

34th Avenue Oral History: Place-based Storytelling in Jackson Heights

By Bridget Bartolini

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PLACE & IDENTITY

Growing up in New York City leaves an imprint on you. It did for me. The city where I was born and raised is the biggest defining aspect of my identity; more than American, Italian, Irish, oral historian or artist, I identify as a New Yorker. When I meet someone and learn that they, too, grew up here, I immediately feel a connection. Yet, despite the affective bond shared by some New Yorkers, too often we go about our days without positive interactions with neighbors, or moments to think deeply about our surroundings. Perhaps I never would have put much thought into my hometown if I hadn't gone away to Ohio for college, then to Tokyo for a three-year fellowship. I returned to New York with a heightened appreciation for the energy and diversity that I'd previously taken for granted, an appreciation that could only have been gained from time spent away. Just as a fish might struggle to describe what it's like to live in water unless it's been caught and released at some point, I gained the ability to see and name the ocean I'd been swimming in.

While relishing all things New York upon my return from Japan, I also felt a need for New Yorkers to slow down and appreciate this city, to meaningfully connect with our neighborhoods and the people with whom we share them. Hoping to address this need, I pursued a Master of Arts in Community Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. I studied with the inimitable Professor Hope Leichter, who researched storytelling and had found that the act of sharing personal stories has the power to build a basis for empathy, helping us move beyond simplistic conceptions of other people and places to attain more nuanced understandings of others. Inspired by Dr. Leichter, I

realized that storytelling is the perfect vehicle to do the kind of community work that fosters thoughtful encounters that can transform strangers into neighbors. In 2011, I began producing free community programs that bring people together through sharing personal stories about their neighborhoods, and in 2013 established the Five Boro Story Project to produce these hyperlocal events citywide.

Though I intuitively understood that the places where we grow up and live our lives shape our identities and inform our senses of self, my earliest place-based storytelling events brought home just how profoundly places impact us, and how deeply we can internalize stigmas and stereotypes about where we live. After I produced an event with performances of true-life stories and poems about the Bronx, an attendee commented, “This shows me today that we’re not this backwards place people like to think we are.” At an event in Staten Island someone said, “We may be a garbage dump, but we’re a garbage dump with culture!” And after a South Bronx event an attendee told me, “Thank you for making the Bronx relevant for something other than violence and conflict.” These comments demonstrate how sharing personal stories can subvert stereotypes, expand our understandings of places, and help us take more pride in where we’re from.

My storytelling work taught me that places are not only full of personal meaning, but constitute a significant component of individual identity, and showed me how profoundly the ideas about the places we consider “home” are bound up in our personhood. I joined the Oral History Master of Arts program at Columbia University in part so to learn how to archive stories that were shared at Five Boro Story Project events.

I started researching “place” for my thesis, with the goal of articulating the value of place-based storytelling. My beliefs about the primacy of place were affirmed by literature describing how attachment to place is a fundamental human need, by cultural geographer Kent Ryden explaining how an individual develops a “geographically anchored personal identity” (1993, p.43) and by geographer Edward Relph (1976) expounding:

There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world (p. 43).

Place can be a kitchen, a home, a neighborhood, a city, a country; it is any location that holds meaning to an individual or group. Place is socially constructed, a fusion of experience, landscape and location bound up with history, memory and time (Ryden, 1993; 2011). People simultaneously feel they belong to many concentric places, but much more of our lives are invested in little places, such as our neighborhood or town, than in big places, such as our state or country. A location’s meaning and identity accrues from big events, historical sites and notable personalities (in New York City, these might be 9/11 or the Times Square Ball Drop; Wall Street or Broadway; Biggie Smalls or Fran Lebowitz) as much as from unique local particularities and homegrown aspects of life: the stories of individuals and families, the unremarkable rhythms of neighborhood social life, work and economy (like sitting on a stoop, playing ball in the

street, or commuting on the subway during rush hour). The little things in little places tend to hold profound personal meaning.

Philosopher Edward S. Casey (1996) argues that place is the most fundamental form of embodied experience, the site of a powerful fusion of self, space and time. We are always in place; we are never without emplaced experiences. Place anchors our bodily experiences, but is psychic as well as physical, encompassing both placial phenomena (locations and situations) and psychological phenomena (memories and thoughts). Along with physical coordinates, places have social, cultural, economic, political and psychological elements. Place defines not only who we are, but also how we live and die – our zip codes determine exposure to risks, economic opportunity, access to services, pollutants, crime and violence, and environmental irritants on physical and mental health (Fitzpatrick & LaGory, 2010).

Anthropologist Keith H. Basso argues that our tendency to think a sense of place isn't complex is because “our attachments to places, like the ease with which we usually sustain them, are unthinkingly taken for granted” (1996, p.xiii) and that “sense of place is accepted as a simple fact of life, as a regular aspect of how things are” (p. 144). We acquire a sense of place and build attachments as we unselfconsciously move through our environments every day. But, Basso argues, sense of place *is* complicated and remarkable – we construct it from our lived experiences, our cultures and the stories we hear. It is the “complex of meaning” that gives a landscape significance in the eyes of its inhabitants.

Brown and Perkins (1992) define place attachment as positively experienced bonds that arise naturally in the context of daily experience, often without awareness or

intent, and that provide anchors in life that orient individuals to who they are. Relph asserts that place attachment is so intrinsic to life that "to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place" (1976, p. 1). Scholars have found that a whole host of benefits come with strong attachment to place: social well-being, a sense of connection and belonging (Richardson, 1984); enhanced individual, group, and cultural self-esteem, self-worth, and self-pride (Low, 1992); feelings of order and personal wholeness (Ryden, 1993); a sense of peace, stability, continuity, and certainty (Chawla, 1992).

Relph argues that although "we may be largely unaware of the deep psychological and existential ties we have to the places where we live, the relationships are no less important for that" (1976, p. 41). Individuals rarely appreciate the depth and extent of place attachments (Brown & Perkins, 1992). We take it for granted that place simply *is* and that a sense of place is natural. For some, its ubiquitousness renders it mundane; the idea of telling or listening to stories about places does not instantly resonate with many people. Relph (1976) wrote about placelessness, or environments without significance, and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge significance in places. Sociologist David Hummon (1992) uses the term "uncommitted placelessness" to describe ambivalent community sentiment and a weak sense of local identity and emotional ties. In studying different types of connection with place, Jennifer Cross (2001) found that the strongest and most enduring attachments are based on personal history with a place, which she calls biographical relationships. In these relationships, place is an integral part of personal history. The weakest attachments are experienced by those who

see place as a commodity to be consumed; “amenity migrants” tend to have emotional connections to commodities like upscale restaurants or a mountain view, rather than to the community or relationships with other people.

Cross’s research prompted recollection of my own experiences making new acquaintances and telling them about the Five Boro Story Project’s neighborhood storytelling events. Some people react with animated excitement and others with blank expressions. From their reaction, I immediately get a sense of their relationship to New York City and the degree to which they are rooted in place; often, the ones who are most excited have grown up here, while those least excited may have moved to the city relatively recently for work or school, consider this a transient home, or have lived in so many places that they haven’t experienced strong rootedness in any particular region or amongst any community. They may feel ambivalent or incurious about what New York was before they moved here. Perhaps they love the city, but with a love that is only skin deep. They haven’t yet developed a full-bodied sense of place, accumulated through personal history, that will allow them to see beyond the opacity of the surface.

Forming relationships to places impacts our development as people. Place is part of identity and knowledge of place is closely linked to knowledge of self, to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person (Basso, 1996). Scholar Yi-Fu Tuan explains that with a strong sense of place, “Above all, we are oriented. This is a fundamental source of confidence” (1977, p. 199). A familiar landscape provides tangible reminders of the past and invites contemplation of the self who lived that past, the evolution of self, and one’s life chronology. Tuan demonstrates that people look to the past out of the need

to acquire a sense of self and of identity, to assert, “I am more than what the thin present defines” (1977, p. 186). Places aid us in understanding the full chronological depth of our identities, in making our identities whole. That may be why visiting our old neighborhood or our parents’ birthplaces are such common ways people try to reconstruct their pasts. Novelist Colson Whitehead writes of New York that we “seek ourselves in this city each time we reminisce about what was there fifteen, ten, forty years ago, because all our old places are proof that we were here” (2003, p. 9). We are created by our pasts, defined by our history, and places provide the structure for thinking about who we are; self and past and place are inextricably tied together.

Basso (1996) describes the particular way in which personal history is overlaid on geography for the Western Apache. He writes:

Most American Indian tribes embrace ‘spatial conceptions of history’ in which places and their names—and all that these may symbolize—are accorded central importance. For Indian men and women, the past lies embedded in the features of the earth—in canyons and lakes, mountains and arroyos, rocks and vacant fields—which together endow their lands with multiple forms of significance that reach into their lives and shape the way they think” (p. 34).

For all of us, personal experiences and the stories we hear create “spatial anchors.” For Apache people, spatial anchors are lakes and mountains; for New Yorkers, it’s train stations and storefronts. Shops and businesses, bus routes and train lines make up our urban landscape. For the people in my neighborhood of Jackson Heights, it’s the 82nd Street and 74th Street stations, Southridge Co-op and the Towers Co-op, Northern

Boulevard and Roosevelt Avenue, the art supply store that used to be a stationary store and the Target that used to be Colony Theatre.

SPATIALLY ANCHORED ODE TO JACKSON HEIGHTS PART 1

Get off the train at 74th Street. You're in an urban marketplace that stretches for blocks, made up of storefronts and street vendors and bargain hunters who travel here for jewels, silk and spices; for mangos, ginger and okra; for bridal wear, bangles and rings. Descend the steps of the 7 train, and pass the steamy windows of Merit Kabab Palace, your go-to spot for early morning samosas. Look up at Phayul, the Tibetan place with your favorite momos, located on the second floor above a head shop that plays prayers when you get on the train in the morning and hip hop when you come home at night. You never would've spotted the doorway that leads to Phayul had your older sister, who used to work at Chhaya on 77th Street, not guided you there.

Continue past Bombay Chat and the window advertising "Phone Repair" in English, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic and Bangla. Turn into Diversity Plaza, an unadorned concrete stretch of road where street vendors, the E, F, M, R, and 7 trains, and humanity from all corners of the world gather. Notice the paan shop, the sign that reads, "Please do not spit betel leaf saliva" and the rust-colored stains on the pavement indicating that customers aren't complying.

Pass what's left of the shops that burned down on 74th, and remember Lhasa Fast Foods, the tiny Tibetan restaurant in the back of a cell phone store that used to serve hearty soups and butter tea beneath prayer flags and portraits of the Dalai Lama. Pass

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Jackson Diner, where your mom took you for your first chicken tikka masala from a lunch buffet they've been serving since before you were born. Wonder where The Liffey, your mom's favorite Irish bar, once stood; it was around here somewhere, but closed before you came of age and she can't recall precisely which block it was on. Remember Rajbhog Sweets, where your twin sister's Gujarati boyfriend used to pick up syrupy desserts every time he visited your family. Quell the little heartaches that surface as you reflect on what once was.

Stop in Al Naimat to pick up Kashmiri chai and delight in the warmth and comfort of the sweet, creamy tea. Think back, as you do every time you come here, to Rizwan telling you how this tea gets its pink color, and how his father, who comes from a long line of sweets makers, named the restaurant to honor all the blessings from Allah throughout his struggles to establish himself and start his own business.

Listen to the cacophony of honking drivers heading towards the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, snaking around double-parked trucks making deliveries at Apna Bazaar, which regularly sees throngs of shoppers filling their carts with fruits and vegetables well past midnight. Weave through hungry crowds surrounding the Bangladeshi fuschka carts, each proudly claiming the title of "original" – the first in the neighborhood. Pass Al Noor, the halal meat shop that inexplicably plays Christmas carols all year round. Turn to survey the kulfi and momos for sale on nearly every corner, and the signs declaring "Eid Mubarak" and "Welcome to Jackson Heights" that stretch into the sky, straddling 73rd Street. Feel your heart swell with love for this place you call home.

EMOTIONS & STORIES

My spatially anchored ode shows how the Jackson Heights landscape is saturated with memories and meaning enriched by a sense of personal history. Ryden writes, “To live in a place is also to inscribe deeply on its face the paths, patterns, and events of one’s own life” (1993, p. 64). To take a walk in my neighborhood is to encounter memories that adhere to virtually every block. The complex of memories and emotions overlaying the geographical surface make me feel connected—to my mother, to my sisters, to my neighbors, to my self—and reaffirm my confidence in who I am and where I come from. Though I usually walk these familiar blocks in a hurry to get to my destination, when I slow down, I can appreciate how everything around me is elevated by association with family and friends and personal history. I feel sworn to this place.

An emotional reaction to the environment is an integral part of a sense of place. Feelings occur in space and thus inevitably become associated with places where events happened. Emotions intensify our perceptions of a place, and may be positive or negative, but Tuan (1974; 1977) and Chawla (1992) explain how familiarity with places tends to breed affection and attachment. Tuan explored topophilia, the affective bond between people and place, and wrote that topophilic sentiment can’t be claimed for a large territory, but for places that we know personally. Memories and places fuse together, so that remembering a place brings back the moods and emotions it once evoked (Cooper Marcus, 1992). Surely Basso’s assertion that sense of place summons “varying levels of mental and emotional intensity” (1996, p.145) resonates with everyone – just standing in or seeing photos of places can evoke strong reactions: the house where I grew up; the city

skyline; the park bench where my boyfriend broke up with me; my first apartment; the candy store that was our childhood paradise.

These places constitute landmarks on mental maps that we all carry with us, maps overlaid with stories that tell us who we are. These mental constructs are a product of personal experiences, cultural stereotypes, preferences, and objective information (Fitzpatrick & LaGory, 2010). For longtime dwellers, sometimes “what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now” (Whitehead, 2003, p. 4). Living in a city long-term means seeing beloved places disappear, living with what Peter Moskowitz (2018) calls “the mental geography of loss.” The memories of what is gone makes a place only more precious, heightening its resonance. Yet even as a city changes beyond recognition, stories can lend a sense of imaginative permanence to what was once there; a sense of place can remain constant even while the physical place changes. Part of the value of place-based oral histories is that they allow vanished landscapes to survive permanently. Sense of place can outlast place itself, through stories.

Narrative, or the telling of stories—origin myths and legends, folklore, family histories, political accounts, urban legends, personal experience narratives—functions as a type of cultural place attachment (Low, 1992). Humans inscribe places with stories. We hear local lore about the places we inhabit, retell those stories, add our lived experiences to the repertoire, and share them with others. As linguist Barbara Johnstone writes, “Coming to know a place means becoming a character in its stories and making it a character in yours” (1990, p. 10). Local stories, though often mundane, inform individual

and group identity – Johnstone explains that “shared knowledge of a community's stories is part of what creates a sense of community in a group” (1990, p. 121).

Stories are how we communicate and maintain what Ryden calls the “invisible landscape” – the deep world of human meanings, memories, associations and dreams laid atop the surface geography. Our sense of place is primarily a narrative construction. Through the vehicle of narrative, “the human meanings with which the landscape is imbued are given form, perpetuated, and shared; the meaning of a place for the people who live there is best captured by the stories that they tell about it” (Ryden, 1993, p. 45). Stories reveal the depth and range of significance that a place holds for those who are familiar with it. Johnstone agrees, arguing that “our sense of place and community is rooted in narration. A person is at home in a place when the place evokes stories and, conversely, stories can serve to create places” (1990, p. 5).

Personal experience narratives, the stories we share on a daily basis, may be brief and unremarkable anecdotes about one person’s experience in a particular locale, but they show the significance the teller has attached to that place and can serve to teach others about the local sense of place. By exchanging place-based stories, tellers and listeners may confirm their knowledge and attitudes about an area, expand and sharpen their knowledge, and initiate newcomers. This process links our sense of self to the physical components of a place: Ryden states that “In recounting stories of local history, people recount and reaffirm who they are” (1993, p. 65). Personal experience stories add to the collective knowledge of place that ties communities together.

Local stories that are passed down in families connect us to place and teach us how to relate to place. For me, hearing stories of my great-grandparents raising pigs in their Upper East Side apartment and butchering them in the bathtub, or lighting fires in trash cans and roasting potatoes on the street, all while knowing what an exclusive enclave the Upper East Side has become today, gave me a sense of the incredible propensity for change in New York City. It illustrated how things haven't always been as they are now and imparted the lesson that things can't possibly stay this way for very long. Hearing the way things were in my parents', grandparents' and great-grandparents' time may have helped me to understand our present condition is not immutable, imagine alternatives, and feel that I just might be able to play a role in shaping the city. In this way, awareness of history can help us imagine a different future.

We are also exposed to local stories in the news, media, television, movies and novels, which shape our perceptions and expectations about places. This tends to be where we encounter the most place-based stereotypes. The person who told me, "Thank you for making the Bronx relevant for something other than violence and conflict" surely was speaking as much from images they've taken in through the media as from personal experience. I have demonstrated how stories play a part in the iterative construction of identities and senses of place, and that the stories we're exposed to matter. A person who attended a Five Boro Story Project event and wrote on a reflection wall, "This shows me the Bronx isn't so bad" undoubtedly had internalized media that said the Bronx *is* bad, and then heard personal stories at the event that provided an impactful counterpoint. The stories themselves may not have been particularly positive – the storytellers were not

looking at the past through rose-colored glasses, but were instead sharing true life stories rich in details of life, landscape and characters of the Bronx. The stories were imbued with the respect that storytellers bear for their own local people and places, and that nuance and respect can have a positive impact on identity, regardless of story content.

Ryden states that “cultural regions are not phenomena with uncomplicated meanings but are continually constructed and contested by their very nature” (2011, p. xiv). Oral histories, local stories and accounts of personal experiences, when purposefully shared with the public—be it through community storytelling events, listening parties, podcasts, soundwalks, or other channels—contribute to the ongoing development of the identity of the neighborhood and its inhabitants. These stories can question prevailing images of the neighborhood and impact the community psyche. Stories can be a subversive force that pushes back against mainstream narratives and inscribes marginal people and places onto the imaginative surface of the city in more authentic ways. Learning about people who live alongside us by hearing their stories not only deepens and enriches our connections to places, but helps us make connections between our individual experiences and larger societal issues, which allows us to view our lives in a larger historical context and grasp a collective historical narrative (Portelli, 1997; Kerr, 2016). Oral histories are thus in a unique position to bring personal stories into the public sphere and make connections between biography and history.

SPATIALLY ANCHORED ODE TO JACKSON HEIGHTS PART 2

Get off the train at 82nd Street. Notice how the bachata reaches your ears before you descend the subway steps. Turn onto Roosevelt Avenue and take in the stands selling raspados, and the smoke and appetizing aroma from roasting corn being made into elotes. Stroll past taco trucks and arepa trucks stationed in front of stores selling electronics and toys and clothes, dancing halls and bars.

