The "G" Word: Growing Up Boerum Hill

By Jackson Hill

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First Reader: Cathryn Prince

Second Reader: Andrew Salomon

One bedroom, one full bathroom, a small kitchen and a medium sized living room; stained black wood floors with tiny pieces missing run through the apartment. A lime yellow bucket sits under the showerhead to catch the excess water that just won't stop flowing. A low-quality television sits on top of a rundown coffee table. A guinea pig cage posted up on the floor in the corner with hay, animal feces and animal food spread about. A love seat in the corner opposite of the guinea pig cage, and a small cot on the other side that provides as a couch and bed with a blown up air mattress next to it.

Run-down staircases where the smell of marijuana slithers about and elevators that often times stall out. Building doors that creak and squeal with each movement and sidewalks filled with cracks and loitering teens and adolescents.

This is what the McBarnett household, a family of four, sees every morning, after they slowly wipe the crust from their eyes and awaken, ready to face the day.

Radcliffe Roye, Jamaican photographer, expressed that he feels his job is to find displacement and capture it. He describes a time when he was walking throughout Boerum Hill and the Gowanus Housing Projects in the early 2000s and saw a rundown park. "Its benches are flipped upside down, with the gates locked shut and garbage littered everywhere…You would never see any of this in a white neighborhood. It is as if they are saying 'your children can't play here.'"

Gowanus Housing, of the New York City Housing Authority, NYCHA, has a great view of Nicholas Naquan Heyward Jr. Park, the heart of Boerum Hill Brooklyn. From the top of the buildings one can overlook the busy streets of downtown Brooklyn. Or one can gaze into the distance to see the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Because it is one of the smaller housing projects in New York City, the Gowanus Housing community is one that is close-knit and provides a sense

of togetherness. A region home to different cultures and ideals, Brooklyn is the city's most populated location with more than 2.6 million residents, with about twelve thousand of those residents living in the Boerum Hill neighborhood. Brooklyn is one of the most diverse locations in New York State, shown by a census taken in the late 1600s, saying that nearly half were Dutch, but others came from England, France, Germany and even slaves, who made up about one-third of the population. Slavery was not deemed illegal until 1827.

"I come out of my apartment and I can see all my friends and we can play basketball together and then you meet other kids and it kind of creates a brotherhood," David Thomas, 16, said. Surrounding Nicholas Naquan Heyward Jr. Park are brownstones crammed together, like the families inside each apartment.

Court Street down to Fourth Avenue. Schermerhorn Street over to Baltic Street. Between the Brooklyn Bridge and the Atlantic Terminal. That's Boerum Hill.

Once an area filled with warehouses and manufacturing, it's now an area where vibrant store shops filled with organic foods took over; the entire makeup of Boerum Hill has changed. Tucked into the northwest corner of Brooklyn sits Boerum Hill. Once an area known for its family-run businesses and local pop-up shops, it transformed into an epicenter for retail businesses, condominiums and the upper-class majority.

"We want to make the structure look more appealing from the outside for now and then we will restructure the inside over time," New York City Housing Authority Representative Lisa Hundley said. In Brooklyn's past the sounds of hammers and drills meant that there was opportunities and jobs, but now it means something new is about to replace the old.

Clearly, Boerum Hill is under revitalization as different parts of the neighborhood are in different stages. On one corner there is a chicken spot, known for their fried chicken with French

fries and just a couple blocks up in the more refurbished area, stands a movie theater and a Trader Joes.

"I can see money being distributed around the neighborhood but not to those of us in the neighborhood that would really benefit from it. They change things around us in the hopes of pushing out, but it is not going to happen" Thomas said.

Those Hispanics and African Americans who are living in Downtown Brooklyn face the reality that every day, due to former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg's plan, that has now been carried on by the Bill de Blasio administration, they could be forced out of their homes and forced out of the area they've been in for a greater part of their lives.

