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## If You're Thinking of Living In/Bedford Park; Stable, Convenient and Committed

By **MAGGIE GARB**

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, the future of Bedford Park, a tiny neighborhood in the north Bronx, looked bleak. Farther south, whole neighborhoods were plagued by drugs, abandoned buildings and trash-strewn vacant lots. And it seemed to many observers that it was just a matter of time before Bedford Park would face a similar fate.

That did not happen. Instead, Bedford Park residents formed community organizations to fight for better city services, to pressure landlords to sell or renovate buildings, to improve neighborhood schools and, as many like to say, "to just get to know our neighbors."

"People said 25 years ago that the neighborhood wouldn't last," said Barbara Stronczer, the president of the Bedford Mosholu Community Organization, which will celebrate its 25th anniversary next month. "They thought there was this syndrome of the South Bronx moving north."

"We had lots of battles and lots of meetings," she added. "We are a more diverse and strong neighborhood today."

Some attribute the neighborhood's stability to its location. Tucked between the New York Botanical Garden and the Herbert H. Lehman College campus, the neighborhood is about a half hour's subway ride from Midtown Manhattan. The Metro-North train station near Webster Avenue along with a handful of major highways nearby provide residents with quick access to jobs and entertainment in Westchester, Queens and New Jersey. Both the botanical garden and the college offer various educational programs and entertainment for children and adults.

The tree-lined Mosholu Parkway snakes along Bedford Park's northern border, and the 1,122-acre Van Cortlandt Park lies just beyond its northwest corner. There is some debate about the neighborhood's southern border, but most people agree that it is 198th or 196th Street.

"We have beautiful parks, excellent transportation and affordable housing," Ms. Stronczer said. "With all that, there didn't seem to be any reason why this neighborhood should fall apart."

Despite the benefits of its location, most residents credit church groups and longtime residents for preserving the neighborhood. "Community groups formed all across the northwest Bronx at a critical time, and it had a snowballing effect," said John M. Reilly, who grew up in Bedford Park and returned from college in the 70's, when the neighborhood seemed bent on self-destruction. Determined to help turn the community around, Mr. Reilly joined a tenant organizing campaign.

A FEW years later, they formed the Fordham Bedford Housing Corporation, a nonprofit community development and property management organization that owns and manages more than 70 apartment buildings across the northwest Bronx.

Mr. Reilly is the organization's executive director. He and his wife, Lois Harr, an adjunct professor at

Manhattan College, are raising their two daughters in the Queen Anne cottage where his father grew up.

"Bedford Park never had a serious problem with abandonment, but there was a lot of fear," Mr. Reilly said. "A lot of people worked very hard to keep their buildings up and ultimately restore confidence in the neighborhood."

That work paid off as property values stabilized in the 80's and began to climb in recent years. One-family houses went up 25 percent to 30 percent in the last 10 years.

Many of the old Art Deco buildings along the Grand Concourse and Mosholu Parkway were converted to co-ops in the late 80's. One- and two-bedroom co-ops with hardwood floors, nine-foot ceilings and crown molding are priced from \$50,000 to \$90,000, said Joel Fishman, a real-estate developer who is an owner of JTF Management in the Bronx.

"They are selling quickly," he said. "A two-bedroom will be on the market for about two days."

Rents are rising, but a two-bedroom apartment can still be found for \$700 to \$950 a month. One-bedrooms and studios run from \$500 to \$700, depending on the condition of the building and its location. Farther north in the neighborhood, housing prices are slightly higher, Mr. Fishman said.

The neighborhood's hilly side streets are lined with 80- to-100-year-old frame houses. Many have been subdivided into two or three apartments. One-family houses sell for \$185,000 to \$200,000, and two- and three-family houses for \$190,000 to \$220,000, said Joe Maymi, an owner of Coldwell Banker Realty Associates.

JOHN VARELA, the owner of Heritage Realty, said: "These are affordable houses for working families. Most don't have new kitchens or new bathrooms. Maybe they were upgraded 25 or 30 years ago. It's the handyman specials that fly off the market."

About 150 years ago, much of Bedford Park was part of the vast estate owned by Leonard Jerome, Winston Churchill's grandfather. He sold the Bedford Park tract in the late 1860's, but it took 20 years before a group of developers subdivided the property and began building houses. Designed as a suburban retreat, the community was named for the London suburb of Bedford, which was the inspiration for the Queen Anne architecture seen in many of the original houses.

One of the few remaining buildings from that era is the Bedford Park Congregational Church, built in 1891-92 and recently designated a landmark by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. The rustic-style church was designed by Edgar K. Bourne, the son of the church's first minister.

The opening of the Jerome Avenue subway line in 1917 and the Third Avenue El in 1920 attracted large numbers of middle-class families to the area. Among the neighborhood's earliest residents was William Fox, a founder of the film company that later became 20th Century Fox.

In spite of the Depression, a number of apartment houses were built in the 1930's, including many of the Art Deco buildings that line the major thoroughfares. After World War II, large numbers of Irish, Jewish and later Puerto Rican families moved to Bedford Park.

"It was a very Irish neighborhood," said Emilia Kazimiroff, who with her husband, Theodore, moved into an apartment in Bedford Park in 1940. They later bought a house and raised their two children there. "Our kids weren't Irish," she continued, "but they would come home from school and say, 'Can't we be a little Irish?'"

THERE were a number of artists living in the neighborhood in the 1950's and 1960's. "We used to have a summer art show each year," Mrs. Kazimiroff said. "It was a lot like Greenwich Village."

By the 1970's, recent immigrants were replacing the older population. Today, the community is home to a vibrant mix of ethnic groups: Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Koreans, Albanians, Bangladeshis and Indians, as well as a few of the older Irish and Jewish families.

Though there are few restaurants and just a tiny shopping strip along 204th Street, as well as shops on Jerome Avenue, there are more than half a dozen churches and several Roman Catholic schools in the area. Students in kindergarten through the eighth grades can attend the St. Philip Neri School on the Grand Concourse. St. Philip Neri Church burned to the ground in 1997. Reconstruction is expected to be completed by next Easter. The Academy of Mount St. Ursula, the oldest Catholic high school for girls in New York State, established in 1855, sits on a rocky hill on Bedford Park Boulevard.

Bedford Park's public elementary schools include P.S. 8 and the Bronx New School, a magnet school established by local parents and opened in 1988. P.S. 8 ranked 480th in reading scores out of 660 city elementary schools in the spring, while the Bronx New School ranked 330th.

Middle-school students can attend any school in District 10. Parents also helped to establish the Jonas Bronck Academy, a public middle school on the Manhattan College campus in Riverdale.

Among the neighborhood's concerns are the quality of the public schools, and some residents complain about graffiti and noise on residential streets. Yet the fears of drugs and urban blight that prompted neighbors to hold regular community meetings 25 years ago seem to have disappeared.

"It's really a quiet, comfortable community," said Ms. Harr, who teaches in the campus ministry at Manhattan College. "It's nice. You can look around and say, 'I did something to make this,' and a lot of other people can say the same thing."