's were hesitant to cross that line . and now you look at it there is a sort of interaction. Everyone goes back and forth across it's a become a great melding of both those populations that were adjacent to the street. People hardly ever look at that as the impact of a street what does that mean and what did it mean. Well it meant a lot to the people who grew up there. It meant a lot to the people who lived alongside that el like the African American population reputedly lived in the basements of those tenements that were adjacent to the el. And so to see the street open now like a beautiful flower is truly magnificent.

What makes the neighborhood special to me is the fact that it's one of the really truly large melting pots in New York City. It's a as a neighborhood. You can come out on the street at almost any time at night and there are people. It's not like certain places in California where everyone's got a big steel object wrapped around them and they are driving down the freeway; here there are people. They are going to and fro they are going to the subways to their homes they are going to shop they are buying produce ad other good. It's an incredible United Nations sort of look to it. Everybody, that's what I really like about it, I like the heterogeneity of it to me that's precious. Very special.

Well you see it depends on who is leading the charge. I know I was there they day that Ruth unveiled the sign saying this is the avenue if the immigrants and from her point of view she was talking about the immigrants of the type that were residing in the tenement she calls the tenement museum. And from my point of view that excludes all the people who were living there before the tenements. An interesting thing about the church I go to now it was built in 1828 one of the founders of that church but the first tenement down here james p oley? so we have a connection to the this whole tenement phenomenon. But when you say avenue of the immigrants most everybody thinks European, today ad I think that's because at the height of the immigration, African Americans weren't counted and the Hispanics, there was little known about them but they were here. They were the labor folks nobody paid them any mind You say immigrant everybody think European so in my judgment that name has a sort of exclusionary aspect to it. I don't' know how you would fix that I don't know what you would call it. What name you would choose that would include everybody, I don't know. So I think the program has got to reflect that.

I think the majority of the change in the minds and the eyes of those of us who have been here for decades is negative. Negative from this point of view, I've been here 50 some odd years, my children cannot afford to live here. My mother lived here I live here, my children my grand children can not afford to live here. There are people living her now who are being marginalize, yet again, right out of the neighborhood and not able to afford it. The question of affordable housing is really on the minds of everybody. The character of the neighborhood has changed dramatically. Blue skyscrapers, hotels, and its amazing when you walk through there are restaurants that I can't afford to eat in. there are bars every 15 feet. So that has a lot to do with the how the character of the neighborhood changes I think that impacts in a rather negative way the young people who still here still going to school still seeing the same sort of hedonistic

activity going on every night all night and it doesn't have that same sort of family character it used to have it's just some high rent transient neighborhood.

Well the neighborhood needs that could be met. I think that first of all seating. That's gotta be a priority. Second of all the y have to be made secure to the point that senior citizens , of which there is a large number, feel comfortable and feel safe coming here. I understand there's gonna be vendors along here. The vendors have got to be vending things that are familiar to people, real men don't eat quiche, that kind of a thing. And as to whether or not they are going to focus in on that sort of a need or if they are going to focus in on a sort of upscale shi-shi kind of a things like you know ice cream is called gelato or something. The old days on the lower east side meant that you could get an egg cream. That was the refreshment of the day now a days you can only do that on certain days if there is a festival on the street, but in other words to make the mall conducive and receptive and comfortable for people of moderate means, that's really important. If the vendors are too upscale, too far out, too high priced, like some of these local boutique shops around here, it's gonna make people not want to go because it makes you feel insecure if you can't take the things that re being offered to you.

If I could fix one thing I think I would wish that the trees would grow faster. There is something about a tree that has been in the ground for a while that is an anchor. There's nothing worse that a neighborhood full of brand new trees that have recently been planted because it implies transience. That would be one thing. I would find a way to make a all a place for relaxation and a place of interest for the citizens who have been here for a long time and who won't be here for much longer.

In my wildest dreams, the mall to me, would simply be a place where you could find shade and peace and the occasional ice cream cone. Simplicity, elegant simplicity, with the opportunity to commune some how with nature . I think the idea with the planting and things of that sort, because people can actually see the difference from one month to the next in terms of the beautification of the mall I think that should be encouraged, try to make it pleasing to the eye. Sort of like Japanese food, you know they say Japanese food it's as please to the eye as it is o the palate. So if we had a mall that was please to the eye and at the same time relaxing to the mind that would be quite an accomplishment

## **Robert Humber M'finda Kalunga Community Garden**

I live in Flushing, Queens now. I used to live on the Lower East Side form many years and I moved to queens about 3 years ago. I lived in the lower east side about 28 years.

Well my contact with the malls is usually as I'm crossing the street sometimes I would sit down in there but I felt very uncomfortable sitting down there because of the cars and the pollution but I think it's great that we are doing something to improve it.

Well I used to work for the children's aid society and I used to take the kids and we used to sit down in the alls before we went on our various trips. We used to take bicycle rides around the city and it's one of the places we used to meet.

Well one of the things I always stress is safety for kids in the lower east side. Working for the children's aid society for many years I used to meet with the kids in the mall and in SDR park and once a week we used to take trips around the city on bicycles. We had a group called a day with Bob and George. And we would meet and use New York City as our class room. One of the things that I found exciting is that some of the kids used to go to Bear Mountain. naturally I went by car, I couldn't ride the bike up that far, but we used to ride the car behind them to make sure they got there safely. I enjoy the lower east side and even though I live in Queens now I still come down to the Lower East Side.

I'm one of the founders of the community garden. There are three people left from the original gardeners. Betty, yo fathert? and joe hubart, we are the founders of the garden. Very proud of it. This is our 25<sup>th</sup> year. When I first started with the garden we had no plants in there. And we decided we wanted to make it a beautiful place for people to come . and I'm really proud I come over about three times a week and work with garden. We have a group called kids for green they are ten and under I also do things with the seniors in the garden, I really enjoy my work and although it's volunteer I really enjoy it. Kalunga, it means the garden at the edge of the earth. It's on Rivington and Forsythe.

Well to me it's the people. I've watched a lot of the kids grow up I originally started the garden because I was fighting drugs on the lower east side. I didn't want kids to have to grow up in a neighborhood full of drugs so I started an organization called DFZ: drug free zone, and I eventually went to the coalition and we started doing gardening work and I was able to make the neighborhood so safe that I can't afford to live here myself now.