Walk to DII, the discount store whose presence comforted you when you first moved here; you used to shop at DII on Liberty Avenue, seven miles away, where you grew up. Liberty Avenue, so similar to Roosevelt Avenue, where the A train rumbled overhead instead of the 7 train. The congestion, music, and mom and pop shops on the two thoroughfares are all so similar. But where storefront after storefront in South Richmond Hill reflects the overwhelming Indo-Caribbean culture of Little Guyana, in Jackson Heights different cultures mix on every block.

Walk by La Pequeña Colombia restaurant, and remember how you used to ride the train to get your cuñado's favorite bandeja paisa, and take pleasure in the fact that the restaurant is now a short walk from home.

Turn on 85th Street and pass your old apartment, the one you sublet from a friend of a friend, the nicest place you've ever lived – one of the garden apartments in the historic district, a low-rise apartment building with a lush interior courtyard shielded from the street and from excessive enjoyment by restrictive rules: no ball playing, no strollers on the grass, no parties, no music, no loud conversation. You had rarely entered

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the garden, but used to look out onto it from your bedroom window, calmed by the sea of green.

Continue down 85th Street and locate the building where your friend Martha used to live, the site of high school sleepovers where you and your best friends giggled together till the wee hours of the morning. Turn on 37th Avenue and pass the old-timey shoe repair shop next to the artisanal cheese shop, and the overpriced gift shop that perturbed locals when it opened, making them wonder, *Who is this for?* Peek inside Hawaii Driving School to see if you can say hi to Carlos, the instructor who helped you get your license and once gave you an impromptu psychic reading during a driving lesson.

Continue north three avenues, passing scores of apartment buildings, and turn onto Northern Boulevard, a four-lane highway with an impressive panoply of shops, nightspots, restaurants, bars and cafes where you've had countless memorable meals. Stop at I.S. 145 and admire the handball court's recently restored mural proclaiming "QUEENS IS THE FUTURE," a catchphrase that points to the borough's status as the most diverse county in the entire USA. Reflect on how fitting it is that this mural stands in the most international neighborhood of all: more than 70 nationalities speaking 167 languages call Jackson Heights home.

Then walk south to 34th Avenue, and see something else entirely. On this residential street lined with apartment buildings and sprinkled with schools, there are no shops. This used to be a street you walked past without taking any notice. Now, something out of the ordinary is happening on the 26 blocks between 69th Street and

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Junction Boulevard. People are riding bikes, walking dogs, jogging, strolling with baby carriages. Elders play Bingo and children play hopscotch while bicycles, tricycles, scooters, skateboards, roller skates and even the occasional pogo stick fill the street. All manner of vehicles course down this road - except cars.

OPEN STREETS BACKGROUND

At 7:00 each morning, volunteers move metal barricades onto the two lanes that comprise 34th Avenue, blocking cars from entering. In their wake, pedestrians and cyclists stream into the newly pedestrianized street. This roadway used to be filled with vehicular traffic, but since its designation as an Open Street on May 1, 2020, it closes to cars and opens to people every day. At 8:00 each night, volunteers move the barricades onto the curbs, allowing drivers to reclaim the street.

The New York City Council and former Mayor Bill de Blasio initiated the citywide Open Streets program at the height of the COVID-19 crisis with the goal of creating more space for socially distanced recreation. The city's many densely populated neighborhoods, narrow sidewalks, and high demand for open space made it impossible to adhere to the CDC's guidelines of maintaining a distance of six feet from other people. With parks and public gathering spaces filling up dangerously, the city turned to streets—which make up 80% of public space in NYC—for relief.

No through traffic is permitted on Open Streets, except for local deliveries, pick ups and drop offs, emergency vehicles and necessary city service vehicles (such as Access-A-Ride, a service that provides public transportation for people with disabilities

or health conditions that prevent them from using public transportation). Drivers who enter are asked to not exceed five miles per hour, although this is not enforced in any official capacity. Most parking spots remain; drivers can get out of their cars and move the fairly lightweight barricades to enter and leave.

The Open Streets program rolled out in 2020 with over seven miles of streets throughout the five boroughs, with a plan to eventually expand to 100 miles. Each site experienced varying degrees of success. The New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) manages Open Streets, in coordination with local police precincts. In many neighborhoods, the police partnered with a local Business Improvement District (BID) to take over daily street operations. But in some neighborhoods, the police did not find partners. Those that lacked dedicated volunteers putting barricades in place at regular times didn't attract regular users, or saw drivers cast aside barricades and continue using the street as before.

When Leslie Ramos, the director of the 82nd Street Partnership BID in Jackson Heights, got a call from the local police precinct asking if they would take over responsibility for the 34th Avenue Open Street, she had to tell them no; as one of the smallest BIDs in the city, they lack the staff to take this on. But Leslie's friends Nuala O'Doherty-Naranjo and Jim Burke, two activists who had worked together on street safety and transportation issues and were thrilled by the prospect of an Open Street, called a dozen local groups they'd worked with, wrangled up volunteers, and formed the 34th Ave Open Streets Coalition. They coordinate with neighbors to move barricades and organize community programs that activate the space and make it feel more welcoming.

The 34th Avenue Open Street, situated in a neighborhood that ranks second-to-last in per capita green space (Vick, 2022), quickly became a lifeline for many residents. Thanks to volunteers in the 34th Ave Open Streets Coalition, it operates seven days a week, thirteen hours a day, attracting people for baile folklórico lessons, soccer games, gardening, and the occasional pop-up circus. Although no single entity was tasked with enforcing compliance from drivers, the regularity of the barricade setup and the number of people using the street make drivers generally respect the rules against through traffic, although electric vehicles and motorcycles regularly disregard the five miles per hour speed limit.

At 1.3 miles, 34th Avenue is the longest Open Street in the city, and is often lauded as the most successful. The DOT has praised it as the “gold standard” of the program (Kuntzman, 2020). Urban planners hold it as a lodestar, a rare example of the ideal urban environment where racially and economically diverse people come together in a shared space (Bartolini, 2022). It’s at the vanguard of a wider movement that envisions walking and biking as the centerpieces of city streets. Yet it’s also at the epicenter of a battle over what urban streets should put first – cars, or people.

Many successful Open Streets are in commercial areas and overlap with Open Restaurants, an offshoot program that allows restaurants to use sidewalk and roadway space for outdoor dining. 34th Avenue is unique in that it is residential – on its 26 blocks there are apartment complexes (mostly six-story brick buildings), a few private houses, one small two-acre park (Travers Park, which occupies approximately one block), a church, a handful of small businesses (doctors’ offices and tax services, a grocery store at

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the eastern end, and a billiards hall and bowling alley on the western end) and five schools. In addition to those five situated directly on the Open Street, additional schools are located on side streets, for a total of nine schools in a one and a half mile area. Arrival and dismissal times see hordes of students pouring down 34th Avenue, and school childrens' safety was a concern that motivated activists like the coalition co-founder Nuala to advocate for slow zones on 34th Avenue long before they would've considered aiming for completely closing the street to cars. A Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) towards the eastern end of the Open Street makes ADA accessibility a central concern for residents.

New York City's Open Streets program never made it to 100 miles, as Mayor de Blasio had planned; it peaked at 83 miles in 2021, but as of summer 2022 it had decreased to slightly over 20 miles. There has been vocal opposition to Open Streets from some residents who are inconvenienced by street closures. As the COVID crisis became less acute, the city returned to pre-pandemic routines and more people began commuting to their offices, and some Open Streets shrank in size or reverted back to regular roads. While a few, like 34th Avenue, have been made permanent, many communities don't have the necessary organizing resources—people able to put in physical labor, time and funds—to keep them running. Of the four most popular Open Streets, Avenue B in the Lower East Side is overseen by the volunteer group Loisaída Open Streets Community Coalition; Vanderbilt Avenue in Brooklyn is run by volunteers with sponsorship from the nonprofit Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council; Berry Street is overseen by the North Brooklyn Open Streets Community Coalition; and 34th Avenue has the 34th

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Ave Open Streets Coalition. These streets have succeeded as a result of the tireless efforts of residents, open space and transportation advocates, and community groups who are dedicated to the places that they call home – all of whom have been advocating for more funding and support for Open Streets from the city government, recognizing that relying on volunteers is not sustainable in the long run. Talking to Nuala, Jim and other volunteers revealed that the 34th Avenue Open Street wouldn't still exist if not for individuals with strong senses of place attachment, commitment and time to invest in this labor of love.

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The story of 34th Avenue Oral History

I live a block and a half from 34th Avenue. On March 22, 2020, when Governor Cuomo issued an executive order putting New York City on pause and shuttering non-essential businesses, my world suddenly shrank to the confines of my apartment. Throughout March and April, my neighborhood became the “epicenter of the epicenter,” with what was then the highest COVID-19 infection rates in the city – one in 22 people – and some of the highest numbers of deaths. The vibrant Jackson Heights streets quieted to an eerie hush. The grocery stores’ shelves emptied. Instead of the hum of voices and music mingling with honking cars, our soundscape became the chirping of birds and the seemingly ever-present wail of ambulance sirens from nearby Elmhurst Hospital, where refrigerated trucks parked outside to hold bodies after the morgue filled up. On March 25th, we read the terrifying news that at Elmhurst Hospital thirteen people had died in a

single day (a tally that would soon be considered small). On the narrow sidewalks where we once casually rubbed elbows with passing strangers, we now eyed one another fearfully as we unsuccessfully struggled to maintain distance. The impact of the pandemic on our individual and collective lives added another layer of meaning to the invisible landscape, a dark chapter in the continually evolving neighborhood identity and lore.

When COVID cases went down in May 2020, I began venturing out to the newly created 34th Avenue Open Street. The two lanes that had been closed to cars offered breathing room that the narrow sidewalks of Jackson Heights could never rival, and people were taking advantage of the space. I was fascinated by the signs of life and resilience on the street: chalk art, pilates classes, music performances, children playing, peaceful protests for George Floyd.

On a walk one day, I came upon dancers rehearsing near 80th Street. I stopped to talk to them. Erick Modesto, the director of the small traditional Mexican dance troupe Ballet Folklorico Nueva Juventud, told me that since “NY Pause” prohibited them from gathering inside the studio where they usually rehearsed, they had moved rehearsals to the Open Street. Erick found a way to exercise creative expression and keep the dancers ready for the day they would emerge from the shadow of the pandemic and perform again.

Passing near 82nd Street, I noticed a group of people practicing martial arts. I talked to Alvaro Tautiva, the owner of AT Jiu Jitsu, and learned that his income had completely dried up when he had to shutter his studio in March, and as the months

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dragged on he began to grapple with the fact that he couldn't pay rent and would have to shut down his business permanently. But instead of giving up, he decided to start holding classes on 34th Avenue. The highly visible lessons attracted new students, and helped Alvaro keep AT Jiu Jitsu afloat.

Near 91st Street, I bought homemade tacos dorados from Janet Bravo, who had set up a folding table on the traffic median to sell food and drinks. Janet and her husband used to have a food cart at a busy transportation hub on 125th Street in Harlem, but during the pandemic the few remaining commuters hurried by without stopping for coffee and bagels. Janet's apartment overlooks 34th Avenue, and seeing people jogging past her windows, she realized they would get thirsty and hungry. She saw an opportunity on the Open Street and seized it.

As I approached 93rd Street one day, I saw a gaggle of children running through a colorful pop-up obstacle course laid out on the pavement. I asked an adult what was going on, and he pointed me to Jim, the 34th Ave Open Streets Coalition co-founder. I also met Nuala and Rita Wade, a dedicated volunteer, who were organizing free activities for children and adults almost every day. They had talked to their neighbors, asked what kind of programming they would like to see, and then coordinated with more neighbors to organize free ESL classes, arts and crafts, games for children, salsa classes, food distribution services and more.

In the Fall of 2020, I took a longform journalism class and, despite my professor's insistence that it wasn't an interesting topic, I wrote a story about 34th Avenue. I interviewed Erick, Alvaro, Janet, Jim, Nuala, Rita and other people I'd met there, and

reached out to residents who didn't like the Open Street to include a diversity of perspectives. I wrote what I thought was a captivating story, pitched it to a few places, and didn't get any bites. But I loved the project. The transformation of this one small stretch of street felt big, the future felt very uncertain, and I wanted to follow the story as it unfolded and document this moment in time with rich oral histories. I conducted more interviews with people whose lives have been impacted by the Open Street, and the project grew into my thesis, 34th Avenue Oral History.

Methodology

My methodology draws upon my training in oral history (conducting multiple in-depth life history interviews and practicing deep listening and radical empathy to understand narrators' subjectivities), journalism (conducting observations and writing profiles), and socially engaged art and cultural organizing (producing free community storytelling events with narrators through the Five Boro Story Project). Drawing on feminist epistemologies that place value in lived experience (Caswell & Cifor, 2016), for my thesis I also utilize my own personal experience as a human, Queens native and Jackson Heights resident alongside academic literature.

The Oral History Association's best practices state that oral history interviews are historical documents that should be deposited in a repository that can ensure long-term preservation and access to future researchers and members of the public. To preserve the 34th Avenue Oral History interviews, I partnered with Queens Memory, a local repository that shares my values of engaging the public with the archive: Queens Memory creates free public events and a podcast that incorporate oral history excerpts,

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and maintains an active website and social media accounts. Some of my narrators have been highlighted on their homepage, which prominently features a profile of a different person every two weeks.

Creating oral histories entails more than conducting interviews and placing them in an archival repository. Oral historians' work of project design, interviewing, recording fieldnotes and metadata, transcribing and archiving interviews constitute but one side of the coin; we should also amplify and curate oral histories to make them more accessible to the public (Starecheski, 2020). To get this project into the world, I am creating multimedia profiles of narrators, organizing free community events and exhibitions, writing articles and presenting my work.

With 34th Avenue Oral History, I hope to tell the story of the Open Street, the story of the pandemic, and the story of our neighborhood - through the stories of individuals. I attempt to do this with full awareness that there is no such thing as *the* story of Jackson Heights or *the* story of 34th Avenue. To meaningfully and authentically tell the larger story, I need to tell the stories of individuals. Having taken a class on profile writing with the incomparable journalist and professor Paula Span, I came to love profiles not only because the format pulls people in with a human connection, but also because I enjoy the process of getting to know someone, as well as tackling the challenge of finding the right way to craft their story. After roping in my husband, photographer Patrick Chang, as a collaborator, I began creating multimedia profiles of each narrator, telling their stories through journalistic prose, edited audio excerpts, photos and videos. These profiles are the heart of 34th Avenue Oral History. The narrators, people who know 34th

Avenue best, share multivalent perspectives from their everyday lived emplacement on the Open Street. Each narrator adds a thread to the tapestry of stories, and meaning accretes through the collection of parallel profiles. In July 2021, I launched a website, 34aveoralhistory.org, to house the profiles and make them publicly accessible. Putting narrator profiles in conversation with one another on the website helps us move from individual stories to a cultural narrative.

My process for creating a profile straddles the worlds of oral history and journalism: I conduct in-depth interviews with each narrator, asking about their experiences on the Open Street, listening deeply and letting them guide the conversations. As a student in Columbia's Oral History Masters program, I came to understand oral history interviews as intersubjective, conversational narratives, as "the opening of narrative space for the subjectivity of the interviewee" (Portelli, 2018, p. 239). A major role of the oral historian is accompanying the narrator, walking side by side with them on a common journey while seeking to bridge divides (Kerr, 2016). Oral historians need not feel the same as the narrator, but by exercising radical empathy—understanding and appreciating another person's feelings and experience, even if you have oppositional visceral affective responses—we practice care and affective responsibility (Caswell & Cifor, 2016). I spend time with narrators on 34th Avenue, observing them in action and writing pages of detailed notes. Multiple observation sessions allow us to get to know each other relatively well. Through interviews and observations, I attempt to understand their worldviews, their ways of thinking, and the meanings that both 34th Avenue and Jackson Heights hold for them. Then I write a journalistic profile draft. Given the

tensions around the Open Street, I'm aware that public profiles may open them to criticism on social media, and so I endeavor to include information about their backgrounds that will help readers understand where they're coming from and empathize with them. I share the draft with each narrator, get their feedback, and incorporate their revisions. This collaboration constitutes a crucial departure from typical writing for journalism, where ethics often dictate that interviewees not edit their statements. But many oral historians consider "shared authority" between historian and narrator to be a central tenet to the practice (Frisch, 1990). 34th Avenue Oral History narrators are given the opportunity to edit and approve the final transcripts that are deposited with Queens Memory and the profile that's published on the project website. We make sure the final product is something we're both happy with.

So far, I have conducted oral histories with nine narrators, one of whom declined to be included in the archive. Six completed profiles are on the project website, and three in the works. I realized that my ability to conduct interviews only in English severely limits the people who can participate in the project. After interviewing one narrator in a mix of English and Spanish with her daughter helping to interpret, I felt it would be better to have fluent speakers conduct interviews rather than rely on interpretation. I partnered with Oscar Zamora Flores, a fellow Queens Memory volunteer, who interviewed two narrators in Spanish. Their interviews have not yet been translated to English and are not included in this thesis, but Oscar and I plan to work together to create profiles for these narrators. As the project continues, I hope to include narrators in other languages, such as Hindi.

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In addition to archiving the full interviews and engaging the public through profiles, I have incorporated my practice as a socially engaged artist and cultural organizer, building meaningful rather than extractive relationships, and strengthening community through free place-based storytelling programs. In collaboration with the 34th Ave Open Streets Coalition, I organized two public events on 34th Avenue in July and October of 2021 where project participants told stories and held dance performances. In May of 2022, I led a story circle workshop at Columbia University, where narrators joined me in facilitating a discussion about the future of city streets. I mounted an exhibition with photos and listening stations at Queens Borough Hall as part of Immigrant Celebration Week in June 2022, and a photography exhibit at a local cafe with photographs and quotes from narrators in December 2022. I'm planning another exhibition for March 2023 that focuses on safety and solidarity.

Beyond the local New York City community, I've shared my work by publishing an article, "The Story of a Street," with mini-profiles of five narrators in *Urban Omnibus*, and presenting on 34th Avenue Oral History at conferences for the Oral History Network of Ireland, Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region, and the Oral History Association, as well as a video installation for the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes' Annual Meeting. I led presentations for urban planning students at Temple University and public humanities students at Columbia College. These engagements are making visible some of the stories that constitute 34th Avenue's invisible landscape of meaning, and advocating for the importance of Open Streets as public spaces that facilitate community connections.

The 34th Avenue Oral History interviews are copyrighted under a Creative Commons license that allows for public, non-commercial use of interview materials. Following feminist ethics of care (Caswell & Cifor, 2016) that go beyond what is legally required, I practice ongoing consent with narrators, touching base each time their interviews or photos are used, and getting approval for shortened versions of profiles that have been used in exhibitions and publications. I also shared drafts of this thesis with narrators for review.

CONTENTION AND NEW DIRECTIONS FOR 34TH AVENUE ORAL HISTORY

Through my research, I met neighbors like Mark Blinder, who managed to pay rent by selling homemade food on 34th Avenue after his visa expired during the pandemic, leaving him unable to practice his profession as a social worker. I befriended Mark Saldana, a young artist who started showcasing his paintings on the avenue and found a community of creatives that he had longed for in the neighborhood. I met Dawn Siff, a local activist who takes Open Streets as a blueprint for reimagining the post-pandemic city streetscape, advocating for a permanent linear park on 34th Avenue. They've all found relief and inspiration on the Open Street.