"They've been doing construction around here for so many years now, that by the time they take down the scaffolding I could probably walk by without recognizing my building," Richard McBarnett said. "We came in here around the same month as another family, but they're already gone. Displacement, kicked out, given a better opportunity, I don't know why they gone, but they definitely wasn't rich and was struggling to live here in the first place."

Areas of Brooklyn were being torn down in order for high rises to be constructed and in order to conform to an upper or middle class lifestyle. Fancy and colorful storefronts, and condominiums and high-rises are among the many new additions to Boerum Hill.

"Maaaannn," McBarnett began with a heavy sigh, "I know this situation my family is in right now isn't the best, and as the man of the house I feel I am responsible, but I also know that at any point they can kick our asses up on out of here but honestly, thanks be to God that we aren't gone yet."

Sounds of hammers, drills and feet flutter this Gowanus affordable housing in the year 2019. They are currently renovating the building, fixing the exterior before they tackle the interior.

“We used to live in Antigua,” wife of Richard, Mary McBarnett said. “The girls don’t remember much because they were little, but here is far better.” We don’t live in the most extravagant place, but hey it does the job and makes ends meet.”

“I remember some parts mommy. I remember that time the roof came off the house in the hurricane,” Kellyn McBarnett, 19, said.

Mary’s tone quickly went from reminiscent to irritated in a matter of minutes, “This shit sucks, pardon my language, but it does. Since we came here in 2008 things have only gotten worse. De Blasio and his people came up with plans to revitalize the community but they forgot all about us,” McBarnett said, her voice raising.

“I remember when the bullet came through the window,” Mary McBarnett said. She was talking about the time in June 2012 when two gangs took to Nicholas Naquan Heyward JR. Park, but in the end, there were no causalities, just shattered car windows and yellow police tape. “It was me and the girls watching ‘SpongeBob.’ That’s their favorite show even though they are grown and somehow it never leaves the TV screen unless the TV is off,” said Mary McBarnett.

She continues with, “As soon as that bullet came through, we hit the floor, huddled around each other and prayed; one after another, shots were fired, until next thing you know police cars were in the area.” After this occurred the only way one was allowed in the area was if you lived inside the taped off area and could provide identification. McBarnett vividly described the event as if it happened just yesterday but, this is “how things used to be,” said McBarnett and her family.

The same park that was the location of this shooting seven years ago, is now a location of children of all ages and races. The basketball courts, once a place where gangs sat on benches smoking marijuana and wreaking havoc, are now a place where people can safely walk and no longer be in fear. Since Mayor Bill de Blasio announced his affordable housing plan in 2014 the Boerum Hill area has become tremendously popular for outsiders.

"Unity makes strength." That is the motto of Brooklyn, and it is something that the entire community is trying to embody.

Three-story rowhouses made of brownstones are what make up a majority of the neighborhood. Brooklyn in the 1600s was originally six Dutch towns: Gravesend, Breuckelen, Brooklyn, New Amersfoort, Flatlands, Midwest, Flatbush, New Utrecht, and Boswijck, Bushwick. But even before then, Brooklyn was home for a Native American tribe. When the Native Americans had settled the land, it was just a marshland that surround what is now the Gowanus canal. In 1664 the English conquered and gained control of Manhattan and Brooklyn, establishing Kings County, the region that Boerum Hill is located in. Between the years of 1760 and 1790 the Treaty of Paris was created and installed, which helped to further advance New York and allow it to become an American state. The 1700s, a time where an influx of immigrants enter Brooklyn. Brooklyn was known as the city of immigrants and those immigrants were able to find opportunity and work in small factories as well as in the Navy Yard.