The coalition we meet we discuss things about the garden and the neighborhood. This is the second coalition, the first coalition was founded around 20 years ago, and the second coalition picked up where the first left off and we are involved with many thing with the garden and with the neighborhood and with the malls. We are really trying to make the neighborhood a place where everyone can live in peace and safety.

It's the people. We are very fortunate to have all races and nationalities here. And to get a long together I think that it's a wonderful thing and through gardening I've been able to meet many wonderful people. It's the people that make the neighborhood. I've been to other neighborhoods but I don't find the warmness and the sincerity that I do with the different nationalities in the lower east side.

I believe that most of the immigrant used to come here and they needed a place to ventilate. And their apartments were so hot they would sit around Allen street and sdr park. Since the apartments were so small and so hot that they had a place to come to and even today it's a nice area but I would like it to be safer. I'm always thinking about safety first.

I started working with the children's aid society many years ago and I worked on 630 east 6<sup>th</sup> street. And then I decided to move down to this area because I really found it interesting and I'm glad I did. I love the people down here. I love to see the kids grow up and many of the kids I worked with originally they have kids that I work with in the garden.

Well I had dreams many years ago that we could make change. And I'm glad to see some of the changes however, many of the people I really work for to make it a beautiful place, they can't afford to live here either their rents have gone sky high and it's just almost impossible so that's why I moved to queens. But my heart is here and I come here pretty much everyday.

It used to be, in the park, let's say, it used to be where parents did not want their kids to go into the park because it was not safe. I work very hard to make it a safe place and today I can sit down and relax and almost close my eyes and see the kids playing and it's really gratifying to see them being able not to duck bullets and needles and things of that nature.

I would like to see bike lanes on the side. I would like to see more flowers. We would like to see a safe place where kids, not only kids everyone, can go and enjoy themselves. I think it should be widened a little bit. I'm worried about the pollution from the cars going by. It could be really a great place. I'm excited about what's happening.

Widen the malls. I would like to see them widened. I think that if we could widen and have bike lanes on both sides all the way down to the water I think it would be a wonderful thing.

I would like to be able to sit down there and have a nice ice coffee or refreshment served in the mall. I would like it be a place where I could come and just relax. Something like I've seen in the malls around the city and in other places.

**Roberto Ragone**  
**Lower East Side Business Improvements District, Director**

I work in the lower east side as director of the business improvement district. The address for the bid office is 262 Broome street between Allen and orchard although we are moving as of July 1, 2008 to 70 orchard street between Broome and Grand. I've been there for about two and a half years. I actually started at the bid office on Sep. 11 2006.

Well I was born in New York city. I was in Manhattan, grew up in the Bronx. So I feel a connection to the city from having grown up here all my life except for two years in Boston for graduate school and two years as a child in Italy. And I feel a strong connection to the Lower East Side because of a lot of the history of New York city that the neighborhood evokes. The immigrant history the architecture of the area, orchard street is an important street. I still remember coming to orchard street as a child with my mother and my mother describing it as a street where you could bargain for merchandise where you could haggle to get a lower price and I vaguely also recall that it was a big deal to be able to come to orchard street on Sunday because nothing else was really open on a Sunday.

The bid tries to play a role as a stake holder in the community. The way a bid works in general is that the property owners in an area, a large concentration of property owners that have commercial store fronts at the ground floor level they vote to become part of a bid area and that happened for the lower east side in 1992 so as result of creating a bid property owners are agreeing to a self imposed take that is collected by the government but then goes back to a nonprofit office that serves that particular bid, so I run that nonprofit office that serves that bid of the les. And that becomes the baseline budget of the bid and what we use that money for is additional litter pick up additional graffiti removal. What's called litter basket maintenance. We're trying to make sure that the litter baskets don't overflow so that they don't become an eye sore. A sanitation company might line litter baskets with a bag and when their filled to the top you tie them up and put a new litter bag in there and the company also routinely also paint street furniture like the mail boxes and the lamps. They also remove the postings since people often use street furniture to promote their events. The bid also uses money for security. We're used security in the past and we're exploring other ways of using security. But there are people who are uniformed who act as eyes and ears of the merchants they check in with the merchants to

see if there is a problem with burglaries or safety or with shoplifting. They also serve to be called greeters where they are giving people directions in the area to get them oriented in the community. The money is also used for landscaping. We actually used money to landscape the end beds at the delancy street malls. So the notion of park space and what do with greenery the bid is particularly sensitized to something like that. Different bids have different emphasis, ours is marketing. The marketing is something that is done to varying degrees in different bid but it's a big emphasis in our bid because the lower east side has reclaimed itself as a nighttime destination with its bars and clubs and restaurants but it's daytime destination isn't what it was when my mother brought me here as a kid. There's Sunday shopping everywhere. There's bargains everywhere. People shop where they work rather than where they live in this hustle and bustle world. So what you find is a lower east side that during the day doesn't have a lot of foot traffic and you have a lot of retailers who are struggling. What we try to do is have events or promotions or branding and marketing that bring people into the community. So we might have for instance international pickle day which is something that we've done with the new York food museum. It started as a 3 thousand person event. And it in fact has grown into a nine thousand , we had nine thousand people attend in 2006. The goal was actually to get ten thousand people to come in 2007 and we actually got 18 thousand people. So it's become a major destination event so and the goal is to have the kinds of activities to help people discover the area during the day. The retail and the shopping and the eateries. Both the multi generation retailers such as harris levey, and some of the newer entrepreneurs a lot of young people who have opened up stores in the area with some of the bargains and some of the newer boutiques. So that's some of the goals of the bid. We try to work with different stakeholders .

We expected 9,000 well we got 9,000 people in 2006. We expected 10 thousand people in 2007 and we got 16thousand. So it's becoming a major destination event. This pickle day where you're not only paying homage to picklers of the historic lower east side but you are celebrating diversity. You know the pickling process done by different ethnic people throughout the world. Chutney, kimchi, it's all there. There's a lot of pickle fans in new York city surprisingly. They are willing to stand in line to sample a pickle the way some people stand in line to buy a ticket to a rock concert. But the idea is to help the les reclaim itself as a day time destination. And we have a bid as part of its market a series of alliteration to get people thinking about how we have this juxtaposition of the old and the new. The vintage and the vogue, traditions and transitions, pickles and pimps, all kinds of alliterations, the bids mantra, it used to be called the, it's branding used to be, orchard street bargaining district then it became the Lower East Side. The Lower East Side is more come explore and if we use the tile mosaics, the les is shaped like the tile mosaic it evoke like the subway tile historically in the modern digital thus the old and the new. Just to go on, we want to work with other community groups to help reclaim the area, again, pay homage to the history of the area but how do you integrate the old and new. Some people think that the area needs to be revitalized, but again there is a lot to be said to the gritty history and the way it evokes an old New York is unique about this area so it doesn't become more like other parts of New York City. People have to recognize that this area had degenerated, quality of life wise, like other areas in new York city because of drugs graffiti debris, so we want to work with groups like the community board and the UNRAP coalition and again the bid is very sensitive to how open space and parks space can play an important role for economic development, particularly since we already do some landscaping on the Delancy malls.