But community members' visions of the ideal use of public space clash over the Open Street, with naysayers maintaining that the closed road exacerbates traffic and quality of life issues, particularly for elderly and disabled residents who rely on cars, and that it has delayed response times of fire trucks and ambulances (although

Councilmember Shekar Krishnan's office has refuted this in public forums). I spoke with Karen Taylor, director of the Selfhelp NORC, and heard about how the civically engaged elders she works with were left out when community meetings and listening sessions moved online during the pandemic. I met Mary, who lives on 34th Avenue and is infuriated when noisy community activities take place in front of her apartment building; she goes outside and rings a cowbell to disrupt events. I interviewed Ricardo Pacheco, a community leader whose frustration with 34th Avenue pushed him to form a community group to advocate against it, and to run for city council on a platform to reform Open Streets.

A contentious program from the start, Open Streets have been the nonstop subject of vitriolic debate on social media and arguments at community board meetings for over two years. The City Council's original plan stated the program would last for the duration of "NY Pause." While detractors complained to the DOT and community board, supporters of the 34th Avenue Open Street began campaigning to make it permanent. At a rally for permanence in October 2020 that was attended by community members and politicians, then-Brooklyn Councilmember Brad Lander declared, "The epicenter of the fight for Open Streets is right here in Jackson Heights" (field notes, personal collection of author).

The Open Streets program is situated within a decades-long activist movement that has moved the needle towards streets that prioritize people rather than cars. Some detractors complain about their freedom being limited by not being able to drive where they want. The pandemic amplified the effects of polarization, reinforcing partisan

divides, and increasing hostility and distrust in government (Carothers and O’Donohue, 2020; Jungkunz, 2021). People who support Open Streets tend to be Democrats, and those who oppose it tend to be Republicans, a microcosm for our toxically divided political climate.

I’d noticed animosity between supporters and opponents of the Open Street; the click-worthy conflict is well-documented in the local media (Byrne, 2022; Cruz, 2020; Dorgan, 2022; Kaye, 2021; Kuntzman, 2021; Osberg, 2022; Parrot, 2021; Ramsay & Eama, 2021; Robbins & Offenhardt, 2021; Rosa, 2020). But it hit home in the spring of 2022. At that point, I’d conducted oral histories with people who I’d met on 34th Avenue, and naturally the people who use the street tend to like it. After documenting positive stories about 34th Avenue, I felt my project would be incomplete without stories from the other side. I joined a Facebook group that advocates to end the Open Street, 34 Ave OS Resisters United, and after requesting and receiving permission from a group administrator, posted an invitation for narrators to participate in 34th Avenue Oral History. When I signed into Facebook that evening to respond to messages from interested people, my post was gone. The same administrator had posted, “I’ve suspended Bridget Bartolini because of suspicion she favors Open Streets.” (My project website makes it clear that I enjoy 34th Avenue; I did not attempt to hide this, and did not anticipate that it would make people not want to talk to me.) I could no longer post or comment in the group, but I could see the comments that flowed on Facebook, speculating I was a mole sent by the 34th Ave Open Streets Coalition to spy on them, and attacking me and my project for being biased.

I was saddened that people in the group felt they couldn't talk to me because I don't personally agree with their views, troubled by the depth of the rift between the factions, and disturbed by the amount of mistrust. I also realized that I may be uniquely positioned to help, as a community member who's been listening to neighbors with the aim of understanding the vastly varied meanings 34th Avenue has for different people, and as a trained storytelling facilitator who helps New Yorkers build understanding and empathy through sharing personal stories.

Before my suspension from the group, I connected with one person who opposes the Open Street but is also willing to participate in my project, Ricardo Pacheco. We've become friendly while working on his profile, and he introduced me to others involved in the resistance. Unfortunately, the two camps seem to be becoming increasingly polarized as time passes.

After spending more than two years researching the Open Street, I still struggle to understand why some people feel so very strongly about it, particularly those who hate it. This may be partially explained by the territorial aspect of human nature, as people with strong feelings about a given place are more likely to be protective and defensive (Fitzpatrick & LaGory, 2010). I am inclined to think it has more to do with the fact that changes to beloved places can threaten our identity. Detractors may feel that the Open Street is changing the neighborhood landscape so drastically that they're experiencing feelings of displacement. While discussing how our attachment to place informs our identity and gives us a sense of order in the world, Ryden wrote, "This sense of identity may be one of the strongest of the feelings with which we regard places: when our

meaningful places are threatened, we feel threatened as well” (1993, p. 40). Ryden further argues that “stories cling to place, with such tenacity that the destruction of place threatens the entire structure—the fear is that stories will fly away unanchored, memories will dim, emotions will fade, identity will become tenuous if the geographical root is cut” (1993, p. 94). When the landscape changes, more is at stake than aesthetics; people’s lives change, too.

Theories of place attachment shed further light on the situation. Brown and Perkins (1992) studied disruptions of place attachments, which may be caused by anything from a natural disaster, a residential burglary, involuntary relocation due to an urban renewal project, or a disruption of routine. Whatever the cause, loss of a positive place attachment precipitates a stressful period of disruption that can threaten one’s self-definition, leaving people feeling unmoored and overwhelmed. Brown and Perkins also showed that in these times communities often experience “dissensus” and become “disabled,” but that residents are “enabled” when they channel their anxieties into community identity and action, and identify points of common interest and common targets in order to rally together. Ricardo has taken this route. A retired police officer and community leader who has long been active in community service, from serving on the PTA for his granddaughter’s school to organizing Thanksgiving meals for seniors, Ricardo’s activism ramped up these past two years because of his dissatisfaction with the Open Street. He feels it is a good concept, and it was helpful during the beginning of the pandemic, but that it should not be operating seven days a week, thirteen hours a day, on a residential street.

When the community group 34th Avenue Open Streets Compromise formed in April 2021 to advocate for adjustments, such as shortened hours, Ricardo joined and participated in meetings and protests. But eventually, the group lost traction and dissolved. As president of his co-op board, Ricardo had long felt that local co-ops should have a way to come together and share useful information with one another about things like taxes, union contracts and vendors. The Open Street served as his impetus to finally create a formal group to advocate for the concerns of co-ops. Along with other board presidents, he formed the Jackson Heights Co-ops Alliance, and incorporated it as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit in October 2021. The organization states its purpose as advocating for the improvement of the community; this has almost exclusively manifested in actions against Open Streets.

More research is needed to understand the feelings and perspectives of Open Street detractors, what they feel is being lost, and what they see is at stake. Going forward, while continuing to conduct interviews, write profiles and hold large public events, I would also like to organize small programs that specifically invite people from both sides to have more intimate conversations, aiming to bridge this rift. People who oppose the Open Street often assert that they aren't being heard. Public programs that create space for them to be heard and to listen to others in turn can help us understand others' perspectives and build goodwill. I have experienced how storytelling and oral history can foster empathy and understanding, and lead to fruitful discussions and the discovery of common ground. Through a mix of small programs that emphasize deep listening—including story circles, facilitated discussions and listening parties—34th

Avenue Oral History could, at the least, get people to take a breath and listen to one another, and potentially help reduce vitriol and combat affective political polarization in Jackson Heights.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

When the city simply provided a new public gathering space, few would have expected the far-reaching impact it would have. Besides the expected exercise and socializing, I've seen 34th Avenue become a space for community connection, a resource for mental relief, and, for some, a means of financial livelihood. The transformation of 34th Avenue into an Open Street has strengthened the local sense of place and heightened toponilic sentiments, helping people feel more rooted in their neighborhood and more connected to their neighbors and the spatial environment.

Sense of place is both communal and individual – regions have shared senses of place derived from experiences that follow recurring patterns, and within that there is a great deal of individual variation, as each person's sense of place is shaped to fit their personal experiences within the larger patterns (Ryden, 1993). Looking at narrators' individual stories reveals common themes, common understandings of 34th Avenue and feelings towards it, and common ways in which the Open Street has worked its way into the identities of the narrators – elements of a shared local sense of place.

Esthi Zipori, a doctoral student who studies urban mobility and sustainability and is invested in a car-free future, became a street vendor during the pandemic; every weekend her husband cooks and she sells food on 34th Avenue with their shared

business, Sandwich Therapy. The Open Street interests her because of her research and advocacy around urban streets, and she has gotten to know 34th Avenue intimately through time spent vending. She explained how this has impacted her and her husband's place attachment and identity:

I mean, we loved the neighborhood before the Open Street. We love Jackson Heights. We moved here by mistake, but now we really can't imagine living anywhere else... The Open Street just kind of made it even more—especially now that we kind of work on the street too, really got our own stake in it a little bit. It's part of our lives a bit more and part of who we are.

Jim Burke, the 34th Ave Open Streets Coalition co-founder, used to work in e-commerce and had saved up money to take what he thought would be a short sabbatical starting in late 2019. Then the pandemic struck, and his sabbatical stretched forward indefinitely. Throughout 2020 and 2021, he was able to devote seven days a week to working on the Open Street, moving barricades and facilitating daily community activities. He will eventually have to return to a full-time job, but experiencing the fulfillment of community service with neighbors has shifted his career goals. Musing about what work he'll pursue, Jim said:

I don't know what I'll be doing next, but I think it might incorporate some of the wonderful things that I learned during this process... It probably won't be the same kind of a corporate job that I had before. Maybe something in the non-profit sector, just because I have just enjoyed this whole community interaction so much

that I would miss it too much to go back to, you know, suit and tie downtown. I don't think I want to do that. I really want to do something with the community.

In 2022, he did take on part-time work with the 82nd Street Partnership BID organizing outdoor music and dance performances as well as exercise and children's programming in Dunningham Triangle, a small nearby plaza. When asked how he feels about this shift in priorities, Jim reflected on his identity:

I'm telling you, I think that this has fundamentally changed me. I think that it was always about the bigger and better next paid job... You know, maybe I don't have a fancy tie, or the latest shoes, and that's perfectly okay. I don't see the latest Broadway show. Maybe I see a performance on 34th Avenue, a baile folklórico, and that's good [laughs].

Manuela Agudelo, a dancer and activist who grew up in Jackson Heights, started regularly rollerskating down 34th Avenue after it became an Open Street. The act of rollerskating became a mental health ritual; the feeling of flying down the avenue helped her cope as she grieved her grandfather's death during the pandemic. Manuela's comments reveal how 34th Avenue's meaning has changed for her:

Now it's become a really special place. And before it wasn't. Before it was a piece of concrete. The Open Street transformed this piece of concrete into a community center... it's become something super precious and sacred. And now it holds life. Now it has a garden. And now people care about the garden. The kids make signs and tell us to take care of the garden. These things didn't happen before, and now

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it's accessible to all of us, and it's not just a piece of concrete anymore. I just feel like that really transformed so many things for everybody.

Nuala O'Doherty Naranjo, activist and 34th Ave Open Streets Coalition co-founder, described the Open Street in similar terms to Manuela:

It really has become the neighborhood community center. Like, I will say, the little town square—and in Spanish-speaking countries they call it the *zocalo*, where everyone goes for everything—but it's really now become a community center. It's where you go if you need help, it's where you go if you wanna just hang out with your kids, it's where you go to have fun, it's where you go to learn things. If you wanna know how to get English classes, if you wanna gain information, you go to 34th Avenue.

34th Avenue has also transformed for Ricardo Pacheco, though not in a positive way. He recalled the first time he ever came to Jackson Heights, when visiting a friend: “I drove to 34th Avenue. This was a snowy day. So all you saw was these canopies of snow and this beautiful road and it was nobody on the road, so you could see for blocks and blocks away. And I fell in love.” His initial encounter with 34th Avenue made him want to move to Jackson Heights. This contrasts sharply with his description of going to 34th Avenue after it became an Open Street; he said it felt like a “zombie movie,” and elaborated:

This was like those commercials where you go to a place and you're like, ‘Where is everybody?’ You go and you see all these blocks and blocks of empty. And

there's barriers and things. It gives you the impression that you're in some kind of like, I don't know, there's a war zone going on.

Although he described an empty road in both scenarios, the visuals of the barricades bother Ricardo, making the neighborhood feel to him like a “gated community for the privileged few.” While other narrators involved in 34th Avenue Oral History do not share these sentiments, more research should be done with people who are opposed to the Open Street to determine commonalities in their shared sense of place.

Despite the presence of barricades, Manuela feels the Open Street has removed psychological barriers and ameliorated social stratification. She spoke about how Jackson Heights is known as the Garden District, but the gardens that earned the neighborhood this moniker are in enclosed courtyards inside expensive co-op complexes:

You can see them through the grates... I've never experienced being inside of them. So I never got to enjoy that. And I feel like the Open Street removed that gatekeeping, removed that barrier. It allowed for me to enjoy the gardens [on the medians]. And it allowed for me to enjoy the space that the more affluent members of Jackson Heights already have access to in these fancier buildings.

In their interviews, Manuela and Ricardo both shared concerns about the Open Street potentially fueling local gentrification and displacement. They felt Jackson Heights changing years before the Open Street was created; Ricardo bemoaned the loss of affordable housing and talked about seeing beloved restaurants close, replaced by more upscale places, and Manuela spoke about the neighborhood losing diversity and becoming “a lot whiter and a lot richer.” As the president of his co-op board, Ricardo

struggles to keep maintenance fees low in order to prevent the displacement of fixed income and low-income shareholders. Some of the people in his building have lived there for sixty years and contributed to the neighborhood through activism like fighting segregation in schools, and now have a tenuous grip on their homes. Manuela, who has experienced living in an overcrowded Jackson Heights apartment, must balance what she appreciates about the Open Street with similar apprehension for her neighbors:

I'm afraid that we'll change the narrative of what the Open Street is doing right now. Because right now it's great. It's accessible to a lot of different families, and people of various economic backgrounds. And I specifically like it because I feel like it services those lower income families who really need extra space because they might have limited living space... There are families that might live ten people in a one bedroom... How precious would it have been in those times, when it was more crowded in my apartment, to have an Open Street to go to?

But she fears that 34th Avenue may “become such a hot, fancy thing” that it will attract more affluent homeowners, drive up rent, and displace the people that it currently serves: “I worry that those families that made Jackson Heights what it is will not get to enjoy the fruits of all of their labor. I really hope that we can prioritize them as we make decisions for the neighborhood.” She holds this anxiety for the future, but for now, these concerns don't outweigh her enthusiasm for the positive changes she's seen on 34th Avenue.

In a 2021 interview, Jim echoed Manuela and Nuala's sentiments about the Open Street functioning as the new center of the neighborhood:

I've met more people in this last year than in the prior two decades that I've lived here. Some of my best friends now are people that I didn't know 13 months ago, 14, 15 months ago. And I met them all through the Open Streets, either fellow volunteers, neighbors. And that's been one of the most wonderful things that's happened, because this neighborhood didn't really have a focal point. We had the farmer's market where you would run into neighbors. You would have an occasional fundraiser or an occasional vigil or something. But 34th Avenue is like having a boardwalk. It's like, you know the boardwalk in Rockaway Beach, right? You walk up and down, and you see your neighbors, or you see people over and over again, and then they become your friends and you start talking to them.

Jim's family has a home in the Rockaways, and he previously felt more connected to that area than to Jackson Heights. He is now more firmly rooted in the local community where he lives, thanks to new social relationships, which are a crucial element of place attachment (Low & Altman, 1992). Jim expanded on how the Open Street has helped him form connections with others who use it, describing a whole community network that has formed:

I think that 34th gave, for the people who are involved in it, a really strong sense of community... as opposed to before... you had no interaction with the people who lived here, even though you've lived here for a long, long time. You wouldn't necessarily know them very well. And all of a sudden this whole world opens up and you're like, 'Wait, I know you.' Like, you see them, you've hung out with them. You've done exercise class with them. You've practiced English with them.

You've jump roped with their kids, played Sapo with them. And it's really such a much nicer place to live now. That's my favorite part of this whole thing.

All of the narrators described meeting new people through the 34th Avenue Open Street. Esthi, an Israeli immigrant, has connected with many neighbors, especially fellow Israelis and people interested in the Israeli, Georgian and Soviet food that she sells. She reflected, “We got to meet our neighbors a lot more, and our community a lot more, and get involved with all sorts of stuff. I think it really kind of connected us to the neighborhood so much more than we were before.” Esthi illustrated how she and her husband experienced a special feeling of acceptance in Jackson Heights:

We felt so much more at home here than any other neighborhood we lived at, because there was so many other people like us... so many immigrants and so many people coming in here just looking for something different, looking for something else. Missing their families, but still loving it here.

The place attachment and topophilic ties she has felt since she began living here have grown due to the Open Street.

Mickey Lin, a Taiwanese immigrant, similarly connected with neighbors when she started selling Taiwanese treats on 34th Avenue, but unlike Esthi, she did not previously feel attachment to Jackson Heights. She relocated to the neighborhood for her husband, who has lived here for fifteen years and loves it. However, Mickey didn't initially see the appeal of Jackson Heights; she would travel to Manhattan to hang out with friends, and considered her home neighborhood a place she returned to sleep. For Mickey, the pandemic coincided with becoming a mother; during the lockdown she was

trapped in her apartment with a six-month old baby. She started baking and selling treats on the Open Street and launched a business, Mickey Lin's Messy Kitchen, motivated less by financial need than by the need to escape the daily pressures of parenting and the confines of her apartment. While street vending, Mickey socializes with customers and neighbors; her husband refers to her station as a "meeting place" where friends gather, and many of those friends are people she met on 34th Avenue. This helped her break through the isolation and alienation she'd initially experienced in the neighborhood.

Mickey described experiencing placelessness, living in an environment without significance, and then developing place attachment:

Actually I started going out after the pandemic, when I selling the cookies. Before that I kind of never go to 34th Avenue or anywhere. I just only stay in my place. I wasn't comfortable at all talking with other people. Before that, I really, I [was] even afraid of going to restaurants, order food, because I didn't know how to order foods, or English. After having the Open Street, I feel like here is much more interesting, because before that, for me, every road, just everywhere, [it was] just streets and cars. So I didn't want to go out, because it wasn't fun at all... I really feel that Open Street is super important for us. Then I could have a chance selling food and then also practicing my English with strangers. I mean, this Open Street is kind of change my lifestyle, too. Like, I really want to go out more in this neighborhood... I feel before it [was] just a place for living. I mean, just car, building everywhere. So it doesn't matter if I live in Jackson Heights or the Bronx. For me, just all the same. And now, I feel a little bit like I live in a

suburban. I mean, I have some place I can walk around, like the tree and a breeze.

It's wonderful. And then kids can hang out. So I think, then we don't really need to buy a house, have a backyard, because we have Open Street.

Just as street vending helped Esthi form relationships with many people but particularly Israelis and people interested in Jewish cooking, many of the neighbors Mickey befriended share similar cultural backgrounds and interests: people with Taiwanese heritage and parents with children of similar ages. She formed a group for parents to practice Mandarin with their young children. Now, she and her daughter live in a neighborhood full of friends. Mickey previously had no positive emotional connection to Jackson Heights, but in her interview she spoke of her excitement at having her daughter grow up with people from different countries and making Jackson Heights her home.

