
July 14, 2002

Whose Neighborhood?

By JUDITH MATLOFF

IT was a serene barbecue in the back garden of a town house on West 141st Street. The roses were magenta. Chicken sizzled. A toddler giggled as he tasted his first mulberry. But the talk quickly turned to the unwanted visitors who haunted the stoop. As birds cheeped, the host described his two-year battle to get the men to move.

"Tar is too messy," he said. "We sprinkled lime to spoil their trousers, but they simply put cardboard on top. We splashed buckets of Pine-Sol to wash away the stink of their urine, but it evaporated.

"The only thing which works is negotiation. We struck a deal with the ringleader that we wouldn't call the cops if his boys kept off the property. The problem is, the old bunch were arrested, and we have to train these new guys."

It is not easy to have cocaine dealers work from your doorstep. They commandeer all the parking spaces, block the entrance and urinate on the stoop. Before Sept. 11, the police described this sliver of Harlem as ground zero because Broadway, between the 137th and 145th Street subway stops, is the main distribution point in the Northeast for millions, if not billions, of dollars in cocaine.

But as the neighborhood has gentrified in the past few years, it has become a surreal world in which the middle-class values of urban homesteaders collide with the gritty street reality of "Traffic."

For those living in this illicit open-air bazaar, the reminders start the moment they step out to get the morning newspaper. Residents carry brooms to sweep up bottles and gnawed ribs left by dealers the night before. Coming home from work, they must weave and bob like halfbacks through throngs of young Dominican dealers taking orders on cellphones. Hundreds of men block the sidewalks, passing packages hand-to-hand or into the tinted windows of Jeep Cherokees. Merengue blaring from radios placed on car hoods makes living-room windows shiver.

Nearly all the local stores cater to dealers, not residents. There are suppliers of cellphones, for keeping in touch with clients. There is 24-hour money-wiring to send earnings back home. Nail salons offer shelter from the rain -- and the police. Clothing stores sell the dealers' uniforms -- black, puffy North Face jackets in winter, white untucked T-shirts in summer.

To the exasperation and sometimes anger of longtime black residents and white and black middle-class pioneers, the dealers work hard, keeping trading hours as fixed as Wall Street's. Nearly all are Dominicans, many from poor villages, who can make more money in one day selling cocaine -- as much as \$1,000 -- than in a month back home. Their customers are wholesalers, rich men in S.U.V.'s who travel the East Coast from Miami to New England. Drugs are stored in apartment buildings and handed in person by mobile units that roam Broadway like an occupying force.

When the police pushed the drug trade out of Washington Heights in the 1980's, dealers found an ideal alternative to the south. Easy access to the George Washington Bridge and the West Side Highway served clients well. The dealers found protection in this close-knit Dominican community.

Despite the best efforts of the police and the complaints of the growing number of new residents, the neighborhood still belongs to the dealers, even though the streets are cleaner than they were two years ago. As gentrification creeps north of Columbia University, middle-class settlers are fixing up 19th-century

town houses that were once rooming houses, crack dens or mere shells. Prices range from \$450,000 for a place that needs total renovation to \$750,000 for one in good shape. On 141st and 142nd Streets combined, more than a dozen properties have been renovated in the past two years. And with every teacher and musician who moves in, there are more calls to 911 to report drug activity.

A Day in the Life

Here's a typical workday on 141st Street between Broadway and Amsterdam.

11 a.m. The dealers show up for trading, easing out of livery cabs from the Bronx. They take up positions on both sides of the street, assume sovereignty of their brick and asphalt trading floor. They squat-sit on milk crates, slouch against parked cars, work their cellphones:

"Thirty pesos a gram."

"Five, fine."

"The bodega."

"The usual."

11:30 a.m. One dealer is unlucky. He sells a kilo (2.2 pounds) of cocaine to two undercover narcotics agents from the Police Department. As the dealer is handcuffed, his colleagues scatter to a traffic island on Broadway, as if they're playing a high-stakes game of tag. "Llevaron" ("They got him"), one says into a two-way radio as he trots into the dry-cleaner's on the corner.

The agents hold up the cocaine like a trophy trout. "You're bringing down the neighborhood," one agent says to dealer.

"No es mío, no es mío," the suspect murmurs as he's led to an unmarked car. The officer turns to a reporter: "You can photograph him, but not the car. We want to come back."

Noon Women hang out of apartment windows and set lawn chairs up on the pavement to keep watch.