There are business owners who are aware in varying degrees, a, about the potential renovation of the Allen/pike street malls and varying degrees of knowledge about the bids prior involvement in that. The bid was involved, and this precedes me, in to allocate the funds in the istea, but it's federal funds that were then used then held in escrow that were eventually used to renovate the demonstration mall between Broome and Delancy so that's finally been completed in April 2008

after more than ten years of advocacy and waiting. So the bid played an instrumental role and different merchants are aware of that. The bid now is working with united neighbors to revitalize Allen and Pike street mall and we've been working you know we started having meetings again, earlier this year after many months, we've been working with the Hester street collaborative in planning the visioning day to the extent that we look at the malls as a way of getting different communities to interact with one another and to come to the bid area and again as part of to create a day time destination area we think it is an important economic development tool as well as an eco friendly and recreational purpose for the community there are many of the new school business are people who are entrepreneurs in their 20's and 30's are very eco friendly so they like the idea of revitalizing the Allen/pike street malls, they like what the bid is doing, and the bid worked to reaching out to tenants to tell them that their perspective is important in this. And the person on staff who is assigned to do that observed much enthusiasm ranging from enthusiasm to curiosity about the bid role and the project in general. So I think as they become more educated in this process they will become more engaged. When we spoke to them about the concessions, food concessions on Delancy, the parks department was proposing food concessions on different parks around Manhattan, one of the locations would have been on Allen street and Delancy street and we approached the merchants to say you might want to put in a bid for this because the idea is this is avenue of the immigrants and we don't want just any kind of food concession you know we want this to pay tribute to this theme of the avenue of the immigrants and the history of the diversity of the area so many of the merchants were interested in taking part in that.

For someone who like to take short cuts and someone who likes to be by himself some times, the mall would represent that kind of oasis for me. The problem is that I think that I myself am always rushing around from place to place, the mall, it's not something i've been naturally doing, I think that as I became more aware that something can be done with the mall, then I made more of a conscious effort to walk through some of the malls to explore their potential. I know that the bid for instance in addition to advocating what's now the demonstration process, the bid was interested, and again this precedes me, in engaging the parks department about the comfort station. We thought of it as a possible satellite office for the bid, to look at as a way of getting people to the area and that there might be food concessions at that comfort station. The comfort station on the north side of Delancy at Allen street So I've also you know walked around that mall a lot to look at it from the outside. I've become more self conscious about engaging that space.

When I have walked through the area one thing I did observe is a the a lot of illegally parked bicycles and motor cycles and some people would actually call these bicycle cemeteries and grave yards and I think the parks department has done more to enforce that. But the interesting thing about the way people are using the mall for that purpose is that transportation and park might want to think bout using some small portion of the mall for bicycle and motor scooters since they are becoming more popular as a way to avoid cars and maneuver easily. And the idea would be that, you know in Europe and in other parts of the united states, they are creating more and more parking for bicycles and scooters, so the idea is that if you create these kinds of accommodations for these kinds of vehicles and again reflected in the fact that this area was a graveyard for these types of vehicles, and when you take into account that a lot of young people are moving into this area and people in the area and in the city in general are using bicycles more, then that might help create the ground work to get people wearing their pedestrian hats to engage the malls when they are renovated.

I think the lower east side has this interesting juxtaposition of the old and the new. It's unique it's distinctive so you have old stores and new stores sitting side by side. You have these multigenerational stores that have been around some of them since the 1890. You have Harris Levy and Katz's that go as far back as that. Other businesses that go as far back as 1930's and so on, side by side with these entrepreneurs. Many of whom have very cutting edge ideas in terms of fashion or the craftsmanship of their work. There's interacting with the new merchants, the young entrepreneurs, there's many of them that are introspective about the meaning of this neighborhood. This is the neighborhood where a lot of iconic, iconoclastic entrepreneurship took place, someone who really pushed the envelope and did something unique, did something really different. And they would like their business to offer something unique and different and would like other business that come into the area to offer something unique and different. For instance Earnest Siltan jeans, which are high end jeans, they are actually sort unique to the industry and word spread about those jeans, I guess word of mouth. There are other businesses that, you know let's look at it this way, the area is known in my mind as a kind of mecca of number ones. The number one, according to some I guess food critics and so on, the number one bagel, the number one pickle, the number one historic boutique hotel, the number one donut, the two best candy stores in the city, Economy Candy and Sweet Life are in the LES, the best knish, the best and the list goes on, someone I think they said the most interesting corset store and displays are in the lower east side. The best coffee with some of the new coffee places among them the new entry roasting plant. Make for an interesting array of number ones in the area that should make people want to visit here so between this theme of the old and the new and this theme of the number ones people should be interested in exploring the area. Residents who may feel that they need to stay closer to their own specific blocks where they shop, and tourists who may be accustomed to thinking about New York in terms of midtown Manhattan or much much lower Manhattan towards you know Battery Park. So I think people should really think about these things and it certainly an aspect of lower east side worth exploring and you know our mantra is LES is more explore.