Janet Bravo moved to Jackson Heights in 2004 and has always been friendly with neighbors, but has also developed more neighborhood acquaintances through vending on the Open Street. She used to set up folding chairs next to her table, and people from her building and passersby would sit and talk with her as they ate, while her youngest daughter played with friends on the median next to her. Janet said, "*Puedes hablar con personas que ni conoces, pero ellos, te quieren platicar. Te escuchan... Es diferente de antes, porque antes, la gente no se paraba. No se detenían, ni si quiera te quieren ver. Pasaba rápido.* (You can talk to people you don't even know, but they want to talk to you. They listen to you... It's different from before, because before, people didn't stop. They didn't stop, they don't even want to see you. They'd pass by quickly.)" Her station is

on the corner of 91st Street, near the coalition's activities, and she's friendly with Nuala and Jim. Nuala helped Janet learn how to ride a bike on 34th Avenue that first pandemic summer. Jim's partner Oscar, who teaches salsa classes on the Open Street that Janet can't attend because she's busy vending, walks down and dances salsa with Janet and her husband, Miguel, to help them keep warm on cold days. Janet reflected, "*Son personas buenas que ya nos han agarrado cariño y nosotros a ellos también.* (They are good people who have taken care of us, and we take care of them, too.)"

Ricardo has also built new connections with neighbors at protests and town hall meetings he organized through the Jackson Heights Co-ops Alliance. Since taking a leadership role in the resistance to the Open Street, he has been invited into people's homes in different parts of the neighborhood for meals and strategizing sessions. He feels lucky to have befriended people who share common goals, and acknowledges that he probably never would have met many of them if not for his recent organizing activities. He also meets people during his near-daily morning ritual of getting coffee from Janet's cart and hanging out on the corner of 90th Street and 34th Avenue to observe happenings on the Open Street. He described how he strikes up conversations:

From the super from the adjacent buildings, to people just walking by that might have a dog and I like the dog, and you start talking to them. Or they're getting coffee and you're standing there and you get to know them. Even the FedEx trucks that park on the side of the street, you get to talk to them... we talk about stealing packages and how they steal from the truck. So the conversation starts from that, to the weather, to anything.

The Open Street is a unique public space that fosters interactions more than other places in the neighborhood. Erick Modesto, who was born in Jackson Heights and has lived here their whole life, said they saw the community come together more during the pandemic. When they held dance rehearsals on the Open Street, passersby would stop to watch and take videos, and sometimes stayed until they completed a routine to applaud and ask questions. During observations, I saw a man passing on a motorcycle stop, pop his kickstand, and settle in to watch a dance; I saw people ask Erick for lessons, and call out, “It’s wonderful to have you here!” Erick appreciated the compliments and attention. They expounded on the neighborliness they witness on the Open Street:

I see everyone just interacting with one another, and seeing the different variety and seeing the different ethnicities and just not seeing any hate. That's the one thing that I want to say the most. I'm not seeing any hate there. Everyone is just very sociable, very lovable, very caring. That's what I like about it. And that's what I mean by the community, or more to say, 34th Avenue and the people using it coming together, you know, not really discriminating against one another or not really using any hate towards one another. This is a perfect example that we all share the same space, no matter where we come from, we're all here.

This friendly atmosphere contrasts with what they know from their earlier life in the neighborhood:

Growing up in Jackson Heights, I didn't really necessarily see people creating groups and hosting events... If people were interacting, it was more like, ‘Oh, get out of my way.’ Or like, ‘Can you move?’ Or people just being on the rush and

being on the go. So for me, I definitely like the change of it. You know, it's something different.

Nuala also feels more connected to neighbors. For the past ten years she has been working to build community in Jackson Heights, but it sometimes felt challenging. She says it has gotten easier now:

I think to build community, you have to have places and spaces where people can come together and have joint experiences. And that's why I think the Open Street is so crucial, because it gives an equalized place for people to come together and have a shared experience, even if it's just walking the dog or doing their morning walks. That builds a sense of community.

Nuala further explained, “what the avenue did was it created a space that was easy for everyone just to kind of walk by each other.” Walking by each other is a simple thing, but the manner in which people walk on 34th Avenue is different from the way they walk on other streets; people tend to slow down and be more open to interactions. Nuala described seeing neighbors on the Open Street at the same time every day and exchanging pleasantries, and reflected:

That's what makes you feel at home and special. Do you know what I mean? There's so many people [who] I now know their routine, they know my routine, and they say hello. So it makes it a small-town feel. I feel like I am part of this neighborhood and that I belong. And that if I weren't here tomorrow, I'd be missed.

Nuala's parents immigrated to America from Ireland, and her family moved around a lot throughout her life. Having experienced rootlessness in her childhood, she consciously decided that her children would have a different experience:

When I started my family, one of the things I really wanted them to feel like is that they were from somewhere. I guess, as any immigrant kid who bounced around a lot, you didn't feel like you were from anywhere. So, when my first kid was born, I moved to Jackson Heights and I'm like, my kids are gonna be from Jackson Heights. So my kids are half Irish, half Ecuadorian, and 100% Jackson Heights.

She set down roots with the intention of this neighborhood being a home for herself and her family. Motivated by the desire to feel that she belonged somewhere, Nuala got involved in local activism and community work. She was president of the Jackson Heights Beautification Group, which focuses on gardening and community events, and served on school boards and Parent Teacher Associations. Given what she calls the neighborhood's "horrible history of traffic violence," Nuala had long felt passionately about traffic safety, especially after a string of car crashes on 34th Avenue. One accident in 2019 that almost killed a middle school student as he was leaving school led the DOT to be more responsive to Nuala's demands for a neighborhood-wide slow zone. Months later, the pandemic made it possible to implement changes to streets at a vastly faster rate than government bureaucracy can usually move; Nuala, Esthi and Ricardo all expressed astonishment at how quickly the DOT mobilized the Open Streets program.

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When asked about her experience with 34th Avenue before it became an Open Street, Nuala initially answered, “It’s a street I drove down every once in a while. That’s it. Nothing.” She then elaborated, “My only connection to it was the tragedy of kids getting hit by cars on it, and how dangerous it was with kids being dismissed [from school] on it. So it went from this thing that I worried about to this great neighborhood treasure.” This crucial aspect of the avenue’s identity changed with the advent of the Open Street. Before, she saw danger on 34th Avenue; now it is a place of enhanced safety. A 2021 DOT report found that traffic crashes and pedestrian injuries on 34th Avenue were down 41.7% (Office of Street Improvement Programs, 2021). In the summer of 2022, parts of 34th Avenue adjacent to Travers Park and two schools on the eastern and western ends of the Open Street were fully, permanently pedestrianized: granite blocks and planters were put in place to block vehicles’ entry, creating permanent safe zones.

Nuala put a lot of thought into 34th Avenue prior to the pandemic, as her advocacy for safety centered on that corridor. Some narrators did not have connections to this street prior to 2020. When asked about their thoughts on 34th Avenue before it became an Open Street, Esthi said, “I remember I was aware of the park.” Previously, Mickey Lin did not know where 34th Avenue was, despite living a block and a half away. Manuela recalled walking down 34th Avenue before 2020 and described it as “very quiet” and “eerie” at times.

Throughout her life, Manuela experienced catcalls and street harassment in Jackson Heights, particularly when walking to school. “I’d always be very on edge and

afraid that there was going to be some man bothering me,” she said. That, too, has changed; in addition to traffic safety, there’s also safety in the stronger sense of community that now prevails:

It's felt like an incredible relief to walk through the Open Street instead of just the regular street, because now there's always a family that I can count on that's looking out for me, or I can count on someone jogging or someone being around that makes me feel safer. There's definitely a stronger family presence, and a stronger presence of children and other women, or other families just exercising, or taking a walk.

Reciprocally, Manuela’s own habits have adjusted: “When I'm on the Open Street, I'm watching that a bike doesn't hit anybody... I'm looking out for everybody in a new way. We get to do that for each other. And it's cool. We all get to keep each other safe in a different way.”

Manuela and Erick spoke about how the Open Street fosters creativity and expression, and helped them expand their artistic practices. Before this free, accessible space to showcase art existed, arranging a venue for events and performances could present an obstacle. In 2019, Manuela founded Kaleidospace, an arts collective focused on the intersection of arts, activism and community, and she found booking event spaces to be a challenge. The following year, the creation of the Open Street opened her mind to the possibility of holding events outdoors. While planning an event, she now turns to the Open Street as a site where she can invite attendees. She commented, “before I used to

walk down 34th Avenue and not look for my neighbors, and now I walk through 34th Avenue looking to make new connections and to meet new people.” She added:

I feel like there's a lot of neighbors that I've never met before, and the Open Street expanded my opportunities to access them and see what they needed and see what they liked... And that opened a new door to us because we realized how many people in our neighborhood like what we're doing and appreciate it and want to connect further. And now we're doing projects with more neighbors and we're establishing more connections and being present for more people in the space and providing more free programming.

Erick describes dance as something that sustains them both spiritually and financially. They said the Open Street “gives a little insight to the community of Jackson Heights, and seeing that in the times that we're living in, we're still creating art. Nothing will stop us from creating art.” For Erick and Manuela, artistic creation is essential to self-actualization, and 34th Avenue provided space that helped them find ways to continue creating art throughout the pandemic, when they felt their neighbors needed it more than ever.

Just as the Open Street has helped Erick and Manuela more fully realize their identities as artists, it has done the same for Nuala, Jim and Ricardo as activists, and Esthi, Mickey and Janet as entrepreneurs. As street vendors, they are their own bosses and work close to home. Janet loves not having to commute to Harlem, and having her children pass by on the way to and from school; her family has grown closer. Nuala and Jim have realized their goal of making the Open Street permanent and creating a safer

corridor for school children and cyclists. Ricardo's creation of the Jackson Heights Co-op Alliance was a dream he'd long held yet had not acted on. For all the 34th Avenue Oral History narrators, the Open Street has been a catalyst for self-actualization.

CONCLUSIONS

By gathering stories filled with concrete details of life in Jackson Heights through 34th Avenue Oral History, I have learned about the narrators' individual and collective senses of place, peeked at the invisible structures of lived meaning beneath the surface of the street, and witnessed how 34th Avenue is endowed with value that it did not previously hold. In the ongoing debate about the Open Street, proponents tout the many benefits, including how it provided a social lifeline by creating space for neighbors to gather, decreased traffic accidents, and enhanced safety. An important impact of the Open Street that hasn't been discussed is how it is strengthening people's sense of place, and the host of attendant benefits that come with this deepened place attachment: increased self-esteem, feelings of belonging, and a sense of security, stability and comfort in the neighborhood. Our oral histories have revealed that all the narrators feel more connected to neighbors than they did before the creation of the Open Street, and at least one narrator has moved from feeling placelessness to feeling deeply rooted in the neighborhood. The narrators and I have developed biographical relationships with 34th Avenue, in which the street has become an important part of our personal histories.

I'd lived in Jackson Heights for four years before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and I knew the restaurants, grocery stores and shops on 37th Avenue and Roosevelt

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Avenue, but I had never given thought to 34th Avenue, a residential street that didn't seem appreciably different from 35th or 32nd Avenues. I'd only gone there for occasional visits to Travers Park or the Farmer's Market on Sundays. Since it became an Open Street, I have become intimately familiar with it. The apartment buildings that line the avenue no longer blend together – there's the one with the terraces that look so inviting; the one with the green shutters; the one on 89th Street that hasn't reopened since the fire. New spatial anchors mark my mental map: Janet's truck on 91st Street; the coalition's activities on 93rd Street; Esthi's Sandwich Therapy stand on 77th Street.

While working on 34th Avenue Oral History, I was reminded of “Only the Dead Know Brooklyn,” a short story written in the New York accent in 1935 that starts, “Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo an't'roo, because it'd take a guy a lifetime just to find his way aroun' duh goddam town” (Wolfe, 1935). The narrator asserts that it's not possible to live long enough to get to know the whole borough of Brooklyn. I agree with that sentiment; in fact, I would say you can't even know a whole Open Street. I've been trying to know it, but will only ever know a fragment of it, and even that fragment keeps changing. As I write this at the close of 2022, many of the experiences I shared with narrators have become memories: Erick no longer rehearses outdoors and Alvaro no longer holds martial arts classes on 34th Avenue; they went back to studios when the city reopened. Janet no longer stands at a folding table on the median in front of her apartment; she and her husband now operate a food truck together and are stationed on the sidewalk.

When I started interviewing people in 2020, 34th Avenue was entirely managed by coalition volunteers. Then, in 2021 they started to get help from city-funded programs like the city's Summer Youth Employment Program, which provides paid work experience for New York City youth in the summer, and from The Horticultural Society of New York, a nonprofit organization whose employees help with moving barriers, cleaning trash and providing gardening services. There have also been infrastructural changes to 34th Avenue: in 2022, three sections were permanently pedestrianized – granite blocks and planters were placed at block entries and parking spots were removed, turning this section into Paseo Park, a “linear park.” It is more of an enhanced Open Street than a typical park, but the amenities nonetheless make me worry. As a cultural organizer who has long supported movements against gentrification and displacement in New York City, I have a gnawing fear that, as often happens when a gentrifying neighborhood gets nice new things, the Open Street may contribute to rising rents.

The fragment of 34th Avenue that I know keeps growing through my own lived experiences and the experiences that narrators generously share with me. Each narrator has intensely local knowledge, from the habits of the squirrels, to the growth of the flowers on the median, to where the street slopes and the pace of your rollerskates quickens. Nuala described the rhythm of people's passage throughout the day:

It's kind of magical at 8:00 AM to watch how it changes from busy traffic and people honking into a sea of people and dog walkers and families going to school... The joggers come first, cause they're faster, and then the dog walkers, and then the kids walking to school, and then the baby carriages, and then the

seniors. And there's this kind of natural flow of the day now in which you see the entire community come out and use the streets in so many different ways.

Oral historian and anthropologist Amy Starecheski writes, “Stories stay alive because they become part of the people who care about them, and those people’s bodies become living archives” (2020, p. 108). Talking with the project participants, re-listening to their stories as I edit audio and transcribe our interviews, and recalling their words as I walk the Open Street makes their stories part of my embodied experience, affording me a more layered sense of place. I hope people who access the oral histories, read profiles on the website and attend community events and exhibits are similarly developing more layered understandings of Jackson Heights, of our neighbors, and of 34th Avenue. The stories we hear become part of our worldviews and shape our intrinsic understanding of place. A collective historical narrative emerges out of the individual stories that show us not just what is in a place and what has happened there, but what the place means to people who inhabit it, shape it and are in turn shaped by it.

The importance of place and of storytelling have been fairly well established by researchers, but further exploration is needed on why *stories of place* matter. This thesis aims to illustrate the potential of place-based stories to reclaim narratives, challenge incomplete accounts, and make profound impacts on people’s lives by subverting stereotypes, strengthening place attachment and enhancing sense of place. Through narrative, 34th Avenue Oral History shows how the Open Street is impacting residents and shaping neighborhood identity. When I started this project, my oral history interviews focused on documenting how the 34th Avenue Open Street was formed and

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why it thrived, and how people used it to sustain themselves throughout the difficult times of the pandemic. In the next phase, I will conduct additional oral histories that focus on a sense of place and identity, and continue to build an argument for the importance of place-based stories. I will maintain relationships with existing narrators while gathering more stories to better understand the Open Street's impact on individuals with different viewpoints, and create respectful places for these stories to be heard, with an eye toward ameliorating neighborhood tensions.

The 34th Avenue Open Street has become a new neighborhood symbol, a new spatial anchor for residents. Ryden (2011) states that as place identities evolve over time, some local patterns and histories take on more public prominence and cultural weight than others. Time will tell how much cultural weight the 34th Avenue Open Street takes on, and how the larger battle over public streets progresses. Open Streets are still a new initiative, and city officials, community leaders and activists are in the process of figuring out what works and how to address things that don't work well. Improvements will be made, the controversy will inevitably die down, and the 34th Avenue Open Street will still be standing. What will the lasting story of this street be? Will it continue to be held as a gold standard for urban streets that inspires activists to reimagine city life? Or will it become a mundane part of everyday life that residents traverse but no longer consciously think about? Will it fuel gentrification? Could 34th Avenue Oral History help prevent that? While documenting the history of the present, oral historians often simultaneously seek to support social justice, using oral history to strengthen movements for social change. I have entered a pitched battle over this contested, dynamic and beautiful place. I

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am eager to see how 34th Avenue develops and to continue documenting the story of this street as it unfolds, and will be poised to use this project as an intervention in support of neighbors and our right to stay in Jackson Heights.

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Appendix A
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Janet Bravo, March 6, 2021

Jim Burke, November 6, 2020; June 10, 2021

Mickey Lin, July 27, 2021

Erick Modesto, October 20, 2020; February 20, 2021; March 17, 2021

Nuala O’Doherty-Naranjo, October 12, 2021

Ricardo Pacheco, June 6, 2022; January 5, 2023

Esthi Zipori, July 22, 2021; April 12, 2022

Appendix B

34th Avenue Oral History Website

The following pages are PDF downloads from the project website: the homepage, “About” page, and six narrator profiles. Some images are missing.



Stretching 1.3 miles through Jackson Heights, Queens, the **34th Avenue Open Street** closes to vehicular traffic each morning and allows local residents to jog, stroll, ride bikes, and socialize while maintaining physical distance, without fear of cars.

34th Avenue Oral History is documenting the story of this remarkable street as it unfolds. Learn more about the ongoing oral history project [here < https://34aveoralhistory.org/about/>](https://34aveoralhistory.org/about/).

Discover 34th Avenue through [profiles < http://34aveoralhistory.org/profiles/>](http://34aveoralhistory.org/profiles/) of people who are reshaping their lives around the Open Street.

Listen below to learn what 34th Avenue means to some of the people who use it:



Privacy policy

Bridget < <https://soundcloud.com/user-466011325>> · Introducing the 34th Ave Open Street < <https://soundcloud.com/user-466011325/introducing-the-34th-ave-open-street>>

— **CLICK TO READ TRANSCRIPT**

RITA WADE (VOLUNTEER WITH 34TH AVENUE OPEN STREETS COALITION): THE MAYOR DECLARED OPEN STREETS, 25 BLOCKS OF JUST A STREET THAT IS MEANT FOR PEDESTRIANS AND BIKERS.

ALVARO TAUTIVA (OWNER OF AT JUUNTSUNYC): 34TH AVENUE BEING OPEN WAS CRUCIAL TO ALL JACKSON HEIGHTS RESIDENTS.

NUALA O'DOHERTY-NARANJO (CO-FOUNDER OF 34TH AVENUE OPEN STREETS COALITION): HAVING A SHARED PLACE, A SHARED SPACE, SO DIFFERENT PEOPLE CAN COME TOGETHER AND HAVE A SHARED INTERACTION. DURING THE PANDEMIC, 34TH AVENUE HAS BECOME THAT SHARED SPACE.