1 p.m. The dealers' ringleader, an elegant man jangling with gold chains, prowls the block, talking on his cellphone. The dealers return. A patrol car approaches. They dart into an apartment building.

1:30 p.m. A dealer fishes into his sock and walks toward a man ambling down the street, handing him a plastic-wrapped package like a baton in a relay.

2 p.m. Lunch. "Mango, mango," calls a vendor, pushing a cart packed with fruit sculptured like flowers. The dealers study menus taped to a lamppost on the corner. Two illegal restaurants that operate out of apartment kitchens, La Chory and Sazón Gladys, advertise this way. The fellows phone in orders for fried chicken, rice and kidney beans.

2:30 p.m. Lunches are delivered, \$6 each. The dealers sit on the stoop of a town house and toss their empty aluminum containers on the ground when they're done. There's a trash can 30 feet away.

3 p.m. The dealers plant their crates in the middle of the sidewalk. A women pushing a stroller tries to pass. The men move, slightly. A police car drives by. They don't look up.

5 p.m. Snack time. A tropical-ice cart rolls by. The dealers eat under the shade of a honey locust tree, absent-mindedly picking off pieces of bark. An elderly resident comes out and yells at them. They ignore her.

6 p.m. Traffic police check license plates of New Jersey cars parked on the street. Word gets out about a bust on Broadway, and the dealers disperse.

8 p.m. The dealers return. Girlfriends promenade with babies. Judging from the number of kisses and the infants, the men are popular.

8:30 p.m. "Pig!" a woman yells from a window as a dealer urinates on a car.

10:45 p.m. Three men in braids check the rim of the front wheel of a car. They look disappointed. "Where is it? You said it would be there," one demands into his cellphone.

An Old-Boy Network

The police are all too aware of how drug operations have transformed the neighborhood. And, in fact, there has been some improvement over the past year. But serious problems persist. A major obstacle the police cite is complicity in the community.

Undercover Police Department narcotics agents have trouble infiltrating an old-boy network that depends on relatives and boyhood friends. Although plenty of local Dominicans don't deal drugs, traffickers are often protected by their countrymen. And given that many families have relatives who have overstayed their visas, they are not going to call the police to report drug action.

Local merchants also depend on the drug trade. When the police parked a van on the corner of 141st Street and Broadway last year, shopkeepers grumbled to the Civilian Complaint Review Board that they were losing customers. The police moved it.

Juan's Unisex on 140th Street is one of many businesses that tolerate the dealers. Near the entrance is a big sign, in Spanish, that reads: "Please do not occupy seats if you are not doing anything or getting a haircut." But on a recent morning, the barber's chairs were empty and the aquamarine vinyl benches near the window were filled. Seven men sat there, cellphones in hand, chatting while looking over their shoulders at the police car parked outside.

When a woman walked in, seeking a manicure, the men quietly stared. As the last nail was polished, a young man came through the door. He plucked from his baggy jeans a wad of money the height of a platform shoe. The barber shoved him toward the door, with a hard glance toward the woman.

"Come back later," the barber said. "Go play basketball or something."

The war against drugs in Harlem has gotten a fresh push from the new police commissioner, Raymond W. Kelly. For the last two months, the police have saturated the area with every type of unit: sniffer dogs, cyclists, cavalry, vans, cars, foot patrols. This police presence can turn a simple act, like getting a quart of milk, into an adventure.

Edwin Cahill, a baritone who sings opera and lives on 141st Street, was unable to enter his house one night because 30 SWAT police in riot gear had sealed off his street. A helicopter hovered. Mr. Cahill waited by the barricade for 15 minutes until undercover agents with shields and battering rams charged two apartment buildings. Three officers bearing automatic weapons then escorted him to his door. "I would advise staying home tonight," one officer suggested.

Such raids, in which the police regularly make hauls of five kilos of cocaine with a street value of \$150,000, occur so often that some residents have adjusted their routines. A couple that owned a dog plotted a special route for evening walks to avoid canine sniffer units. This decision came after one tense night when the dog almost got into a fight with an unleashed Rottweiler, which was circling a mound of white powder at the corner deli.

One family routinely kept a bottle of chardonnay chilled in case of a raid. When a bust took place, they phoned friends and invited them over to watch this particular reality show from the comfort of their living room.

While most New Yorkers complain about scarce parking spaces, the problem is especially severe here, because the dealers snap up spots for their clients. Sometimes dealers sit inside a car all day, just to save a place. For that reason, Marie King, a homeowner, decided that it wasn't worth buying a car. When her relatives come over from New Jersey, they double-park outside the house and Ms. King visits with them in the car. "They come into the house only to make phone calls or use the bathroom," she said.