The Allen Street Mall, Allen Street was renamed Avenue of the Immigrants, and what I think is wonderful about that is an important element in the neighborhood is cultural tourism. I think that people's exploration of either the arts or culture, are an important factor of economic vitality in New York neighborhoods. And what the lower east side offers among of those cultural anchors is the lower east side tenement museum. and it's great to have a museum that pay tribute to the immigrant experience in the preserved tenement but it's great to have a street that adjoins the museum that is called Avenue of the Immigrants and it's co-named Avenue of the Immigrants and it helps evoke that history it helps remind people that that's partly what this neighborhood is all about besides any kinds of newness that might be exciting we need elements of the city that help people ruminate about the past, and I think that the Allen Street Mall can help do that. It can take into account that the street is called Avenue of the Immigrants, and perhaps it should, again, in discussions with the UNRAP coalition, we've said that in terms of concept and themes maybe the people that design the malls can think about what historically what were the demographics historically and currently on the blocks that adjoin a particular mall and how can those elements be incorporated into the mall. So there's the Jewish and Italian history and Irish history and the fact that it was called Germantown, but at the same time this particular block area has a Fujinese presence, this particular block area has a Chinese presence, present day the Latinos, and how do you incorporate all that, and I think it's an important thing to do it's an important thing also to take into account when choosing the kind of greenery you will have in the area to the extent that greenery will play a role, the kind of food that will be served when concessions are chosen. These are all very important considerations that will pay homage to the co naming of the street Avenue of the Immigrants. In conversation I was mentioning the fact the bid has, one of our recent developments, we took advantage of a grant we received to create a

pod tour of historic sites, and one of the requirements was to do things with the money was to do things that will make the community friendly to the blind and visually impaired. So besides enlisting stores to make structural modifications that would be more inviting to the visually impaired We did this pod tour and this pod tour is described very vividly, there are elements of it that go into detail and are also engage the listener to be tactile and it's a way of you can download it off onto the mp3, the idea is to get people to come here and do a tour on ones own. I think a tour, some kind of a pod tour of the Allen street mall, regardless of what gets put on each of the malls, but assuming again, that these different kinds of themes would be incorporated you have a pod tour like that it'll with some kind of self guided structured tour I will engage people to walk along those malls and it will serve to vindicate and exalt the effort that went into revitalize the malls.

There are certainly controversial aspects, and there are positive, you know people with institutional knowledge depending on, there's selective memory, there's selective perception, so there's people who remember the drug dealing, the graffiti, the homeless and they look at some of the positive changes in terms of that revitalization, the fact that other than the shopping that could have done during the day it was an area that was dangerous to walk around at night. So a lot of people are pleased y those kinds of changes. Again there are other people that like, which is valid, the idea of the grittiness that evokes an old new York that keeps the area from becoming a mall like other parts of Manhattan or other places that are becoming one chain store after another and one franchise after another. And some people glorify or don't remember some of those more negative things that needed to be improved. So the new revitalization I think or those, the new populations that come in are people that re-explore the area, I think that's all a positive thing. There are concerns about the building heights getting too high, because the area is now on people's radar screens a lot of developer are building tall and a lot of people feel like that may be detracting from the structural landscape so the city is rezoning the area. I think a consensus is forming around height limits, in order to revitalize the area the bid feels that it is important to preserve the allowable commercial density. The reason that it's important is that in order for the area to be strong economically during the day and for the whole quality of life to improve it would be great to have a kind of critical mass of day time population of people working in the area. What's known as the creative economy the creative sectors, architects, engineers, fashion designers, light manufacturing, the craftsmanship graphics designers, those type of people, they are not in retail but they are in commerce, those are the people who can come here, work here, and shop and support the retail business on their lunch hour and after work. Now the reason how this all becomes segue back to the Allen and Pike street mall is that people need amenities. People need space or recreation space that they can engage in and some of these people, everybody, New Yorkers live in a new York minute, and new York second, so that someone on the east side of Allen street may think that Sara Roosevelt might be a little too far if they are in a hustle and bustle frame of mind, so Allen street serves a very important purpose both for people who could potentially work here and for the residents here, they lived here for a long time, and they don't live necessarily near Sara Roosevelt , they may live on grand street towards the water but it would be great as they are coming west and we are trying to bring them over to shop and it would be great if they have a place to recreate. We were talking about a particular proposal, it was called the clean streets program, and that was a program where we are cleaning certain areas outside the bid area to convince the merchants and the property owners in the area to convince them how becoming a part of the bid can benefit them, so we had a little forum where we could educate the merchants about the clean streets program and they wanted to find out what else the bid does and they asked well my I'm originally from this city this state and my mother comes to visit me and my mother is this old, this age and it would be great if she could just take pause and relax when she's walking around the area, and we told him about the bid's role in the demonstration project, but think about this

persons anecdote and his mother's visiting from out of town, think of all the senior citizens and parents and some of whom have strollers who would probably love to have that kind of oasis on Allen street.

I see a lot of purposes served by the malls I need to sort out what I'd like for any one particular mall but I think that having just taken a walk through the city needs to think about what can serve as a community gathering space from time to time or every day and there has been talk in the past when UNRAP did it's study with the project for open space as to whether the mall between Delancy and Rivington where the comfort station is, if that can be a gathering place for concerts from time to time where you close off the streets. I think there as discussion about that, or another mall more on canal street and Allen street, the idea that if pedestrians do in fact play an important role in economic development, whether by widening streets widening the malls so that people would more likely engage the malls, whether they can play a role, and whether that could have the effect of sending a message to drivers that do I really need to be on this street, do I really need to take my car. Or otherwise there could be other creative way of managing traffic so that everybody could have it a little bit their way. But temporary exhibits, permanent t art exhibits, there was an idea that was given to me by someone from the Chinese American planning council, the idea of an ongoing slide presentation in what looks like a rock sculpture but has a screens o that people can actually look into the screen in the mall. Some play areas for kids, there could be tile areas where little kids enjoy engaging the ground area, plantings in some of the malls would be very helpful. There's an idea of connecting some of the malls, the idea of, connecting some of the malls meaning curb cuts that run north south instead of east west the idea, again, of food concessions to pay homage to the avenue of the immigrants, along the water we talked about boating activities and a visitors kiosk. The fencing could be very important do we want fencing that's just poles and one chain or something that's a little more secure. There were two accidents on Allen and Delancey street that effected the malls within weeks of each other some time in may. The park department and department of transportations needs to be mindful of that. Again signage that lures people to the mall and encourages people to walk along the mall to find the water front

Again an example for instance of a temporary or even permanent exhibit is something that pay homage to the fact that an elevated train used to run along Allen street in the early 1930's. one of the broad questions that parks needs to ask itself and even the communities, is if we want to engage the mall what would make someone want to get away from the humidity and step into the mall as the place to get away from that. That is unique to that space that compliments it that Sara Roosevelt park may have. And also in the winter where people may be less likely to go into a park space anyway, what would make them go into the these parks. There was a very clever exhibit in February a few years aback and I can't remember the name of the exhibit right now but it was an installation and but we need things like that that certainly would get people to come into the malls in the winter time. We talked about things like raised planting, we talked about creating even a nighttime sanctuary, something that would have people come at night without creating disturbances. These are some of the range of things that we've talked about on the visioning day for the Allen/pike street mall.