ALVARO: JUST THE FREEDOM TO BE ABLE TO WALK, TO BE ABLE TO SOCIAL DISTANCE, TO PLAY WITH YOUR KIDS.

RITA: THERE WASN'T A BIG, FORMAL ANNOUNCEMENT OR AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT OPEN STREETS WOULD MEAN IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, BUT ONCE PEOPLE COULD SEE THAT AT 8:00 EVERY MORNING IT WAS OPEN TO THEM, THEY DECIDED ON DIFFERENT WAYS ON HOW TO USE IT.

JIM BURKE (CO-FOUNDER OF 34TH AVENUE OPEN STREETS COALITION): AND ALL OF A SUDDEN, THIS WHOLE WORLD OPENS UP, AND YOU'RE LIKE...

ALVARO: WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO HAVE INDOOR GROUP CLASSES, SO BECAUSE OF THAT WE DECIDED TO TAKE IT OUTSIDE ON 34TH AVENUE.

ERICK MODESTO (DIRECTOR OF BALLET FOLKLORICO NUEVA JUVENTUD): BEING THAT 34TH AVENUE IS OPEN, HEY, MAYBE I COULD HOLD SOME OF MY REHEARSALS THERE. IT MADE IT A GOOD PLACE WHERE WE COULD REHEARSE, GET STARTED UP, START CREATING NEW IDEAS.

ALVARO: MEETING ON 34TH AVENUE, WHICH HAS BEEN A BLESSING, THOSE STREETS!

RITA: IT WAS KIND OF MAGICAL, ESPECIALLY IN THE MORNINGS WHEN PEOPLE WERE EXERCISING AND WALKING. AT 8:00 AS SOON AS WE STARTED PUTTING IT OUT, IT WAS LIKE A DANCE. SUDDENLY YOU WOULD SEE THESE PEOPLE JUST APPEAR FROM THEIR BUILDINGS AND START WALKING OR JOGGING, BUT ENJOYING IT. REALLY BEAUTIFUL.

RITA: I WAS ONE OF THE FIRST VOLUNTEERS FOR THIS OPEN STREET.

JIM: WE SAID WE GOT THIS, WE WILL HAVE VOLUNTEERS FOR EVERY SINGLE BLOCK.

NUALA: WE HAD TO FIND ALL THE MANPOWER TO MOVE THE BARRICADES. WE'VE MOVED OVER 20,000 BARRICADES, ALL WITH VOLUNTEER POWER, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK NOW FOR MONTHS ON END, AND WE'RE GOING TO DO IT WHEN IT RAINS AND WHEN IT SNOWS AND WHEN THE SUN SHINES, TO SHOW THEM THAT WE AS A COMMUNITY CAN DO THIS.

NUALA: I MEAN, THE KEY TO THE OPEN STREETS HAS ALWAYS BEEN THAT IT'S COMMUNITY-RUN, COMMUNITY-LED, AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN. Y'NA'MEAN?

JIM: I THINK THAT 34TH GAVE, FOR THE PEOPLE WHO ARE INVOLVED IN IT, A REALLY STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY.

ALVARO: I SAW EVERYONE ON 34TH. WE'RE ALWAYS THERE!

RITA: RETHINKING HOW PEOPLE CAN LIVE AND MOVE IN NEW YORK CITY.

ERICK: WHO KNOWS WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR 34TH AVENUE?

RITA: LET'S REIMAGINE WHAT NEW YORK COULD BE LIKE.

ABOUT

Background

On May 1st, 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio and the City Council officially initiated the Open Streets program, with the goal of providing more space for socially distanced recreation. The program closes designated streets throughout the city to vehicular traffic for set hours, and opens them to people.

Many of the Open Streets never flourished, with drivers simply moving aside the barricades, and others fell into disuse when the weather turned cold. However, the 34th Avenue Open Street, which spans the Queens neighborhood of Jackson Heights and borders on Woodside and Corona, continues to thrive.

In a neighborhood that ranks second-to-last in per-capita green space and fifth-to-last in per-capita playground space in the city, 34th Avenue has become a lifeline for some residents. Locals jog, stroll, ride bikes, walk dogs and socialize, without fear of cars. Elders play Bingo and children play hopscotch, while bicycles, tricycles, scooters, skateboards, roller skates and even the occasional pogo stick and unicycle fill the avenue's two lanes. But it's a space for much more than recreation; it's a space for community connection, a resource for mental relief, and, for some, a means of financial livelihood.

The Department of Transportation has praised 34th Avenue as the gold standard of the Open Streets program, and the volunteers who maintain it were instrumental in the campaign to make it permanent. 34th Avenue is now at the vanguard of a wider movement that prioritizes people over cars and envisions walking and biking as the centerpieces of city streets.

Yet, it is also a site where visions of how public space should be used are clashing. Some want 34th Avenue to serve as a blueprint for city streets, while others object that the closed street exacerbates traffic and other quality of life issues, particularly for elderly and disabled residents who rely on cars. On 34th Avenue we see a harbinger of what post-pandemic New York City may look like, and what it will take to get there: imagination, negotiation and adaptation.



The Oral History Project

Bridget Bartolini hardly left her apartment in the first two months of the pandemic, when Jackson Heights became the "epicenter of the epicenter." When she started emerging from isolation and walking her local Open Street, she was fascinated by what she saw: chalk art, pilates classes, dance rehearsals, music performances, kids playing. Signs of life and resilience.

An Oral History MA student at Columbia University and Founder of the [Five Boro Story Project <http://www.fiveborostoryproject.org>](http://www.fiveborostoryproject.org), Bridget loves talking to people and hearing their neighborhood stories. She began interviewing people about 34th Avenue in the fall of 2020 for a journalism class, and the more she listened to how people are reshaping their lives around this street, the more she wanted to hear. She launched the 34th Avenue Oral History project to document the story of the Open Street as it unfolds.

Bridget partnered with photographer, filmmaker, and fellow Queens native [Patrick Chang <https://www.instagram.com/irracionaley/>](https://www.instagram.com/irracionaley/) to create multimodal portraits of the project narrators that incorporate photos and videos.

On our website you'll find [profiles < http://34aveoralhistory.org/profiles/>](http://34aveoralhistory.org/profiles/) of local community members whose lives have been deeply affected by the 34th Avenue Open Street. The profiles include short, edited excerpts of their oral history interviews, and the full oral history interviews are being archived with [Queens Memory < https://queensmemory.org/>](https://queensmemory.org/), a community project run through Queens Library and Queens College.

34th Avenue Oral History is designed to be a longitudinal oral history project. Bridget is in the process of conducting additional interviews and crafting more community member profiles, which will be added to the site. She's also planning free community events with project participants - stay tuned for upcoming events on the Open Street!

This project has been supported by a Public Humanities Grant from [Humanities New York < https://humanitiesny.org/>](https://humanitiesny.org/), the Humanities in Practice Initiative of the [Society of Fellows/Heyman Center for the Humanities < https://sofheyman.org/>](https://sofheyman.org/) at Columbia University, and [The Laundromat Project < https://www.laundromatproject.org/>](https://www.laundromatproject.org/)'s Creative Action Fund.

Project Goals

- To tell the story of the 34th Avenue Open Street, the neighborhood, and the pandemic - through stories of individuals.
- To show what makes 34th Avenue thrive, and provide an educational resource for people who want to make their local open street successful, or work on similar community initiatives.
- To show how small business owners and artists creatively pivoted to sustain their livelihoods after the pandemic.
- To document how people are reimagining the city's streetscape and rethinking post-pandemic NYC.
- To build community among the people who use the 34th Avenue Open Street, and provide opportunities for dialogue and listening.

Publications

Bridget wrote about her research and shared mini profiles in "[Story of a Street < https://urbanomnibus.net/2022/07/story-of-a-street/>](https://urbanomnibus.net/2022/07/story-of-a-street/)" in Urban Omnibus.

JANET BRAVO



On a brisk afternoon in November 2020, Janet Bravo stood behind a folding table loaded with her homemade arroz con leche, chicharrones, and flautas, Mexican sweet bread baked by her cousin, and soft drinks and candy.

Janet had risen at 6:00 a.m. to start preparing food to sell. Using recipes she learned from her mother, she began the day by cooking chicken for the flautas, then preparing beans and homemade salsa verde. She fried wheel-shaped wheat crisps for chicharrones, a popular street snack, while checking on her four kids, helping the two youngest log into their remote classes. She cooked a cup of rice for the arroz con leche, added cinnamon, sugar and a gallon of milk, then poured the concoction into a two-gallon thermos, one of the few purchases she made to prepare for her new vending career on 34th Avenue.

She sets up her table on the median directly outside her apartment. On days when customers finish the arroz con leche, she crosses the street, steps back inside, and whips up another batch.



All the preparation can feel overwhelming when Janet is in her kitchen, but when she's out on 34th Avenue, she can relax. Throughout the day, people stop by and talk to her. Her friend Hilaria, who lives ten blocks away, often sets up next to her to sell homemade tamales. Janet has always been friendly, but has gotten to know her neighbors better since the pandemic.

In the interview excerpt below, Janet (speaking Spanish) and her eldest daughter Alysia (speaking English) talk about how the Open Street brought neighbors closer together:



34th Avenue Oral History

Janet Bravo 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Socializing On 34th



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[Privacy policy](#)Bridget < <https://soundcloud.com/user-466011325>> · Janet Bravo 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Socializing On 34th < <https://soundcloud.com/user-466011325/janet-bravo-34th-aven...>**— CLICK TO READ TRANSCRIPT****BRIDGET:** WHAT'S THE ATMOSPHERE LIKE ON THE OPEN STREET?**JANET:** SE SIENTE BIEN BONITO PORQUE UNO MIRA GENTE. YA UNO SALE DIARIO NO MIRA LA MISMA GENTE. TE SALUDA, COMO YA UNO VA CONOCIENDO MÁS PERSONAS LA RUTINA, QUE VIENEN, QUE PASAN. ES BONITO.**ALYSIA:** SHE LIKES THE ATMOSPHERE BECAUSE IT'S REALLY NICE. EVERYONE NOW IS GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER BETTER AND THEY'RE MORE FAMILIAR WITH EACH OTHER. THEY'LL SAY HI TO EACH OTHER MORE. EVERYONE'S A LOT CLOSER. BEFORE THEY DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHO THE NEIGHBORS WERE, AND NOW THEY ALL KNOW EACH OTHER.**BRIDGET:** SO YOU SEE A LOT OF FRIENDS ON THE OPEN STREET.**JANET:** SÍ, YO CONOZCO MUCHAS PERSONAS, MUCHOS AMIGOS, YA AHORA TENEMOS MÁS CONOCIDOS. Y MIS NIÑAS TAMBIÉN. ESTÁN ESPERANDO QUE SEA VERANO PARA QUE VUELVAN A VER SUS AMIGUITOS QUE HICIERON EL AÑO PASADO PORQUE HICIERON MUCHOS AMIGUITOS AQUÍ AFUERA.**ALYSIA:** SHE SAID THAT SHE HAS A LOT OF FRIENDS NOW, AND ALSO MY LITTLE SISTERS, THEY'RE VERY EXCITED FOR THE SUMMER TO COME, THE WARMER WEATHER, BECAUSE THEY'RE EXCITED TO SEE THE FRIENDS THEY MADE LAST SUMMER.**JANET:** Y SIEMPRE ENCUENTRAS ALGUIEN QUE SE QUEDA PLATICANDO CONMIGO ALLÍ.**ALYSIA:** AND SHE ALWAYS FIND SOMEONE THAT JUST STAYS THERE AND TALKS TO HER AND HAVE A CONVERSATION.**JANET:** PORQUE HAY MUCHA GENTE QUE PASAN Y DICEN QUE ESTÁN ESTRESADOS.**ALYSIA:** THERE'S A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT WALK BY—**JANET:** TIENEN PÁNICO.**ALYSIA:** —AND THEY WILL TALK TO HER, TELLING HER THAT THEY'RE STRESSED OUT FROM THE PANDEMIC, AND THEY ARE SCARED, OR THEY'RE PANICKING. SO A LOT OF PEOPLE FIND COMFORT IN TALKING TO OTHERS ON THE OPEN STREETS.**JANET:** PUEDES HABLAR CON PERSONAS QUE NI CONOCES, PERO ELLOS, TE QUIEREN PLATICAR. TE ESCUCHAN.**ALYSIA:** SHE TALKS TO A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT SHE DOESN'T EVEN KNOW, BUT EVERYONE'S LISTENING TO EACH OTHER.**BRIDGET:** AND THAT'S DIFFERENT FROM BEFORE?**JANET:** SÍ, ES DIFERENTE DE ANTES, PORQUE ANTES, LA GENTE NO SE PARABA. NO SE DETENÍAN, NI SI QUIERA TE QUIEREN VER. PASABA RÁPIDO.**ALYSIA:** YEAH, IT'S VERY DIFFERENT BECAUSE SHE SAID PEOPLE WOULD JUST WALK BY YOU AND NOT EVEN SAY HI. THEY WOULD JUST WALK BY YOU AND BE LIKE, WHATEVER. NOW SHE JUST THINKS THAT IT'S EASIER FOR PEOPLE TO ACTUALLY TALK TO EACH OTHER.

This November afternoon, neighbors called out “Hola!” as they walked by, and on the median beside her, Janet’s seven-year-old splayed out with two other little girls, playing with dolls. “For kids, the Open Street is like a park,” Janet said. “My little one, she loves it.”

Janet is too busy vending to attend the free dance classes that her friend Oscar organizes on 34th Avenue, but she sometimes goes for morning walks in the car-free streets. She used to be overweight, and her doctor prescribed exercise. “They say to go to the gym, but it’s dangerous inside. So here I exercise.” She marches in place behind her table and does calf raises on the curb of the median. She has a folding chair, but never seems to sit.

Her building’s superintendent came over and ordered flautas, then sat in her chair and chatted while Janet took two chicken-filled corn tortillas out of a Tupperware container and carefully topped them with beans, shredded lettuce, salsa verde, sour cream, and a sprinkle of cotija cheese. After each transaction, Janet picks up the bottle of hand sanitizer that sits on her table and squirts a generous dollop into her hands. Her super continued regaling her with a story while he sat and ate beside her.



For the past eight years, Janet and her husband, Miguel, had worked at a pushcart in Harlem, selling coffee, tea, donuts and bagels. They had to stop working on March 22nd, 2020, when Governor Cuomo issued the “PAUSE” executive order mandating that non-essential businesses close. Fear gripped the city; suddenly, there were no customers on the usually bustling intersection of 125th Street and Lexington Avenue where they set up their food cart, and eventually even the garage where they stored their cart closed.

The next four months, Janet stayed inside with her four children and husband. Afraid of catching coronavirus, they only left the house for the most essential purposes, like trips to the grocery store or the pharmacy. “Every day was scary,” Janet said. “Oh my God, the stress. We had no money, and the rent doesn't stop.” With no income, soon they found themselves unable to pay rent. At the same time, prices for food they were used to buying cheaply - like beef, cheese, flour, and tortillas - shot up.

In this excerpt, Janet and Alysia recall how they lived off of eggs:



34th Avenue Oral History

Janet Bravo 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Huevos

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2:39

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JANET: LA COMIDA SE SUBIÓ MUCHO.

ALYSIA: FOOD THAT WE WERE USED TO BUYING AT AN AFFORDABLE PRICE, IT WAS NO LONGER AFFORDABLE. SO IT GOT TO THE POINT WHERE THE FOOD WAS JUST—WE WERE NOT EATING BEEF, WE WERE NOT EATING CHEESE, WE WOULD JUST EAT EGGS.

JANET: PORQUE DECÍA, ES MEJOR—QUE VAMOS A MORIR DE COLESTEROL, PERO NO VAMOS A MORIR DE HAMBRE. HAY HUEVITOS.

ALYSIA: SHE SAID, IT'S BETTER TO JUST NOT STARVE, AND AT LEAST HAVE SOMETHING TO EAT. AND WE WERE TRYING TO SAVE ALL THE MONEY WE HAD. IT WAS LIKE A SACRIFICE THAT MY MOM HAD TO MAKE, WE ALL HAD TO MAKE.

BRIDGET: HOW WOULD YOU PREPARE EGGS?

JANET: NOSOTROS PREPARAMOS CON HUEVO, JALAPEÑO, Y TOMATES, CEBOLLA. NOSOTROS LE LLAMAMOS HUEVO A LA MEXICANO.

ALYSIA: SO THERE'S ONE STYLE, WHICH IS VERY BASIC MEXICAN-STYLE EGGS, WHICH IS WITH JALAPENO, ONION, TOMATO. THAT'S ONE WAY, WITH BEANS ON THE SIDE.

JANET: Y OTRO, PARA QUE LAS NIÑAS COMERAN, HUEVOS CON EJOTES.

ALYSIA: ANOTHER STYLE, FOR THE KIDS, WAS EGGS WITH STRING BEANS.

JANET: Y HUEVOS CON PAPA, HUEVOS CON RAJA. PERO SIEMPRE ERAN HUEVOS, HUEVOS, HUEVOS!

ALYSIA: THE OTHER POPULAR STYLE WAS EGGS WITH POTATO AND JALAPENO SLICES AND ONION.

JANET: HUEVOS HERVIDOS CON ARROZ.

ALYSIA: OR HARD-BOILED EGGS WITH RICE.

JANET: PERO SIEMPRE, HUEVOS, HUEVOS, HUEVOS!

ALYSIA: BUT EVERY DAY IT WAS EGGS.

JANET: ENTONCES, A ALYSIA NUNCA SE LE VA A OLVIDAR PORQUE ELLA SIEMPRE DECÍA, “OH MY GOD! EN ESTA CASA, NO VAMOS A MORIR DE COVID, UNO VA A MORIR DE COLESTEROL.”

ALYSIA: SHE SAID YEAH, SHE'S NEVER GONNA FORGET THAT I SAID THAT, I, PERSONALLY, IT WAS VERY STRESSFUL FOR ME BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT TO EAT EGGS ANYMORE. SO IT AFFECTED ME BADLY BECAUSE I'M LIKE, YOU KNOW, IN THIS HOUSEHOLD, WE'RE NOT GOING TO DIE FROM COVID. WE'RE ACTUALLY GOING TO DIE FROM CHOLESTEROL. SO, BUT IT WAS DRAMATIC, BUT IT WAS JUST SO STRESSFUL AT THAT POINT.

JANET: PERO, NO IMPORTA PORQUE LOS HUEVOS, LAS NIÑAS COMÍAN LOS HUEVOS, HUEVOS. ASÍ NO MÁS; HUEVO SCRAMBLE, ASÍ REVUELTO, Y ASÍ CON TORTILLAS Y ENREDADOS TAQUITOS COMIMOS CON HUEVO YA.

ALYSIA: THEY'LL EVEN MAKE EGG TACOS. SO, SCRAMBLED EGGS WITH TACOS, AND THEY'LL ROLL UP THE TORTILLA.

JANET: HUEVOS CON BRÓCOLI, HUEVOS CON LO QUE HABÍA, PERO HUEVO ALLÍ, PARA QUE NO TUVIÉRAMOS HAMBRE.