The 1800s was a period where Brooklyn continued to grow and flourish, as many famous landmarks were created. Prospect Park, the Brooklyn Museum and Brooklyn Children's Museum, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and the Brooklyn Bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge brought in immigrants who were trying to escape the high prices that were in what is today considered Manhattan. The Erie Canal was completed in 1825, and this allowed the economy to boom as

well as the trading of goods, ideals and people. In the mid 1800s there was an enormous influx of immigrants as the population of Brooklyn grew to nearly 80,000 people because of a wave of European immigrants. A second wave of immigration in the 1800s brought in Europeans, Russians, Italians, Polish and also Jews. At the end of the nineteenth century the population in Brooklyn exceeded one million people and more than 30 percent of those residents were born outside of the United States. Outsiders are a key aspect of Brooklyn and it has not changed dating back to 100 years ago.

The 1900s began a time period where hard infrastructure began its slow climb to what is has become today. The completion of more bridges and also elevated railroads helped with the urbanization of Brooklyn. Baseball, America's national sport, was brought to the borough with the Brooklyn Dodgers and Ebbets Field. In the early 1900s Brooklyn became known as one of the leading sugar producers in the United States. Crime began to subside in the late 1990s and neighborhoods like Boerum Hill became safer to live in but at the same time became more expensive to live in. These neighborhoods became places people wanted to move into and no longer avoid.

The neighborhood was an area that was true to the heart, meaning shops and stores were owned by locals of the neighborhood, but it has now become the new spot for all the chain businesses including Starbucks, Chipotle, Shake Shack, Dunkin' Donuts, and a MAC cosmetics store. There used to be a family thrift shop, that sold more than just clothes, but toys for children and even house goods and necessities, but that is now going out of business solely because the rent in the area has sky rocketed and become nearly impossible for small businesses.

"I had to increase rents in order to keep up with the times, there was nothing I could do," Thomas Moore, the landlord for the Elberih Deli said. Moore did acknowledge, however that he

realizes that the uptick in rent drove some residents out but the one thing that he constantly uttered was that, “there was nothing he could do.”

Rent in Boerum Hill has had a recent spike in years. For a one-bedroom apartment in the area one could pay as little as $2,000 a month, but as much as $5,000 a month. That would be the price to pay for a more lavish lifestyle of living but even the prices to live in Affordable Housing units has risen as well. The McBarnett family paid under $1,000, at one point to live in the apartment they have lived in for years now. However, now they are paying $1,200to live there. Their rent rose, therefore making the price of living that much higher.

“There used to be so many local restaurants that I loved, down on Smith Street, but they knocked those down and started replacing them with clothing stores or places like Starbucks,” Thomas said. Many members of the community feel powerless and have lost faith and are giving up on Brooklyn. They are giving up on the memory of what the area once was. The area is now a host for gentrification. Gentrification has become that fly that that just leave house; One minute it is gone and the next it appears right where it was the first time.

“Old Timers Day, and Family Day used to be some of my favorite holidays in the summer in the neighborhood,” McBarnett said. “Everybody used to come outside, and you would see people you have not seen in years, people you thought had moved out.” She spoke those words as if this was a distant memory, something that no longer existed. Even her children reminisced the fun times they had had on these days, reminiscing about hearing the ringing bells of the ice cream trucks, while they huddled under the water sprinkler getting dosed in gallons of freezing cold water, or while they were on the swings or sprinting up and down the outdoor basketball courts filled with dangerous cracks and chips.

Old Timers Day, the name speaks for itself, it's old but that doesn't mean it should be forgotten about, but Gowanus Community Board Member, Devin Gomes, said that the community does not have enough funds to continue with those, "outdated traditions." Gomes addressed this by saying, "There used to be a negative stigma placed around this neighborhood, and myself and other board members agree that the community has gone through a complete one hundred and eighty degree turn. Foreigners to the neighborhood used to be scared to walk through, but now it has become a place where foreigners want to reside," Gomes said. The members representing the community are no longer acting in the interest of the community, something that has been voiced throughout the years. Their sole focus is making the neighborhood more appealing to outsiders.

The Community Center of Gowanus Housing was once a place of large gatherings where children could go and make friendships and make good decisions in their lives. They have distractions to keep them out of trouble and out of the local gangs. However, it was closed over a decade ago and is no longer in commission.