If there was only one thing I could do with the mall in the absence of anything else I think it would be it has to be something interactive I think it has to be either I guess public art with benches, it's hard to pick one right? I mean even you know, community gardens, or even community gardens as public art with the benches, a focal point of the arts to the extent that art as landscaping doesn't necessarily have a mecca location. Maybe the Allen street malls can be that and encourage people to go there and observe it as art and also recreate them but having a place to sit and be among the art. I don't know if I'll change my mind on that by tomorrow but

having to answer that question right now, and having assimilated much of what was said during visioning day and trying to reconcile the idea for pedestrians to have somewhere to walk and engage but also for the area to be where greenery serves a purpose and art serves a purpose, maybe greenery as landscape art on a rotating or permanent basis that also gives people a place to recreate might be that one thing that the city should do.

I would certainly, if there were no constraints, I would certainly widen the malls. It becomes that much more relevant to people. There are conversations about how relevant a mall can be at certain points along the walk, because the sidewalks on either side of Allen street are not that far away and it's not necessarily viewed as a short cut it certainly and again depending what you put there it can be an oasis but I think that widening those malls can be a tipping point for people so that no matter what's put there it becomes a tipping point, it's this wide area, it's unique, it's I don't know how wide ocean parkway is but some people have said that ocean parkway should be a frame of reference in the way that people can get from one mall to another so I would say widening the malls, connecting the malls, finding creative ways of finding traffic patterns in the area, you know the bid is very concerned about traffic a lot of merchants feel that a lot of their visitors come here by cars so a lot of merchants in our bid area they had a mixed feelings about congestion pricing and they certainly want cars to be accommodated through adequate parking and so if there's a way that widens the malls, allows for multiple activities on the malls, because wider malls will certainly allow for an entire variety be it recreation the flexibility of doing much more in the all you can recreational and artistic work and landscape work all juxtaposed in one mall with wider streets I would think ,you know I'm not an urban planner, and again just taking into account where can we park cars, where can we put traffic, where can we encourage motorists to use other modes of transportation so that they can get where they need to go and they're happy and we are happy with this larger unconstrained mall.

I'd like to wish the parks department luck in putting this together. I encourage them to take into good faith consideration all the work that's being done by many members of the community the UNRAP coalition and a lot of the people a lot of community members who are working with them to offer insight and input into what the future of the mall should be this mall should not be created, the metaphor of the arm chair detached manner, but should really involve engagement in the community a community that earnestly wants to work with the parks department. Many of us like members of the parks department we work and engage for whatever our issues are in the les and we hope that at the end f the process we can look back and say we worked collaboratively on this and we are all collaboratively proud of the end product.

## **Victor Papa**

### **Two Bridges Neighborhood Council**

I'm the president of the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, which is an organization founded in 1954, right on Madison Street when the community was threaten--changing at the time (in 1954) from a white ethnic, European-based immigrant community to one that was welcoming Hispanics, (Puerto Rican especially), Blacks, and I guess a slight increase in Asian immigration, although Asians have always been here (although a small..). So, that organization was founded in order to mitigate some of the tensions that this new immigration caused, (the new integration in the community was causing). In fact, we started little leagues. Very civic based. It's probably the kind of organization that a suburban community would found with the same issues

- but an urban community founded it. And interestingly enough, it was integrated in 1954 so it was ahead of its time – it was impressive..

Then in the 60's and 70's, the community was threatened with a very high tower called AT&T that wanted to build their tower between Catherine and Market Street, thereby demolish all the tenement buildings on that street but also probably in the periphery. which is now the Verizon building - see where Mary Bergtraum is. So TB then mobilized the community. It was probably one of the first kinds of mobilizations of the community that works to get groups coaxed. Probably the trend that had occurred previously, with the protesters against Robert Mosses' motion to build a pedestrian cross path from Canal Street, thereby demolishing Little Italy and Chinatown. So that was in the air. We won and the tenements were saved. The Coalition for affordable housing was emerging and President Ford issued a vow for the city and the eradication of blighted areas and the creation of urban renewal districts and certain bridges (?) were selected to become part of the TB urban renewal district. TBURD is located on South Street between Pike and Montgomery, South and Cherry. And over 30 years, TB engaged partners – housing partners...

We built over 1500 units, probably the largest developer of affordable housing in Manhattan. TB built all of that over a 25 year period including Pathmark supermarket and other commercial aspects of the district, plus community space that accommodates senior citizens (and senior residents). And some of the buildings we own, some of them we do not. (And I know Pathmark, lot better times...is going to emerge as an issue soon??) So TB have, resulting from that, then having completed the district passed its mission on the preservation of that housing, plus housing on the LES in general ...

Incessant struggles that had occurred in 70s, 80s, 90s – spending gentrification time... after 9/11. 9/11 was the eradication of real effective... impeding gentrification process which is now in full swing – so they compromise between this community and the city about first build affordable housing and then developing...but all on the premise that city owned property is the property of people who are housing... now that's how we operated. Along with many, many other groups improved, external...

There's no group on LES that I can think of that's fighting for more affordable housing that are really relevant for some incomes that are really poor. TB, of course, advocates for, that we will build affordable housing in the future. Looks like the mall has an improvement to an area that it was responsible..(developers probably less prestige?).. The mall and the waterfront. So we have to do whatever, (careerists(?),hence our involvement in Allen/Pike Street malls and Little Italy.

[The Allen Street Malls] are practically not usable. The conditions of the malls down here are appalling. Appalling. And that's particularly helped when you hear the kinds of improvements have been made in lower Manhattan/LES. Yesterday I was at Chrystie Street Park on my bicycle. I just couldn't believe that the park is still in use ... and it has to reflect on the Parks Dept to some degree because it's the Asian population that uses it. Talking about Chrystie Street – the park. Not only the malls, but it's an extension of the wider question, it's that the parks dept, the city, LMDC, all of those in Mayor's office who are responsible for restoration and renewal, revitalize. They haven't really addressed those issues in our public parks and malls on the LES.