ALYSIA: YEAH, SHE'LL TRY TO CHANGE IT UP, SO WE WEREN'T ALWAYS HUNGRY.

BRIDGET: YOU'RE REALLY CREATIVE WITH COMING UP WITH DIFFERENT WAYS TO MAKE EGGS.

JANET: PERO SÍ COMÍAMOS HUEVOS, PERO DIFERENTE HUEVOS. PERO SIEMPRE EL HUEVO.

Eventually, Janet's husband Miguel returned to work in Harlem two days a week, and she stayed home to look after the kids and help them with remote schooling. In Harlem, the thinned out crowds rushed past his cart; people weren't stopping to buy coffee and donuts anymore. Then they got a letter from their landlord saying they were going to be evicted. They had to make money somehow.

Janet's bedroom overlooks 34th Avenue. She saw people exercising on the Open Street, and knew they would want drinks like water and Gatorade. She wanted to try street vending on the avenue, but while she had her permit and food handlers card, she didn't know if setting up there would mean risking high fines and police harassment. “That's my fear. Before I saw police take away food from vendors and put it in the garbage, and take away their license.”

Then in June, following mass protests against police violence and pressure to cut NYPD funding, Mayor de Blasio announced that the police would no longer enforce street vendor regulations. As soon as Janet heard the news on the radio, she asked Miguel to stock up on bottles of Gatorade and water from Costco, repurposed the shopping cart she used for laundry to hold a cooler, and set up on 34th, selling drinks for a dollar.



The first month she only sold bottled beverages. "Then people said, 'Why don't you sell food? I'm coming from work, I'm hungry!'" She decided to make flautas because they're easy to eat on the go. She would sell an average of 25 flautas a day, making anywhere from \$30 on a bad day to \$60 on a good day. In October, when it started getting colder, her regular customers suggested, "Why don't you sell something that will keep us warm?" She expanded her offerings to include coffee, arroz con leche, and champurrado, a hot chocolate drink thickened with masa corn flour.

She had to stop selling her flautas in the winter, because the freshly assembled ingredients got cold too quickly, but those in the know still pre-order them from her directly.

Despite the stress and fear of the pandemic, this time brought Janet's family closer. Everyone used to be busy with their routines of going to work and school, but now that they were together, they began communicating more. "Tanto siempre estamos juntos. Nunca estábamos como ahora. Este pandemia nos ha enseñado a ser mas unidos," Janet said. *We are together so much. We've never been like we are now. This pandemic has taught us to be more united.* "Now I know family is most important to me. It's everything for your life."

In the spring of 2021, Miguel started bringing their food cart to 34th Avenue, and they began working together again in their own neighborhood, close to their children.



Janet and Miguel are working and saving as much as they can. They hope to have a brick and mortar store and own their own home someday.

Throughout the winter, when Janet stationed herself on 34th Avenue almost every day from 8:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., she would wear three layers of pants and three sweaters under her big winter coat, along with super thick socks, and hand warmers inside her gloves. Her youngest daughters would ask her, "Why do you have to go outside? It's so cold." The pandemic showed her the importance of saving money, and she wants to impart this to her children. She tells them, "Aprendan y prepárense para que ustedes tengan un futuro mejor, y no tengan que sufrir lo que nosotros estamos sufriendo." *Learn and prepare yourselves so that you can have a better future, and not have to suffer the way we've suffered.*

She is optimistic that her children won't struggle as she has.

Janet earned more at her old job in Manhattan, where she had a steady stream of customers every day. Business on 34th Avenue is less reliable. "Here if you don't sell, you have nothing," she said. Nevertheless, she prefers the life of an entrepreneur. "Here's better, because it's mine. It's not for somebody else. It's something for us, our family. People like my arroz con leche, and that makes me happy."

JIM BURKE



A long-time safe streets activist, Jim regularly devoted time to volunteering after work, and in 2020 he had more time on his hands than ever. He had taken a sabbatical in 2019, and because of the pandemic, the job that he planned to return to no longer existed. With his sabbatical stretching forward indefinitely, he helped his friend Nuala O'Doherty-Naranjo with a mutual aid program she started, the COVID Care Neighborhood Network. One day in April 2020 found him in Nuala's basement with other volunteers, including Leslie Ramos, the executive director of the 82nd Street Business Improvement District (BID), when Leslie got a call from the police.

The Open Streets program was about to start. Mayor de Blasio had delegated responsibility to the Department of Transportation and local police precincts. In many neighborhoods, the police partnered with a local BID to take over daily management of the streets. The 115th Precinct called

Leslie to ask if the 82nd Street BID could take on the duties for the 34th Avenue Open Street, but Leslie explained that they lacked the staff to clean the street and move the barricades each day.

Jim and Nuala jumped in: "We'll do it!" They'd both been advocating for safe streets in their home of Jackson Heights for years, and recognized that this was a special moment in time. Eager to show that the community could manage 34th Avenue without police presence and determined to make their local Open Street a success, they called a dozen local groups – including Queens Transportation Alternatives, where Jim is volunteer chair for Queens, and the Jackson Heights Beautification Group, where Nuala had served as a past president – and wrangled up volunteers. They formed the [34th Ave Open Streets Coalition < https://www.34aveopenstreets.com/>](https://www.34aveopenstreets.com/) to make it work.



The NYPD provided barricades, and beginning on May 1st, Coalition volunteers put them in place, hanging up signs that read "Do Not Enter Except Local Traffic, 5MPH."

Now, at 8:00 every morning, volunteers move barricades to block cars from entering 34th Avenue between 69th Street and Junction Boulevard, 26 blocks. Every evening at 8:00 p.m. they remove them. Rita Wade, who has been picking up trash and moving barricades as a Coalition volunteer

since day one, said, “It’s kind of magical. At 8:00 suddenly people appear from their buildings and start walking or jogging. It’s like a dance.”

In the interview excerpt below, Jim speaks about how the Open Street brought new relationships into his life and helped combat isolation during the pandemic:



34th Avenue Oral History

Jim Burke 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Combatting Isolation

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JIM: I’VE MET MORE PEOPLE IN THIS LAST YEAR THAN IN THE PRIOR TWO DECADES THAT I’VE LIVED HERE. SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS NOW ARE PEOPLE THAT I DIDN’T KNOW 13 MONTHS AGO, 15 MONTHS AGO. AND I MET THEM ALL THROUGH THE OPEN STREETS, EITHER FELLOW VOLUNTEERS, NEIGHBORS. AND THAT’S BEEN ONE OF THE MOST WONDERFUL THINGS THAT’S HAPPENED.

I HAVE FRIENDS IN OTHER PARTS OF THE CITY, SOME OF WHOM FELL INTO DEEP DEPRESSION, SOME OF WHOM FELT VERY ISOLATED OR ALONE. THIS NEIGHBORHOOD, COVID HIT US HARD IN MARCH, AND BADLY. AND WE LOST A LOT OF PEOPLE. A LOT OF PEOPLE GOT SICK. BUT AFTER THAT, WE REALLY ALL CAME TOGETHER, AND SO MANY WONDERFUL THINGS HAVE HAPPENED SINCE THEN. AND WE WERE ABLE TO NOT FEEL ISOLATED, BECAUSE WE HAD EACH OTHER. AND I THINK THAT MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE. THAT WAS WORTH WORKING SEVEN DAYS A WEEK FOR.

BRIDGET: YEAH.

JIM: AND I WAS NOT THE ONLY ONE; THAT’S THE OTHER THING. THERE WERE MANY OTHER PEOPLE COMMITTING SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. RITA, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. NUALA, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. OSCAR, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. MIGUEL, WHO WAS OUR BARRICADE VOLUNTEER, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. YOU KNOW, I CAN GO ON AND ON. THESE PEOPLE, LOTS OF PEOPLE REALLY STEPPED UP AND WORKED HARD, EITHER ON CLOSING AND OPENING OUR STREETS IN THE MORNINGS; NONE OF THE OTHER THINGS COULD HAPPEN WITHOUT THAT HAPPENING. AND THEN WE HAD A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO REALLY DEVOTED—AND STILL DO—A BIG PORTION OF THEIR DAY TO MAKING SURE THAT OPEN STREETS IS SUCCESSFUL. AND WE HAD A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT, MAYBE FROM THE OUTSIDE, LIKE, “HOW COULD YOU DEVOTE THAT MANY DAYS?” BECAUSE PEOPLE, IT WAS REALLY WORTH IT TO THEM. THAT MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE.

I THINK THAT 34TH GAVE, FOR THE PEOPLE WHO ARE INVOLVED IN IT, A REALLY STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY. AS OPPOSED TO BEFORE, LIKE, YOU HAD NO INTERACTION WITH THE PEOPLE WHO LIVED HERE, EVEN THOUGH YOU’VE LIVED HERE FOR A LONG, LONG TIME, YOU WOULDN’T NECESSARILY KNOW THEM VERY WELL.

AND ALL OF A SUDDEN, THIS WHOLE WORLD OPENS UP AND YOU’RE LIKE, “WAIT, I KNOW YOU.” LIKE, YOU SEE THEM, YOU’VE HUNG OUT WITH THEM. YOU’VE DONE EXERCISE CLASS WITH THEM. YOU’VE PRACTICED ENGLISH WITH THEM. YOU’VE JUMP ROPED WITH THEIR KIDS, PLAYED SAPO WITH THEM. AND IT’S REALLY SUCH A MUCH NICER PLACE TO LIVE NOW. THAT’S MY FAVORITE PART OF THIS WHOLE THING.

After talking to neighbors to find out what they wanted on the street, Nuala and Jim hired local instructors to lead free Zumba, Pilates, salsa, yoga, and English conversation classes. Every day, weather permitting, the Coalition holds free classes for adults and activities for children, like games, races, and slime-making workshops. They organize free cultural events, including music and dance performances, and art exhibits. The Coalition covers the costs of all this, about \$1,000 per month, with small grants and donations.

Here, Jim describes his favorite activity:



34th Avenue Oral History

Jim Burke 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Favorite Activity



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BRIDGET: SO, FROM THE MANY ACTIVITIES THAT YOU HAVE BEEN PART OF ON 34TH AVENUE, COULD YOU TELL ME A STORY ABOUT ONE OF YOUR FAVORITES?

JIM: OOH, I HAVE SO MANY FAVORITES. I THINK, I THINK THE RACES. NOW, AGAIN, WE STARTED THAT IN THE WINTER BECAUSE WE NEEDED AN ACTIVITY THAT YOU CAN DO IN 20 DEGREE WEATHER.

ONE OF THE REASONS I LOVE IT, FIRST OF ALL, WE GOT GREAT PARTICIPATION. WE GOT KIDS OF ALL AGES. WE HAVE TWO CHEERLEADERS. AND THEY'RE PROBABLY LATE SEVENTIES, EIGHTIES, THE WOMEN WHO HELP US CHEERLEAD. AND THEY HAVE COMPLETE WITH THE POM-POMS AND EVERYTHING, TO CHEER ON THE KIDS. WE HAVE OTHER ADULTS THAT HELP JUST MAKE SURE THAT THE STREET IS COMPLETELY FREE OF CARS, OR THAT IF THERE IS A BICYCLIST OR THERE IS SOMEONE COMING DOWN, THAT THEY'RE COGNIZANT OF THE CHILDREN AND ARE CAREFUL. SO, IT'S A BIG COMMUNITY UNDERTAKING. LOTS OF VOLUNTEERS COME.

AND THE JOY, THE KIDS—I THINK IT WAS LAST WEEK OR THE WEEK BEFORE, WE DID, LIKE, TWELVE RACES, AND YOU RACE AND YOU GO THROUGH AN OBSTACLE COURSE, AND IT'S JUST AMAZING HOW MUCH THEY ENJOY IT. AND THEN AT THE END, WE GIVE THEM ALL A MEDAL. IT LOOKS LIKE THE OLYMPICS AT THE END, AND THEN THE KIDS ARE SO HAPPY WALKING AWAY WITH THEIR MEDALS.

I THINK THAT GIVES ME THE MOST JOY, BECAUSE THE KIDS REALLY, REALLY LOVE IT. AND THEN TO SEE ALL THESE OTHER, YOU KNOW, THE OTHER PEOPLE PARTICIPATING AND HELPING VOLUNTEER DOING IT. AND THIS ALL WAS THE IDEA OF A 13-YEAR-OLD BOY WHO ALSO HELPS PARTICIPATE AND HELPS WITH THE RACES. SO IT'S JUST, I THINK IT'S JUST WONDERFUL.

OH, I KNOW ANOTHER FAVORITE ONE. WE HAD THE MOMS AND THE DADS JOIN US, AND THE MOMS DID A RACE, AND THEN WITH THE DADS—THERE'S ONLY A COUPLE OF GUYS. AND THE KIDS WERE ABSOLUTELY HYSTERICAL, LAUGHING, CLAPPING, ROOTING ON THEIR MOMS AND DADS. AND YOU KNOW WHAT, THAT'S MY FAVORITE. CAUSE THE KIDS, WATCHING THE KIDS WATCHING THEIR PARENTS RUN WAS AMAZING AND A LOT OF FUN.

On one of the last warm afternoons of late October 2020, people sat on the curb of 34th Avenue's tree-studded median eating late lunches, soaking up the weakened October sun. Others jogged, strolled, rollerbladed, or pushed baby carriages by. They passed road closure barricades pasted with advertisements for a rally to make the Open Street permanent, placards planted in the dirt of the medians declaring "No es demasiado tarde, complete el censo hoy!" (*"It's not too late, complete the census today!"*), and NYPD signs offering a cash reward for information about a recent shooting.

Near the corner of 93rd Street, Jim, Nuala, and Jim's partner, Oscar Escobar, set up wooden chairs around the median. They were preparing to teach a drop-in ESL class, which meets most weekdays at 3:45pm.



Students began trickling in. Masks covered everyone's mouths, but their eyes crinkled in smiles as they greeted each other. A young mother approached with a boy of around five hefting a Spider Man backpack, and a girl of about seven clutching a Barbie. Nuala beckoned them over, and they sat amid the fallen yellow leaves on the median. At first the children were shy, but when Nuala asked a question, they shot up their hands, fingertips quivering with eagerness to answer. Jim threw his head back and laughed, delighted by their enthusiasm.

They began discussing holidays. Jim translated to Spanish for a student who was confused, and she nodded. But the children were not satisfied with his cursory explanation. They elaborated, a jumble of words and gesticulations pouring out of both of them at the same time. Laughing, Jim lifted asked them, "What's your favorite holiday?" The boy leapt to his feet, jumping up and down while extolling the virtues of Christmas, and having exhausted himself with the manic delivery of his answer, dramatically fell backwards onto the median, cushioned by his backpack.

The discussion and laughter continued until the clock struck 4:45 pm and the lesson was over. Students and teachers stood and chatted before eventually parting ways with elbow bumps. Jim, Nuala, and Oscar picked up yoga mats from an earlier exercise class and piled them onto a small cart, along with a clipboard and markers they used in the class.

A little girl in a sparkly dress twirled in the street, a man rode by on a bike with a radio blasting a Spanish ballad, a teenage boy on a skateboard fell while attempting a trick, and the activity of the Open Street swallowed up Jim, Nuala, and Oscar as they carried their chairs home.



For their afternoons on 34th, Oscar often brings sapo, a traditional South American game where players try to toss coins into the mouth of a frog, and Jim officiates sapo tournaments. The metal coins tend to bounce off the sides of the game board, ricocheting into the street, and Jim and the children shimmy under cars to retrieve the game pieces.

Previously, Jim had never worked with children, or even thought much about them. That changed as he helped with sapo games, taught neighborhood children how to ride bikes, and succumbed to their infectious enthusiasm. “All those kids motivate me,” he reflected in November 2020. “We’re all caught up in the election, the pandemic, and people dying. And these kids are having a great time on their street. They’re so full of joy.”



For months, Jim jumped rope and ran up and down the street with the many neighborhood children who adore him. But he had never shaken the fatigue that plagued him since contracting COVID the previous March. “I was full of joy every day, even though I was tired. I wanted to fight through it. I thought I would overcome the exhaustion,” he said. “I didn’t know that my blood was not traveling to my heart.”

Jim had been helping to plan a rally on October 24th to advocate for extending the 34th Avenue Open Street and making it permanent (the city had originally planned for the Open Streets initiative to last only until October 31, 2020). Two days before the rally, while moving barricades one morning, Jim suddenly felt as if someone were sitting on his chest. Nuala and Rita happened to be nearby and saw him lie down in the street. While Rita waited with him, Nuala knocked on doors to get him aspirin, then called her son, who drove them to nearby Elmhurst Hospital, where Jim was diagnosed with a heart attack.

The day of the rally, as Councilmember Daniel Dromm announced that he had come to an agreement with the DOT to make the Open Street permanent, Jim was still recovering in the hospital. Local politicians at the rally commended his contributions, and Assemblymember Catalina Cruz called him “the Mayor of 34th Avenue.”

Jim was released six days later, and the very next morning found him back out on 34th greeting friends. “Everybody has been very nice,” he said later, tearing up. “It felt really good.”

A week later, feeling somewhat dizzy, perhaps because of his heart medication, Jim leaned on his cane as he turned down 34th Avenue and headed to 93rd Street, the base of operations for the Coalition’s activities. Instead of joining Oscar and children at the sapo game, as he used to, he sat on a folding chair and watched a nearby Pilates class and the kids playing. A steady stream of adults and children flocked around him. “Estoy un poco cansado,” he told a concerned neighbor - *I’m a little tired*.

Six-year-old Delilah ran over to Jim, slapped a high five, then stood behind him and squealed, “You can’t see me!” “I have no idea where you are!” Jim played along.

Oscar kept points for the sapo game and made sure the players took turns. Children chased each other and drew with chalk while their mothers practiced pilates. Across the street, people lined up outside P.S. 149 elementary school for free community meals being distributed through the Department of Education. The line for food ebbed and flowed, but never ended.

Feeling unwell, Jim went home before the English conversation class started.



In a couple of weeks, Jim felt more like himself and was back out on the Open Street every day. On a sunny June day in 2021, he donned his usual fluorescent orange, high-visibility safety vest, and headed for 34th Avenue with Oscar. Jim facilitated kids’ activities near the corner of 93rd Street, while Oscar led a salsa class in the middle of the block. They had incorporated an obstacle course into the

sapo game - the children had to run between traffic cones and through a hopscotch board before attempting to toss coins into the frog's open mouth.

"We added some extras so the kids can burn more energy," Jim explained.



A boy holding one of the coins asked, "Are these made of real gold?"

"I think they're made out of real brass," Jim told him.

"What's brass?"

"Another kind of metal."

Jim officiated the sapo game, helping kids take turns and keep score, cajoling and encouraging:

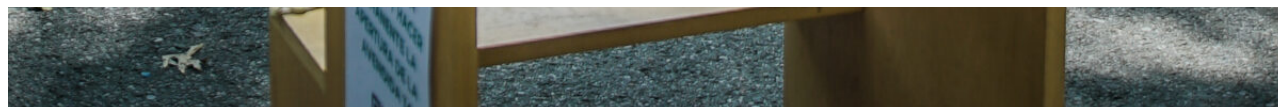
"Look at Rex! Rex is a pro!" "Oh! So close! So close it hurts!" He laughed.