Unlikely Helping Hands

Except for McDonald's and a lonely Rite Aid pharmacy, most mainstream retailers have shunned the area. So the neighborhood's growing middle class cheered last summer when a Starbucks opened at 138th and Broadway.

At first, the dealers avoided the place. But soon enough, they heard about the clean bathrooms, and since only customers are allowed to use the toilets, the dealers have become steady buyers of takeout coffee.

"They always order ventis," a cashier said brightly, "and are great tippers."

As if on cue, a man in a white Yankees T-shirt sidled in, holding a walkie-talkie. He mouthed, "Latte," and disappeared behind the chartreuse door in the back. A few minutes later he walked out, leaving his change on the counter.

Residents generally agree that while the dealers are a nuisance, paradoxically, they keep the streets safe. The dealers don't want addicts on the street who will attract the police, and because theirs is a wholesale business, their S.U.V.-driving clients generally aren't the type who mug.

The 30th Precinct, which covers western Harlem from 133rd to 155th Street, led the city in narcotics arrests last year, with 5,103. But it reported only 24 shootings, ranking 27th of the city's 76 precincts.

"These kids don't carry guns; they're not interested in killing anyone," said Stephanie Herman, a sociology professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice who has studied the 136th Street drug dealers for the last six years. "It's simply a job to support their families."

Residents swap tales about dealers who helped them carry groceries or wheelchair-bound parents into the house. When the elderly mother of one 141st Street resident visits from Queens, the dealers offer her a parking spot.

Bradley Erickson, a fashion designer who lives on 141st Street, told how dealers rescued a neighbor when muggers followed him into his building. "He yelled for help," Mr. Erickson said, "and the dealers came and beat the guys up."

Helpful or not, the police say they are determined to get as many dealers off the street as possible.

"We're doing the best we can," Deputy Inspector Thomas Cody, commander of the 30th Precinct, told a meeting of outraged residents this past spring. The problem, he said, was that his men were outnumbered. There are 189 officers permanently assigned to the precinct, and another 20 temporary officers. There are also 100 undercover narcotics agents who work the area.

An officer on patrol opposite the Starbucks, however, said they were fighting a losing battle. "There are no grounds to search them," he said. "It's not illegal to loiter." He pointed to seven men playing dominoes on a nearby traffic island. Every now and then, one would get a call on his cellphone and amble down the block. "Even if I ticketed them for spitting," the officer said, "they'd be back on the street tomorrow."

Police officers complain privately about judges who set low bail for repeat offenders back, almost guaranteeing that they will soon be back on the street. Officers also lament what they describe as a lack of support from federal agencies like the Internal Revenue Service and the Immigration and Naturalization

Service, which they say could do more to investigate money-laundering businesses and deport dealers who have overstayed their visas.

The I.N.S. and I.R.S. have repeatedly snubbed invitations to attend community meetings on the drug problem. The I.R.S. has said it does not comment on investigations that are under way; I.N.S. representatives were not available for comment.

Many residents do believe that more could be done. They say politicians are apathetic because they don't live in the district. The current renaissance of black Harlem has largely passed by this Latino corner, they say. "We're in a political no-man's land," said Yuien Chin, the leader of the Hamilton Heights-West Harlem Community Preservation Organization.

But Robert Jackson, a Democratic city councilman who represents the area, denied at a town meeting last month that he didn't take the district seriously. "The drug problem here is my No. 1 issue," he said.

Even the angriest local residents admit the streets are cleaner than they were two years ago, thanks to more police attention and fewer abandoned houses to trade in front of. Through June 16, 2,092 drug suspects had been arrested in the precinct. The officers mill through the streets, stopping cars, checking out-of-town licenses, doing buy-and-bust operations. Meanwhile, the District Attorney's office is pressuring landlords to evict drug-trafficking tenants.

Many residents, however, wonder why, after so many crackdowns, they still see the same faces on the street. "Look at that one, and that one, and that one," said one woman, pointing to a cluster of men on a neighbor's stoop. "They've been here for years."

But the dealers' numbers have shrunk, and they are less brazen. Deputy Inspector Cody says he thinks his precinct's latest assault will make a lasting difference.

It already has, according to Professor Herman. Some dealers she met through her study are talking about leaving the stoops to pursue jobs in modeling or take computer courses. "They are always asking me if I can get them a job," she said. "One even asked me for help in writing a résumé."