"Having this space and not utilizing it to its fullest potential is a disservice to the community," Executive Director of Arts in the Gowanus Abby Subak said. Subak added that she realizes the community is trying to speak up, but that she believes they need to speak even louder. The center was temporarily opened and according to Subak, "Just in the short time that the center was reopened, you could see the ray of hope."

When the center was reopened for a trial run, Imani Gillison, Gowanus resident and activity coordinator, recalls children coming up to her in the street with smiles on their faces asking about future activities that would be held in the center. The Community Center helps build a community which inherently ties into the social justice needs of the community. "There is

a lot of good that comes out of Public Housing," said resident Tracy Pinkard. Residents don't want the officials to give up on their community

"The change is being built around us," Brien said. Brien, a local of the Boerum Hill neighborhood notes how there is so much change going on around his community including the buildings and businesses, but also within the community itself. "This neighborhood has made me who I am today," Brien said. "It's old traditions and events made me enjoy living here but those have all slowly withered away, and it doesn't feel like they will ever come back."

Because of increased prices around the neighborhood, public housing rent which used to be well under one thousand a month has rose to one thousand two hundred dollars for a one-bedroom apartment. "Nobody goes up there," McBarnett said, referring to the corner of Court Street and Atlantic Avenue. "It is too expensive up there."

"You know what we got on our corner? We got a liquor store, they got a movie theater. We have a chicken spot, and they got a Trader Joes," Brien said.

According to the 2017 American Community Survey, nearly one thousand new housing buildings have been built since the year 2000 in Boerum Hill. Those new buildings are the attractions for foreigners and cross-country/state residents. With a population of just under 12,000 residents, almost 2% of the residents have come from abroad. Gowanus Community Board member Jane Nance notes, "A lot of Europeans have recently moved into the area, and something we noticed is a lot of them use their residences in order to run small businesses."

The strip that runs throughout Boerum Hill is constantly changing with the times. Those who have moved out would not recognize it if they came back years later. The pop-up shops that once littered the area are disappearing and being replaced with those expensive chain companies that everyone has become so fond of.

"It is just so surreal to see what the neighborhood has transformed in to. They are basically cornering in the urban community, urban meaning the black community," Mercedes Crespo said. Crespo has been a Boerum Hill resident for nearly thirty years, living in the same brownstone, year after year.

Many other residents feel the same was as Crespo and feel as if the higher ups have left them for dead. There is money being distributed to outside businesses, and to changing up the image of the neighborhood, but those who have been residents for quite some time have noticed that they are beginning to be left in the dust.

"It is not going to happen," said McBarnett. "They think that because of all the change around us we will just get up and leave, but it is just not going to happen."

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Richard McBarnett, May 26, 2019; Resident of Gowanus housing and husband of Mary (347) 705-9915

Kellyn McBarnett, May 26, 2019; Daughter of Mary and Richard McBarnett (347) 705-9915

David Thomas, June 1, 2019; Former resident of Gowanus Housing and has since moved South (917) 499-5504

Lisa Hundley, January 2, 2020; NYCHA Representative (917) 863-5996 *personal number*

Radcliffe Roye, December 11, 2019; Freelance Award-Winning Photojournalist, who revolves work around Gentrification; (917) 589-0850

Thomas Moore, January 7 2020; Landlord for Elberih Deli

Gavin Brien, December 20 2019; Boerum Hill Resident; gavin.brien@purchase.edu

Devin Gomes, February 5 2020; Gowanus Community Board Member, and resident of Gowanus Housing (516) 551-3244

Abby Subak, February 1 2020; Executive Director of Arts in Gowanus Housing (212) 522-1126

Imani Gillison, March 1, 2020; Gowanus resident and activity coordinator (929) 280-6482

Tracy Pinkard, January 8, 2020; Longtime Gowanus resident (876) 892-3409

Mercedes Crespo, July 2019; Boerum Hill Resident for over twenty-five years; mbth9@aol.com