A father and son riding by on bikes stopped and asked if they could join. "Of course!" said Jim. He explained the rules: "If you get it in the frog's mouth, you win automatically! You'll win the day!" The young boy ran through the obstacle course and made his shot. His coins fell inches from the frog. "You got it on the board! Most people don't even get that," Jim encouraged him. "You get a high five!" The boy jumped up and slapped Jim's hand.

Children kept coming, and Jim kept the game going late. As one little boy's mother buckled his helmet for the bike ride home, he squealed, "Jimmy! We're gonna come again next week!"

“You have to do your homework so we can play again!” laughed Jim.





Bronx, and reflects on how Open Streets are bringing this back:



34th Avenue Oral History

Jim Burke 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Childhood Streets

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1:41

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JIM: IF YOU LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF NEW YORK, YOU KNOW, MORE OF THE YEARS ARE SIMILAR TO THIS YEAR. IN OTHER WORDS, CARS, MAYBE IN THE LAST 20 OR 30 YEARS, SORT OF MONOPOLIZED THE STREETS. BUT BEFORE THAT, YOU PLAYED KICK THE CAN, RINGOLEVIO, MANHUNT, STICK BALL, STOOP BALL, TAG. YOU PLAYED ALL THOSE THINGS ON THE STREET. WE PLAYED IN THE HYDRANTS. YOU DID ALL THOSE THINGS, FOR GENERATIONS AND GENERATIONS. WE HAVE A LITTLE MEMORY LOSS THE LAST, MAYBE, TWO OR THREE DECADES, BUT WE ALL USED THE STREETS LIKE THAT FOR GENERATIONS. AND IT'S WONDERFUL TO SEE THAT COMING BACK.

BRIDGET: AND IN YOUR CHILDHOOD, DID YOU PLAY ON THE STREET A LOT?

JIM: WE OWNED THE STREETS WHEN WE WERE GROWING UP IN THE BRONX. CARS HAD TO ASK US TO PLEASE BLOCK THE WATER FROM THE HYDRANT SO THEY COULD PASS. WE PLAYED BALL, WE PLAYED MANHUNT, WE PLAYED KICK THE CAN, RED ROVER, WE PLAYED JUMP ROPE, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREETS IN THE BRONX. AND IN ROCKAWAY IN THE SUMMERS. THAT'S WHAT YOU DID. CARS DID NOT OWN THE STREET AT THAT TIME.

YOU KNOW, SIDEWALKS IN NEW YORK CITY, BUT PARTICULARLY HERE IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, WE HAVE SOME OF THE MOST NARROW SIDEWALKS IN THE WHOLE CITY. IT'S VERY DIFFICULT TO RIDE YOUR BIKE ON A SIDEWALK IF YOU'RE A KID. THERE'S CRACKS AND BUMPS, AND ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE TRYING TO LEARN, IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO LEARN, BECAUSE YOU NEED A SMOOTH SURFACE. AND A TREE STUMP, CURB CUTS, CRACKS, ALL THOSE THINGS IN THE SIDEWALK MAKE IT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT. AND SO WE FINALLY HAVE SPACE IN ORDER TO DO ALL THE THINGS THAT FOR GENERATIONS NEW YORKERS DID, AND IT'S GREAT TO GET THAT SPACE BACK.

The Coalition's first goal was to make people feel safe and welcome using 34th Avenue. Next, they focused on making the Open Street permanent. Now that they have achieved both of these milestones, their next goal is to fortify the streets around schools to protect children on their way to and from school. And after that?

"After making the streets safer, we want an interconnected network, so that theoretically you could hop on your bike, your skateboard, push the wheelchair, go for a walk through all of New York City and stick to an Open Street network, never having to worry about violence from cars, and be able to safely get to your destination, whether you're a jogger or walker or a cyclist," Jim said. "That would be the dream."

Published July 2021

MICKEY LIN



One Sunday in late August 2021, as New York was easing out of a heat wave and droves of people flocked to the Open Street to enjoy the cooler weather, Mickey Lin glided down the avenue pulling a red wagon stocked with her homemade treats: cookies, rice crackers, and cakes, all in packaging adorned with "[Mickey Lin's Messy Kitchen < https://www.instagram.com/mickeylinsmessykitchen/>](https://www.instagram.com/mickeylinsmessykitchen/)" stickers. She reached her usual spot on 34th Avenue and 79th Street, near the entrance to the Jackson Heights Greenmarket. She lifted her wagon onto the median, between the two lanes that used to be filled with cars and were now filled with joggers, people walking dogs, and shoppers streaming toward the farmers' market. Mickey's husband and 23-month-old daughter would join her later, but for now she had time to herself. Vending on the Open Street offers an escape from the daily pressures of motherhood, from the apartment walls that confined her since the pandemic.



She set up her hand-painted pink and blue folding chair and, for protection from the sun, a rainbow striped umbrella that matched her colorful striped shirt. She arranged hand-drawn posters advertising her wares: healthy rice sticks, marshmallowy Q Cookies, spicy Bust-A-Nuts, and chocolatey Puggies, named after her favorite animal. She hung a sign listing ingredients in English and Spanish, and a laminated sign with photos of her custom cakes. Then she perched on her chair, surveyed the shoppers on the avenue with a smile, and called out, "Taiwanese snacks!"



A woman approached and picked up a package of Q Cookies. "In Taiwan, 'Q' means 'chewy,'" Mickey explained. "The chewiness comes from marshmallow." This creation is inspired by a popular Taiwanese cookie with nougat and peanuts. Mickey makes a softer version, sweet and slightly salty, with delicate flaky layers.

Two children spotted her and ran over, their parents following closely behind.

"Last time we did the spicy ones," the mother said, peering into the wagon.

"Oh, you got different flavors," the father remarked. "This one's strawberry. This one is pork floss."

"What?" asked the mother.

"Pork floss."

"What's that like?" they turned to Mickey.

"In Taiwan, we cook pork a long, long time." Mickey searched for words to describe the finely shredded dried pork seasoned with soy sauce and sugar.

"OK, I'm gonna do a strawberry, and let's try that pork."



Two girls on skateboards stopped at her table. "Is this for dogs?"

"No, for humans!" Mickey pointed to a large sign reading "Made for Kids + Adults (Not Dogs)." She'd learned quickly that this was a necessary clarification; some people see the drawings of pugs on her logo and stickers and assume she's selling upscale pet food.



As she helped customers and called out to entice passersby, Mickey exuded a friendly, attentive energy, easily breaking into tinkling laughter. Most of the people who come to her station are regulars, many of them parents with young kids. Children abound in Jackson Heights, a longtime destination for immigrant families. Mickey lets first-time customers know that she takes orders for custom cakes, and encourages them to follow her on Instagram to see her edible artwork. She tells potential clients, “I can draw anything on a cake!”

Although Mickey has a permit for selling baked goods, she doesn’t sell inside the farmers’ market to avoid stepping on the toes of the more established vendors there. Instead, she sets up her station around the corner on the Open Street. She’s not the only one who had this idea. To Mickey’s right, the Jackson Heights Immigrant Solidarity Network was tabling, handing out their newsletter and information sheets about their mission and members’ activities. To her left, Monica Quintero sold homemade Colombian coffee cookies and brownies. Later, an artist who goes by ET set up next to Monica to sell original prints of the city skyline. On the other side of 79th Street there was a free book giveaway, and free neck massages from Bodywork Spa Jackson Heights, a local business that regularly sets up a massage chair on the median. Greenmarket patrons with bags full of peaches, eggplants, knishes, and farm-fresh eggs stopped to look at their tables.

Mickey’s number one customer, Rita, dropped by. “My daughter is obsessed with the rice sticks,” Rita said. Mickey created the sugar-free rice sticks for her daughter, a picky eater. She uses

walnut oil because it's good for brain development, and black sesame because it's rich in calcium. The result is a bland cracker that young kids go crazy for, and parents, like Rita, appreciate as a healthy on-the-go snack for their little ones.



Rita found out about Mickey Lin's Messy Kitchen when she saw a post of Mickey's on a Jackson Heights Facebook group. It was when Mickey was just starting out, shortly after the March 16, 2021, shootings at spas in Atlanta that left six Asian women dead. Rita, who is Filipina American, was concerned by increasing incidents of anti-Asian hate crimes since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and energized by the AAPI community's mobilization against racism. She felt especially eager to support an Asian woman entrepreneur.

"I'm curious and I like to eat," said Rita. "I came out, tried her stuff, and they were good." She commissioned Mickey to make a red bean cake for her mother's birthday, then sugar cookies with a Raya The Last Dragon design for her daughter's fourth birthday. A taro cake followed, then a lemon cake, and today she'd asked for mango. Mickey made a concoction with layers of mango agar pudding, heavy cream, and chiffon cake, topped with white chocolate icing. "Yesterday I kicked my husband and daughter out of the house. I need quiet time, so I can do invention," Mickey told Rita. "With my daughter there I really can't do anything."

Mickey Lin's Messy Kitchen is an outlet for creative expression, and Mickey is direct about her need for mental space to dream up new recipes and cake designs. She has always been artistic.

She used to love painting, and briefly worked as a graphic designer, but didn't like sitting in an office all day and answering to a boss. So, she became her own boss: for seven years, she ran a B&B in Toucheng, an idyllic beachside community. In Taiwan, B&Bs do more than serve breakfast; hosts often invite guests to join in their daily lives, and Taiwanese people often choose lodging based on the owner they want to stay with. Every morning, Mickey would prepare breakfast for her guests, and each evening barbeque on the beach, then they would drink and watch the sunset together. It felt like a family. "You can talk to so many strangers. It's a lot of fun," Mickey reminisced. She loved meeting new people, especially visitors from different countries.

One time, a guest from England informed Mickey that she was vegetarian. Mickey understood the meaning of the word "vegetarian," but wasn't familiar with the pronunciation, and accidentally called her a "virgin." Later, when she realized her mistake, she was so embarrassed that she vowed to improve her English. Below, Mickey recounts her encounter with the vegetarian:



34th Avenue Oral History

Mickey Lin 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Vegetarian Virgin

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— **CLICK TO READ TRANSCRIPT**

ONE DAY, A CUSTOMER, A COUPLE, THEY CAME TO MY PLACE, AND THEY WERE FROM ENGLAND. AND THEN THE GIRL--BECAUSE I ASKED HER, WHAT TIME DO YOU WANT TO EAT YOUR BREAKFAST? AND THEN SHE TOLD ME SHE WAS A VEGETARIAN. AND THEN, BECAUSE MY ENGLISH WAS SUPER POOR, BUT I KIND OF KNEW WHAT SHE SAID, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO PRONOUNCE IT. SO I JUST TOLD HER, "DON'T WORRY, DON'T WORRY. I KNOW HOW TO COOK BREAKFAST FOR VIRGIN." [LAUGHTER]

SHE WAS SO SERIOUS, LOOKING AT ME, AND I THOUGHT I WAS RIGHT. AND THEN NEXT DAY, BECAUSE AT THE MOMENT I HAD A FRIEND FROM--HE IS AMERICAN, AND THEN HE SAW THE COUPLE CAME, SO NEXT MORNING HE ASKED ME, "OH, HOW WAS THAT COUPLE?" AND THEN I TOLD HIM, "OH, THEY ARE NICE. SHE IS A VIRGIN." AND THEN MY FRIEND TOLD ME WHAT HAPPENED. AND AFTER THAT, I ALWAYS REMEMBER THIS WORD. AND AFTER THAT, I FEEL LIKE I REALLY NEED TO LEARN SOMETHING, I REALLY NEED TO LEARN MORE.

Mickey and a friend applied for student visas to study English abroad. Her friend, who was enamored with New York City, chose the location. But only Mickey got the visa. She came to New York alone. The city wasn't as she'd imagined; from movies, she expected it would be fashionable and fancy, but compared to Taiwan it was dirty and technologically backwards. She booked a cheap AirBnB in Hunts Point in the Bronx, commuted to language school in Midtown Manhattan each day, and befriended other students in her class. Partly to meet locals, she joined OKCupid. That's how she met Jeff Orlick.

Despite a rocky start (he teased her about a profile photo with a tiger, accusing her of complicity in animal abuse; she didn't see the humor in it) they started dating and fell in love. Jeff is a longtime Jackson Heights resident, and Mickey visited him there, but didn't find it an interesting neighborhood. She liked that there were so many trains nearby; it made it easy to get to Manhattan, where she preferred to spend her time.

She'd originally planned to stay three months and return to her B&B before the busy summer season, but for Jeff, she extended her stay to six months. She went back to Taiwan when her visa ended, but soon returned to New York. She moved into his apartment in Jackson Heights. They got married. Almost immediately, she got pregnant. She decided to close her B&B and stay in the US. She gave birth to their daughter Layla in September, 2019.



Soon after, she started hearing from family and friends in Taiwan about a deadly virus spreading in nearby China. It wasn't long before it reached New York City, and Mickey found herself living in the epicenter. Now, news reached Taiwan about the dire conditions in Queens. Friends and old B&B guests messaged her asking if she needed them to send face masks.

For Mickey, the experience of motherhood and the pandemic are inextricably intertwined. She found herself quarantining with her husband and newborn baby, in this place she'd moved to for Jeff, but didn't feel connected to. Most of the friends she'd made as a language student had returned to their home countries; now, she couldn't meet new friends.

For months, Mickey and Jeff barely left their apartment, afraid of exposing Layla to the outside world. In the beginning of the lockdown, they carefully limited how much they went out to the supermarkets that remained open. They survived on a huge turducken that Jeff had bought and stored in their freezer.

In this interview excerpt, Jeff and Mickey remember the turducken that got them through the pandemic:



34th Avenue Oral History

Mickey Lin 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Turducken



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— **CLICK TO READ TRANSCRIPT**

JEFF: WE BOUGHT THIS TURDUCKEN, OR I ALREADY HAD IT.

MICKY: WE HAD IT LEFT WHEN MY SISTER WAS HERE BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, AND THEN HE BOUGHT--

JEFF: I BOUGHT THIS HUGE TURDUCKEN.

MICKY: HUGE! AND I THOUGHT HE WAS CRAZY, WHO IS GOING TO EAT THAT? AND THEN IT TURNED OUT, IT HELPED US TO SURVIVE THE PANDEMIC [LAUGHS].

JEFF: YEAH. SO FOR A WHOLE MONTH WE ATE THE TURDUCKEN [LAUGHTER]. IT WAS LIKE A MIRACLE, BECAUSE WE COULDN'T GO OUT. WE DIDN'T GO OUT. YOU COULDN'T GO OUT FOR GROCERIES.

MICKY: YEAH. AND THEY WERE ALL CLOSED FOR A LONG TIME.

JEFF: YEAH, AND THOSE HUGE LINES. CRAZY. SO THAT TURDUCKEN SAVED US.

MICKY: IT WAS IN THE FREEZER FOR MANY MONTHS.

JEFF: I WAS WAITING FOR A SPECIAL OCCASION. BUT IN NEW YORK CITY, YOU RARELY HAVE 20 PEOPLE OVER FOR DINNER [LAUGHTER]. SO THE SPECIAL OCCASION NEVER CAME. SO, WE STARTED CHOPPING IT UP. SHE MADE LIKE THE MOST AWESOME DUMPLINGS.

MICKY: BAO.

JEFF: BAO. A BUN WITH STUFF IN IT. IT WAS SO GOOD, FROM THE TURDUCKEN. IT WAS AWESOME.

Mickey and Jeff busied themselves taking care of their infant, and felt lucky to have time together as a family in those early months. “Even without the pandemic, I couldn’t go out at all,” Mickey said; she was completely absorbed in motherly duties.

The creation of Mickey Lin’s Messy Kitchen wasn’t motivated by financial concerns, but by the need to get out of the house, to break the isolation and monotony that was beginning to crush

Mickey. "During the pandemic I was so bored," she recalled. She hadn't baked before, but when supermarkets reopened and covid cases started going down, she was excited to buy groceries and try new things. She learned about baking from YouTube videos. "And then one day I made a chocolate crunchy cookie, and my husband loved it so much," said Mickey. "He said I definitely need to sell this, and that it would be super popular."

Jeff had experience leading food tours, and when he bit into that cookie, he realized it not only tasted good and was simple to make, but had a key element that would make it a success: the magic combination of exotic and familiar. Hear Mickey and Jeff describe the invention of the first cookie, and how they named Mickey's creations:



34th Avenue Oral History

Mickey Lin 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Cookie Invention

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3:07

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MICKEY: AND THEN ONE DAY I MADE A CHOCOLATE CRUNCHY COOKIE, AND THEN MY HUSBAND LOVED IT SO MUCH. AND THEN HE SAID, I DEFINITELY, DEFINITELY NEED TO SELL THIS, AND THAT IT WOULD BE SUPER POPULAR. SO IT WAS THE BEGINNING.

JEFF: YEAH, I TRIED HER COOKIE AND IT DID TASTE GOOD, BUT TASTING GOOD IS--NOT SAYING IT'S EASY, BUT IT'S COMMON. A LOT OF THINGS TASTE GOOD. BUT THIS PARTICULAR COOKIE IS VERY EASY TO MAKE.

MICKEY: YEAH, IT'S VERY SIMPLE.

JEFF: YEAH, YOU COULD MAKE A LOT OF IT AT THE SAME TIME. SO I JUST THOUGHT IT WAS A PERFECT FOOD TO SELL ON THE STREET. I FIND THAT THE COMBINATION OF EXOTIC AND FAMILIAR IS LIKE THE MAGIC COMBINATION. SO, THIS COOKIE IS EXOTIC: TAIWANESE, IT'S FROM THIS ISLAND COUNTRY IN CONFLICT WITH CHINA, ALL THE WAY ON EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE OF THE WORLD. BUT IT'S ALSO JUST A CHOCOLATE CRUNCHY COOKIE. LIKE, IT'S SOMETHING THAT AMERICANS WOULD TOTALLY BE RELATABLE.

SO, IT'S EXOTIC AND FAMILIAR, AND IT'S EASY TO MAKE, AND SHE WOULD BE GREAT, SHE'S SO FRIENDLY, EVERYBODY LIKES HER, AND SHE HAS A GOOD AESTHETIC ALSO. SO, THAT'S WHY I THOUGHT SHE WOULD BE PERFECT TO DO STREET VENDING. AND I ALWAYS WANTED TO DO IT, TOO. SO, WE STARTED.

MICKEY: OKAY, SO, WE TRIED SO MANY DIFFERENT INGREDIENTS, WE TRIED SO MANY DIFFERENT CHOCOLATE, HOW TO MAKE IT BETTER. AND THEN, BECAUSE WE CAN NOT JUST ONLY HAVE ONE PRODUCT. AND SO WE TRY TO MAKE A "Q COOKIE," AND THEN HE LOVES IT. AND WE WERE THINKING ABOUT HOW CAN WE NAME OUR CHOCOLATE COOKIE? AND THEN HE SAID, "OH, BUST A NUT."