I was born not too far from here. As I grew up, it was what they are now, so I could only say what they are now and what I saw then was, I guess a newer version, what probably was 50 years ago.

I don't get into the question too much (what could the mall possibly be). I also think that the Broome street mall, on Delancey is beautiful but I'm afraid to say that because some don't like it. I think they're adequate and I think they were well done, I think they were done in sensitivity. That's why I'm so opposed to any attempts to slow the process down, because I don't lay too much importance on the design of the park. Maybe I'm wrong about that, but I think the design of any parks is such a subjective exercise and when you try to process that exercise in the community, it's going to get more complicated, take years to come to a consensus. I think the malls should be used like the mall on Delancey Street (the Demonstration Mall)— people sit there, relax, pass through, help make the area look nice. Improving the malls reflects on the city's commitment to take care of poor neighborhoods like ours to the same degree they would take care of any other neighborhoods.

I would rely on the partners of the Alliance - the [UNRAP] Coalition - to advise me about that. I'd go with where they want to go with that. If they think it should be, then I would go along with it. It's not a pressing concern. I just hope that it wouldn't stop tourism and traffic to the Chinatown community, which relies on, truck traffic and buses. It relies on that for its very vitality, so if that's going to threaten that in any way, I would be against it. I think that's a main thoroughfare.

So, I think that the Coalition has been touching upon certain commercial..outlets there that serve the communities needs.

A population that is lower [down on the malls], the memory of southern European immigration population which settled here in this community since the 1820s – I'm talking about Italians, Spanish, Irish, German, populations which wasn't remotely disagreeable for many years, but now, of course they are moved out. I don't see that population on the Avenue of the Immigrants, I think there needs to be some recognition to that. If anyone are represented I think we have to be careful. It's important to show the cultural backgrounds of the immigrants that have been down here. It's not a bad idea to have the malls change from section to section. The mall near East Broadway has to have a Chinese theme, and further South this area was Southern European for the most part and that heritage should be reflected.

I think down here, especially this area was, Southern European for the most part. All of the buildings, where you see all the projects, where you see La Guardia Houses, were once tenement buildings that housed thousands of Italians. I am from an immigrant family that was displaced, by projects. They got all this attention, we just were stranded in the late 40s/early 50s. Thousands of Italians and Greeks were displaced.. That order was dead. It was a terrible word. It was the most feared word. They were going to condemn this building. They didn't know that – they weren't going to be repressed.

They were promised that they would be returned (and many were) in public housing. Many moved out, moved away. Was that a good thing for the city? You know, the city should be fully integrated. I guess the working class white ethnic, somehow represented a stability to this community.

**Margaret Chin**  
**Asian Americans for Equality**

**Interviewed by Anne Frederick, Hester Street Collaborative**

**Margaret:** This is not the first time I've done an interview at Pace High School. This is my second time. I was here last year for another project with your other class, I think it was a film about Chinatown after 9/11?

**Anne:** The New Design students?

**Margaret:** Yes, the New Design students.

**Anne:** Was there anything I missed about AAFE, or your role in the organization that you want to explain to students before we start?

**Margaret:** it was an organization started by students, a lot of us were college students at the time, but there were high school students who were involved in the process. The way that AAFE started was... I don't know if you all know this really tall building in Chinatown, Confucius Plaza? It's the tallest building in Chinatown, 40 stories high, right near the Manhattan Bridge? When that building was being constructed in 1974, they weren't hiring Chinese construction workers. So a lot of us who were activist students started organizing in the community, demonstrating for jobs, and so we started and the (?) joined the demonstration line and then high schoolers from neighborhood high schools started coming, like from Seward Park and Brooklyn Tech, so people were coming to support the demonstrations and advocacy. And at the end we got about 26 jobs for Chinese construction workers, and that's how we sort of started, as students with a lot of activism. Students can do a lot of things.

**Anne:** Could you talk a little bit about community organizing, what it is and how you got involved as a young person?

**Margaret:** well, I think of it as how you go out and talk to people, and get them involved in fighting for a cause. I mean that how we started. Back then, AAFE was fighting for jobs. And the reason was that a lot of jobs that were available to immigrants at that time were jobs in garment factories. My mother worked in a garment factory, my father worked in a Chinese restaurant, and those were the low paying jobs that were available. And here you have jobs in the construction industry at that time paying very well – I think it was more than \$10 an hour back then – and then they had benefits. So we thought, hey, wait a minute, we have people who build houses or buildings in the countries they came from, in China, in Taiwan or Hong Kong they were able to build these buildings. Why couldn't they build the buildings here? And the reason they gave was "well, we have unions so you can't get the job," or "you don't speak English well enough so you can't get the job." So we started organizing, going into the community. It started by giving out flyers, writing up the story, telling people this is not right, this is not fair, we need to fight for our rights and that's how we started organizing and getting people to support and getting people to join in the fight. Even later on when we were organizing around housing issues, it's the same thing. You talk to the tenant about what their rights are, that they have the right to decent housing, to heat and hot water, and the landlord is collecting their rent but not providing the services and it's not right. It's not fair, and people need to come together. So part of organizing is getting people together to fight for their rights.

**Anne:** Just to back up a little bit, could you tell me where you live and how long you've lived here?

**Margaret:** Okay, this is my English name. I wasn't born with this name. I have a Chinese name. I think coming to America, a lot of people kept their names... my name came from when I was baptized, but I never used that until I came to the United States. I came to this country when I was about nine years old. I was born in Hong Kong and I grew up in Chinatown. I grew up not too far from here, on Mott Street. That was in the sixties. In that time, that was actually Little Italy. Most of my neighbors were Italian. The kids we went to school with were Italian, and we also had Latino kids, African Americans.... It was pretty mixed, the school that I went to, PS 130. and I went to school here, the old school here. before the new school was built here it was Junior High School 65. They tore down the old school to build the new school. This is a school I also went to. I grew up in Chinatown but right now I don't live in Chinatown. One of the reasons is that I can't afford to live in Chinatown. I actually live down near Wall Street. 21 years ago my husband and I bought a co-op down there. At that time it was close to the community, it was close to my parents, and I needed help with daycare, and it was close to Chinatown. My son went to daycare in Chinatown. So that's where I grew up and lived.

**Anne:** I'm going to ask you a few questions about the Allen Street Malls, because that's what this summer school session is – all of these students are going to be thinking about ideas for the Allen and Pike Street malls and how we as a group can come together and create some suggestions and advocate for some certain things that we want to see out there to the city. Could you tell me a little about how you use the malls now? How frequently, how do you use them... do you pass through them or do you spend time on them?

**Margaret:** Personally, I just pass through them. There's no place to sit and it's really not welcoming. But the mall in front of our office – we have an office on the corner of Division and Pike, so there is one in front of our office. And for many years we sort of adopted that mall. Our staff used to go out and sweep it, and we put a planter there and had some plants in it, so its actually one of the nicer ones in the area. I don't use it personally, but I cross it a lot. But I do see people parking their bicycles there, and I do see people sitting there, eating or reading newspapers. It's just a place that really needs to be fixed up.

**Anne:** Do you have memories of either good or bad things that you've experienced or observed at the mall?

**Margaret:** I remember people just hanging out there. I mean, it's just a gathering place. Also, I remember growing up I had a friend that lived at the project on Pike Street. I remember sitting there and talking to her, when it was at night and hot like this. Outside it was actually quite cool. You could hang out with your friends and just chat and talk, and that's what I remember. The friend I was talking to, she actually just came back to visit from California last week.

**Anne:** And the malls are still the same?

**Margaret:** It's still the same. It's worse now than before. And before we had a lot more trees, and the benches were, you know, nicer. And now that mall that we used to sit on, it's the worst. It's the one where all the bums and loiterers are... and every time it rains there are puddles.

**Anne:** Could you tell me a little bit about what you think makes this neighborhood special? We're talking in our group about how the malls might reflect that. What features do you think should be preserved?

**Margaret:** I think the interesting thing about the malls is that it connects different neighborhoods. It connects Chinatown to the Lower East Side. Also the sense of history. That's why, I don't know, about two or three years ago, we were able to organize and get Allen Street co-named "Avenue of the Immigrants." So there's a lot of history in this area, and also a lot of activism. We've talked about people organizing, we started here fighting for jobs. So I think that using that mall would be nice place to really visit and sit and talk to your friends, but also using it to really showcase the history in our neighborhood.

**Anne:** Could you give us some examples of the history that could be highlighted there?

**Margaret:** Thinking back, thinking like an immigrant in the 60's, when I went to school, you'd see kids from other cultures. It really represents what America's all about. So its not just like you're isolated in your own neighborhood but by going to school and living in a neighborhood with different neighbors you learn about people's different cultures, different experiences, so I think the mall really can illustrate that. You could also highlight the different struggles in the different communities. From my own experience, from what happened with my mother... she was a garment worker... and the garment workers had their own union, and the union was organizing. And she used to tell stories when I was young about how they, in the old days, were able to stop work and protest for higher wages. And these were garment workers who didn't speak English, but they knew something wasn't right. But they were able to band together, to organize and to fight for better pay. So histories like that I think we need to showcase. And also the history of tenants, people that we work with who fight to stay in the community. They're the ones right now that are getting harassed, getting evicted. They're the ones who built up the community when it wasn't safe, when they didn't have a lot of services. But they remain in the community and they helped build the community. I think it would be really interesting to interview them, maybe the old-timers that are in the community, get them to tell their stories, and to really show, to piece together the history.

**Anne:** Can you talk about how the challenges of AAFE have changed over time? How has the neighborhood changed and developed and how your work has changed from advocating for equitable jobs to things you have to advocate for now?

**Margaret:** We started doing housing in the mid-80's. A lot of the building in this neighborhood are very old. Most of them are over 100 years old, they're tenement buildings. And I think it was in like 1985 when, I think it was in January that we had a fire, because a lot of the buildings didn't have services like heat and hot water and a lot of people were using portable heaters so there were a lot of fires. And once the families get sent out of the apartment they go to a city shelter, which is usually far away, and they have to come back to the community for work, or the kids have to come back to the community for school, so our first idea was to build a transitional homeless shelter. It was going to help the families temporarily, they could stay there for a couple of months while we organized and got the landlord to fix up their apartment so they could move back in. It was a great idea, but the timing wasn't right. At that time it was under Mayor Koch, when they were not dealing with small community programs, that was the time of the welfare hotels. They were building a lot of the big establishments, a lot of the big hotels and putting families in those spaces. So we couldn't get the support of the city to do that project. At that time there were a lot of broken down buildings in the neighborhood, I think that's way before

you guys were born. So a lot of these buildings were more welcoming to have community groups come in and try to fix them up. So one of our first projects was two buildings on Eldridge Street. If you walk down Eldridge Street now you wouldn't recognize that block. I think the first buildings were 176-180 Eldridge Street. It started with two burned down buildings. I mean they were completely gutted, we have pictures of them. It was just a frame of two buildings. I looked at that and said, "we can turn that into a great transitional homeless shelter." That didn't happen, but we turned it into 59 units of low-income housing. Housing for families that are low-income, but also for seniors who were coming out of the homeless shelters in the city. So we were able to provide 59 units of housing. And the way we did that was a lot of just organizing – we had no experience building houses. At that time there was this group called Enterprise Foundation. They helped community groups do housing. So they took a chance on us. We had no experience, but they worked with us, and they used us as one of the first projects to utilize this program called Low Income Tax Credit. What it is that the rich people donate money, for these kinds of projects, and in return they get tax credit. They don't have to pay taxes on some of their money. So programs like that helped us start, and from then on we started renovating other buildings on the Lower East Side, such as the building on Rivington Street, a building on Norfolk Street... so we started working on buildings that were burned down, with no people living in them. And then later on we started doing new construction, on empty lots, where buildings had been destroyed and there was nothing left but an empty lot. So we were able to build on them. But right now there are really no more of those broken down buildings, because the property value has gone up, everything has gotten more expensive, you see new people coming in, and you see a lot of condos going up. In terms of opportunities for us to build, it's less than it was. But lately what we've tried to do is another program, where we access some city dollars to purchase some of the buildings in the community that have people living in them, when the landlord wants to sell the building. We buy it at market rate, with city subsidies, and then we renovate the apartments and have the tenants stay there. So this is different from the marketplace, where every time you have a new landlord coming in, buying the building... do you know what's the first thing they do? If a new landlord comes in and wants to make money, what's the first thing they'll do? Yeah, they try to kick out the people. That's what they do. And that's part of the organizing work. So instead of doing a bad thing, we do a good thing. We tell the people, "don't worry, you get to stay in the building. And guess what? Your apartment will get fixed up." And the units that are empty when we buy the building, like in the building we just finished on Hester Street there were four units that were empty, so we fixed up those units and then we had a lottery where people could apply. So then any family could move in and have affordable housing in the neighborhood.

**Anne:** What does "Avenue of the Immigrants" mean to you?

**Margaret:** It means a lot to me because I'm an immigrant. I came to this country when I was a kid. I think the whole history of the Lower East Side, you know you have the Jewish community, the Italian community, the Irish community, the African-American community, the Latino community, especially from Puerto Rico but now there are a lot from the Dominican Republic, and from all parts of China. So I think the history of the immigration, and the history of each community, how they survived and how they struggled, and how they preserved their culture, I think those are the things that could be highlighted along the Allen Street Mall.

**Anne:** What do you think the malls could provide to the community that it's lacking right now?

**Margaret:** I think, especially in this community in the example of the tenements, the spaces are small. Growing up, we had a three room apartment and there were five of us. Actually seven of us, two of them couldn't live there with us. It was too crowded, they had to live somewhere else. In a way, Allen Street mall is really represents an extension of the family's living room, where you can actually go out and hang out with your friends, sit with your family... have a little space. You couldn't do that in an apartment, its too small. We have families that we work with in the neighborhood here, one family I remember on Eldridge Street. It was a three room apartment, smaller than the one I grew up in, and you have two grandparents, the mother and the father, and two young children. I mean, six people living in a very tiny apartment. What place do the kids have to play? So as you know it's the open space that allows the families to go out, enjoy themselves, share, you know, gather together with their friends. I know that at the same time, in our community, you see a lot of street vendors, people trying to make a living starting their own small business. So, on the mall we should have people selling food or items. Small business opportunity can happen at the mall. We also talked to some other community residents and they say its very hard for them to find information about what services are available in the community that they can utilize. So in the mall there could be some place where they can access information, like an information booth or center or whatever. There are many opportunities to allow us to create something, or use it as open space or a place for small businesses.

**Anne:** What are some of the physical changes could be made to accommodate those spaces on the mall?

**Margaret:** It would be great if we could make it wider. It means we may have to take away some of the traffic lanes, because crossing Allen Street is not easy. Especially for seniors, but even for us. You're looking at the light while you're standing in the middle and the cars just zoom by you. So if there's a way to maybe make the malls bigger, that would create more use. The one on Division Street, right next to the Mobil station? That part is two malls. Its really funny, at one point you're going down and its one mall, then all of a sudden at that part it's two malls. So we were discussing what could happen at that mall, whether it could be widened into a bigger plaza space, or a square or whatever, so you can have more activities. you could have a park there, or you can have it like Union Square or you could have different kinds of activities.

**Anne:** What are your wildest dreams about the mall? Describe your ideal mall.

**Margaret:** My ideal version of the mall? I would love to see a lot of flowers, and green, and trees. I think that's what we really need in this community, so when you walk through the neighborhood or when you walk down the mall, or you're walking down a side street and you look across and you see this whole, you know, greenery. And flowers in the springtime and summer would help liven up the neighborhood. And if you have places where people can sit down and have a conversation with their friends and family. And maybe along the way you can stop and have a cold drink or buy a magazine. I would personally like to walk all the way down from Hudson straight through the malls to the waterfront. You can't really do that now. But if we fix it up, there's the opportunity to really do that, to go from the community down to the water and really see the open space that's available to them.

**Student:** How does your organization define what the poverty level is?

**Margaret:** There is a general description, and it's according to the federal government. This is the department of housing and urban development, they have their guideline. But their guideline is actually not the most appropriate for us. They don't just look at New York City, they look at New York City and the surrounding areas. So the medium income for New York, the way they look at it, is \$77,000 a year. And so "low income" is supposed to be below that. A lot of the housing we have built for 50% below the poverty line, like for a family for four the income is \$32,000. But that isn't for us, when we do our housing we use a lottery selection. We also look at what is their income and what kind of rent they can afford to pay. If a family's income is low and they're paying usually, according to the government, about 20% of their income goes to paying the rent. If we see a family who is paying more than 30% of their income, and they are paying regularly, we can make some adjustments and allow them to move in, we don't just say, "Okay, you don't make enough income. You only make \$15,000 a year and the income level has to be 16-20." But if there is a gap, we also look at if this family can afford to pay what they're paying. And if they've been paying for a long time, we take that into consideration. And once they move into our buildings, every time we hear about government subsidies that are available, we help the family apply for the programs. Sometimes when you're working with the city, they let you know, "Right now we have a period open for section 8. So you have to go get your tenants if they qualify." It's a lot of work. But it's worth it because you can help a family get subsidies. And in return we get more rent. It's a win-win situation for the family and also for us. Early on, non-profit meant you wouldn't make money, but you still have to run the building. So you run it very efficiently. That's why when we do organizing, we ask why a private landlord is not providing services, but we are able to provide services when we're charging even less rent.

.... We have a management company that manages the building. We don't own the building. The government pays money to build the building, the people who invest in the building. But there is a management company that manages the building, that collects the rent, makes sure there is heat and hot water, makes sure the building is clean. The difference with a private landowner is that they want to make the maximum profit. We're not out there to make a profit. Whatever money we collect goes back into the building. In the private sector, they make the money and they take it out, and they try not to provide any services if it's possible. That's the bad landlords, not all the landlords.

**Student:** How do you earn money (as a non-profit)?

**Margaret:** We apply for government grants to run different programs, we also apply for grants from private foundations, we apply for grants from corporations. At the same time we raise our own money. We have a donor base, a membership that donates money to us. And we have our own fundraisers. Every year we do a big community banquet... that's how we raise a lot of the funding.

**Student:** Is what the landlords are doing against the law?

**Margaret:** Yes. But a lot of times the tenants don't know that. They don't know what their rights are. And the other times they're afraid to do something about it. If a tenant doesn't get any services and contacts her landlord and he doesn't do anything about it, she can call 311 to register the complaint, she can come to our organization, she can file what is called HP action, which gets a judge to mandate the landlord to fix the problem. So there are a lot of things the

tenant can do. So we help individual tenants, and we organize groups of tenants. A good thing to do is first start by getting everyone together to form a tenant association. This way when you have a large number you're a lot stronger and you won't be afraid of the landlord picking on each one of you because you have a group and you deal with him on an organizational level.