AND THEN, BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS. AND THEN HE TOLD ME THE REAL MEANING, AND I WAS SHOCKED, AND I SAY, "NO, THIS CHOCOLATE COOKIE SHOULD BE GOOD FOR KIDS." AND I DON'T WANT BABY KNOW THIS WORD AND SAY THIS WORD ON THE STREET. SO I JUST TOLD HIM, LIKE, MAYBE WE COULD HAVE A SOMETHING DIFFERENT FLAVOR AND FITS THIS NAME. HE WANT TO USE THIS NAME SO BADLY. SO I CAME UP THE IDEA, MAYBE WE COULD MAKE A SPICY ONE, CALL IT BUST A NUT.

JEFF: MAKE A SPICY ONE, HAVE THAT BE NAMED BUST A NUT.

MICKEY: YEAH, BECAUSE FOR YOUR--

JEFF: BECAUSE IT'S SUCH A GOOD NAME. AND I THOUGHT IT WOULD GO CRAZY. I THOUGHT ALL THESE TEENAGERS WOULD WANT TO GET IT AFTER SCHOOL [LAUGHS] BECAUSE THEY ALWAYS SAY IT. I THOUGHT IT WOULD GO VIRAL.

MICKEY: ACTUALLY, IT'S NOT [LAUGHS].

JEFF: YEAH, ACTUALLY, IT'S LIKE THE LEAST SELLER [LAUGHTER]. SO, TURNS OUT I CAN ONLY SELL IT TO 40-YEAR-OLD MEN, LIKE IMMATURE 40-YEAR-OLD MEN LIKE MYSELF [LAUGHTER].

BUT WE ROUNDED IT OUT WITH THE OTHER COOKIES. SO WE MADE THE SPICY ONE "BUST A NUT," THE REGULAR CHOCOLATE "PUGGY." MY MOM CAME UP WITH THAT NAME BECAUSE IT'S CUTE, AND SHE LOVES PUGS. AND THEN SHE MADE THE "Q COOKIE."

MICKEY: IT TURNS OUT Q COOKIE IS THE MOST POPULAR ONE.

Mickey experimented with different ingredients and perfected her recipes. On a chilly day in late March 2021, she ventured out with 12 cookies, one Swiss roll cake, and her daughter's small plastic table. Curious passersby stopped to see what was on her table. The first two days she sold most of her treats, but gradually interest seemed to wane.

Then Jeff made signs. They got the red wagon, and Mickey decorated it. Step by step, things came together. Mickey made better signs, drawing on her background in graphic design. A friend designed a logo and stickers with drawings of pugs. She tried setting up in different locations on the Open Street on different days. By the summer, she was making 30 bags of cookies for the farmers' market and selling out.



This late August Sunday, she only had a few Bust A Nut cookies left when Jeff came by with Layla. Layla teetered over to her mother, helped give cookies to a customer, then held up her

hands to Mickey. Mickey stood, picked her up, and spun her around, exclaiming, “Woo! Yay!” Layla squealed in delight.

Mickey’s friends Lianne and Jack stopped by with tostadas from a Mexican food stand in the Greenmarket, and sat on the median next to Mickey’s cart as they ate. “This is my Sunday ritual,” said Lianne. “We come for breakfast, and to hang out with Mickey.” While chatting, Mickey sat in her chair and played with Layla, who began picking up debris from between the cement cracks in the median and putting it on Mickey’s lap. “On Open Streets it’s like a meeting place. Some friends come over, then we see some other friends jogging, and all of a sudden we have like six of us,” said Jeff. “We all gather in front of her selling station.”



Before 34th Avenue became an Open Street, Mickey didn’t even know where 34th Avenue was, although she lives just a block and a half away. Jackson Heights was a place she commuted away from, and returned to sleep. It wasn’t a place for hanging out and having fun. “It was just cars and buildings,” Mickey said. “Before the Open Street, I really didn’t care about the neighborhood, it’s all the same. I didn’t go out. I didn’t walk around. I had no friends here.”

She lives on 73rd Street, and describes it as dirty and loud, with near-constant honking. “When I was going to sell cookies, I found out this area, and I realized it’s beautiful here.” The Open Street opened up the neighborhood and changed Mickey’s perception of her home. She used to feel intimidated by language barriers, but vending pushed her to talk to people, and she

became more comfortable. “The Open Street is really important. For me, it’s like Central Park in Manhattan.”

Here, Mickey describes how her feelings about Jackson Heights have changed:



34th Avenue Oral History

Mickey Lin 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Jackson Heights



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— **CLICK TO READ TRANSCRIPT**

SO ACTUALLY I STARTED GOING OUT AFTER THE PANDEMIC, WHEN I SELLING THE COOKIES. SO BEFORE THAT I KIND OF NEVER GO TO 34TH AVENUE OR ANYWHERE. I JUST ONLY STAY IN MY PLACE. I WASN'T COMFORTABLE AT ALL TALKING WITH OTHER PEOPLE. BEFORE THAT, I REALLY, I [WAS] EVEN AFRAID OF GOING TO RESTAURANTS, ORDER FOOD, BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO ORDER FOODS, OR ENGLISH.

AFTER HAVING THE OPEN STREET, I FEEL LIKE HERE IS MUCH MORE INTERESTING, BECAUSE BEFORE THAT, FOR ME, EVERY ROAD, JUST EVERYWHERE, [IT WAS] JUST STREETS AND CARS. SO I DIDN'T WANT TO GO OUT, BECAUSE IT WASN'T FUN AT ALL. IT WAS JUST CARS AND BUILDINGS.

NOW, I REALLY LIKE HERE BECAUSE IS SO MANY FAMILY HERE, AND THEN THE SCHOOL, ESPECIALLY THE SCHOOLS, IT SEEMS LIKE THEY ARE [MORE] EXCELLENT THAN OTHER PLACE. SO I THINK HERE IS A GOOD PLACE FOR KIDS, FOR MY DAUGHTER'S EDUCATION, OR HANG OUT WITH PEOPLE, BECAUSE THE PEOPLE HERE IS ALL FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, AND I THINK THAT'S GOOD.

AND ESPECIALLY, I REALLY FEEL THAT OPEN STREET IS SUPER IMPORTANT FOR US. THEN I COULD HAVE A CHANCE SELLING FOOD AND THEN ALSO PRACTICING MY ENGLISH WITH STRANGERS. I MEAN, THIS OPEN STREET IS KIND OF CHANGE MY LIFESTYLE, TOO. LIKE, I REALLY WANT TO GO OUT MORE IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD. I FEEL BEFORE IT [WAS] JUST A PLACE FOR LIVING. I MEAN, JUST CAR, BUILDING EVERYWHERE. SO IT DOESN'T MATTER IF I LIVE IN JACKSON HEIGHTS OR THE BRONX. FOR ME, JUST ALL THE SAME.

AND NOW, I FEEL LIKE A LITTLE BIT LIKE I LIVE IN A SUBURBAN. I MEAN, I HAVE SOME PLACE I CAN WALK AROUND, LIKE THE TREE AND A BREEZE. IT'S WONDERFUL. AND THEN KIDS CAN HANG OUT. SO I THINK, THEN WE DON'T REALLY NEED TO BUY A HOUSE, HAVE A BACK YARD, BECAUSE WE HAVE OPEN STREET.

Since creating Mickey Lin’s Messy Kitchen, she’s been able to meet new people, like she used to when she ran a B&B, and practice English with customers. She’s also connected with Taiwanese people who saw her “Homemade Taiwanese Snacks” sign and stopped to talk to her. She estimates she’s met around 20 Taiwanese neighbors, many of whom are mothers, like her. She formed a group for moms who want to teach their children Mandarin.

Besides helping her connect with neighbors, vending on 34th Avenue also affords alone time that is so elusive for new parents. While Sundays are for socializing, on quieter weekdays she has a chance to sit with her thoughts, reflect, and plan for the future.



On Friday, September 3rd, Mickey set up her station on the Open Street in front of Travers Park. At the farmers' market, lines sometimes form at her station, but on weekdays by Travers, Mickey is usually alone. She sat in her painted chair, wrapped her arms around the umbrella pole, and leaned her head against it. "Today I came to relax, not really for selling," she said. She took out a well-worn notebook and wrote down recipe ideas. She sketches designs for custom cake orders in this book. "I can not relax at home. My daughter always comes to me. She wants me to play."

Most days, Mickey, Jeff, and Layla are home together all day. As a freelance TV news producer, Jeff often works nights, and usually goes to sleep around 7pm with Layla, then wakes up in the wee hours of the morning and heads to work. Mickey stays up at night after Jeff and Layla have gone to bed; it's her time to experiment with baking. Neither Mickey nor Jeff sleep much.

"I need a break from my husband and daughter, to have my own time to think about everything," said Mickey. "I think about my future. Like, I don't know what I should do in my future. A lot of Taiwanese came here with high expectations for a good job. I came for marriage. I never thought one day I'd be here. I don't know what I can do here for my career."

She likes being her own boss again, being creative, working not just for money but doing something she enjoys. For now, she puts a lot of time into baking and doesn't make much money in return. She and Jeff think of this period as an investment—she's establishing herself,

doing market research, testing recipes and locations for vending—and hope it will become a bigger source of income in the future. Mickey feels she still has a lot to learn and doesn't know if she'd ever be able to make a living from baking. She fantasizes about opening a new B&B.

A man jogged by and Mickey called out, "Hi! Taiwanese cookies!"

He kept running.



MICKEY SITS AT HER STATION IN FRONT OF TRAVERS PARK IN SEPTEMBER 2021.

Across the street, people sat on benches that used to face traffic and now face the promenade of the Open Street. On the grassy knoll behind the benches, a family sat on blankets having a picnic, a shirtless man lounged in a beach chair soaking in the sun, and kids gobbled ice cream from the nearby truck.

A friend, Eugenia, stopped by with her husband and daughter. She's one of the Taiwanese people who met Mickey on 34th Avenue, and part of the mom group that Mickey formed. "I don't know if it would've happened without the Open Street," Eugenia said. "We've gotten to know our neighbors better. It's such a lifeline for us."

She spoke to Mickey in Mandarin, bought two Bust A Nuts, two Puggies, and two rice sticks. As she departed, Eugenia asked Mickey how long she was going to stay out. "Till my husband and daughter go to sleep!" Mickey laughed.

ERICK MODESTO



"The dance studio has been the place where I could relieve my stress," said Erick Modesto, the director of traditional Mexican dance group Ballet Folklórico Nueva Juventud. "I would dance it off, sweat it off."

But in March 2020, the Covid-19 outbreak closed studios and theaters in New York City. Ballet Folklórico Nueva Juventud's dance performances were canceled. Erick couldn't even assemble his troupe in a studio to practice.

But he didn't stop dancing. He started holding rehearsals on 34th Avenue.



"I kept saying, how can we adapt to this? We don't want to just quit and wait until everything is over. We want to be able to still create work and find new ways to engage an audience," said Erick. "I wasn't going to let any more time go by and let my experience and training go down the drain."

Erick & Ballet Folklórico Nueva Juventud: La Presumida rehearsal



A Jackson Heights native, Erick knew that some parts of the neighborhood that used to be unsafe, like Travers Park, are now more welcoming.

He initially considered rehearsing in Travers, one of the few parks in the area. But he scoped it out and saw people were already holding Zumba, tai chi and flamenco classes there. “There were so many activities going on, there was no room for any other activity,” he said. “I was disappointed because we lacked space to rehearse, but I love that people didn’t let the pandemic stop them. I was smiling under my mask throughout the whole entire park.”

The pandemic didn't stop Erick, either.

Here, Erick describes his experience on 34th Avenue:



[34th Avenue Oral History](#)

Erick Modesto 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Rehearsing On 34th

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— **CLICK TO READ TRANSCRIPT**

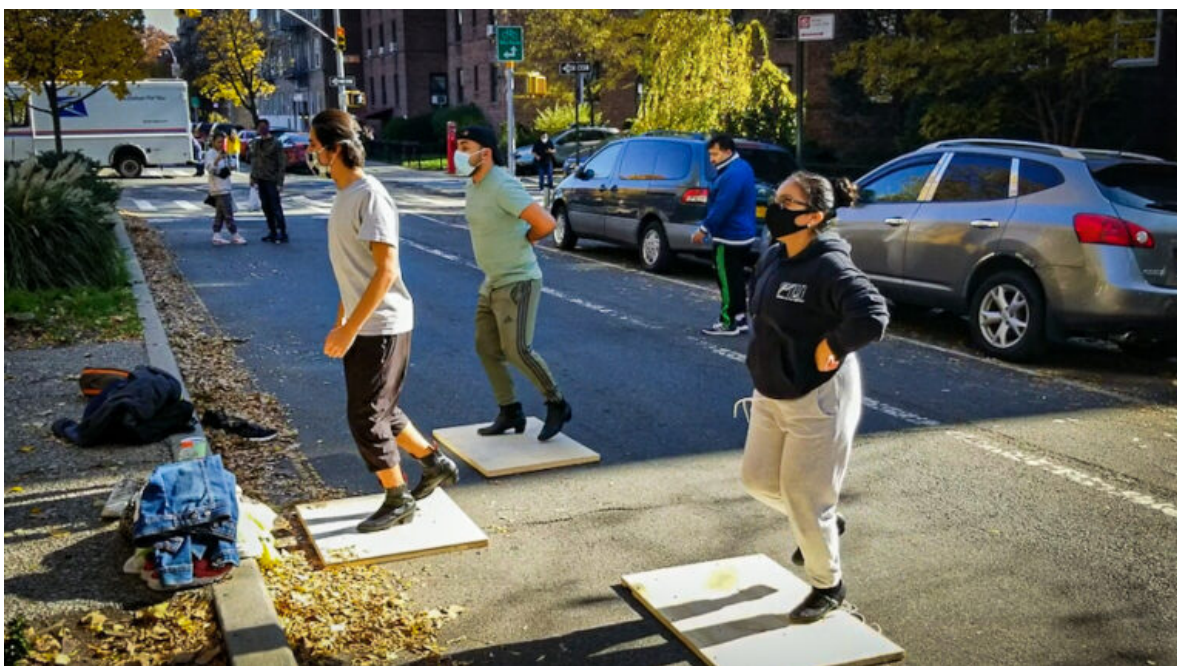
USING 34TH AVENUE IS VERY NEW FOR ME. AND IT WAS REALLY FUN. I REALLY FELT SUPER ECSTATIC. IT ALMOST FELT LIKE MY FIRST TIME BEING ON STAGE, YOU KNOW, WITHOUT THE LIGHTS, WITHOUT THE CURTAINS.

BUT JUST THE SENSE OF PERFORMING, AND JUST THE SENSE OF SHOWING THE PUBLIC THAT THIS IS WHAT I DO. AND THIS IS WHAT I LOVE. THIS IS WHAT I LIVE FOR. THIS IS WHAT FINANCIALLY STABILIZED ME BEFORE THE PANDEMIC.

AND SO, SEEING THE DIFFERENT DIVERSITY THAT WAS THERE, IT WOWED ME. I WOULD HAVE NEVER IMAGINED THAT, IN MY YEARS OF LIVING IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, THAT I WOULD'VE SEEN THE COMMUNITY COME TOGETHER MORE THAN EVER.

THIS IS THE PERFECT EXAMPLE THAT WE ALL SHARE THE SAME SPACE, NO MATTER WHERE WE COME FROM, WE'RE ALL HERE. AND WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT, WE'RE HERE TO STAY [LAUGHS].

On a bright Sunday morning in early November 2020, Erick met up with two group members on 34th Avenue between 81st and 82nd Street. They sat on the median and changed from sneakers to *botas*, folklorico dancing shoes with nails hammered into the bottom. Erick laid down wooden platforms that his father, a carpenter, made for their rehearsals. The wooden boards amplify the percussive sound of their footwork, and provide a buffer against the concrete, which can be hard on dancers' bodies and wear down their shoes.



Erick and the dancers each stood on an individual platform, 25 by 28 inches wide, and started reviewing some steps. Standing in front, Erick demonstrated footwork, hand motions, spins, and kicks, with precise movements. "One, two, three, four, five, six, and step out," he called. "On

the sixth one, instead of bringing your leg out, mark it as a stomp and a small pause.” Soon arms were sweeping and feet were stomping rhythmically.

A woman walking a dog stopped, asked what kind of dance they were doing, and remarked, “It’s wonderful to have you here.”

Moments later a man in a three-piece suit, Matt Moran, approached. “Good morning,” he said. “I love what you do. We have one conflict though.” Matt was from Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church, on the next block, diagonally across from where Erick and the dancers were rehearsing. The church had been closed since their pastor died of coronavirus in April 2020, but recently started holding services again in their garden. They were about to start a service. “The stomping is a little loud,” Matt explained with a wince, as if lodging the complaint pained him.

Erick apologized and stepped off his wooden platform. Matt added sheepishly, “I heard you yesterday and said, ‘This is joy in life.’”

With a good natured smile, Erick promised to keep the noise down until the service ended. The dancers set aside their platforms and continued rehearsing on the cement of the avenue.

“We have to respect everyone else’s activities,” Erick said. “We always have to adapt.”



The winter cold finally did bring the outdoor rehearsals to an end. Ballet Folklórico Nueva Juventud took a winter break, and Erick concentrated on other work. Like most dancers, he relies on multiple jobs to sustain himself financially. He also dances with another company, Ballet Nepantla, but his main source of income came from working as a pastry chef. He would work long hours in the kitchen, and go straight to rehearsal with Ballet Nepantla on weekends and Ballet Folklórico Nueva Juventud on weekdays.



Before the pandemic, he was working full time at The Clocktower, a Michelin-starred restaurant in Manhattan. When non-essential businesses closed in March 2020, his sources of income as a dancer and chef were suddenly gone. "That gave me anxiety, worrying, how am I going to make it through? How long is this gonna continue?"

Naturally, while quarantining with his family in Jackson Heights, Erick, who is vegan, baked treats for them. His sister, Erika, encouraged him to try selling his pastries. Since 2020, the combination of restaurant closures and unemployment has led to a rise in home-based

kitchens. Erick started an Instagram account and joined the ranks of new entrepreneurs selling homemade food out of their private kitchens. Now, in the incredibly diverse Jackson Heights dining scene, Erick's baking business, [Veganity < https://www.instagram.com/v.g.n.t.y/>](https://www.instagram.com/v.g.n.t.y/), fills a void for vegan sweets.

Erika was not only Erick's taste tester, but also his first customer and hype man. The siblings got the word out to friends and co-workers, and promoted Veganity on social media. The income this brought in helped Erick through the pandemic. Now he has loyal customers.



Ballet Folklorico Nueva Juventud resumed outdoor rehearsals in May of 2021.

On a hot, humid Saturday morning in late May, Erick and three dancers gathered at their usual spot on 34th Avenue.



This day the three dancers were all women, each wearing short-sleeved t-shirts and colorful traditional skirts with leggings underneath, and Mary Jane-style *bota* shoes with short socks. Everyone wore masks.



They reviewed choreography and sequences, concentrating on foot work and skirt work. The women gathered their skirts in both hands and opened their arms, creating beautiful swirling movements. In the bike lane behind them, bikers zoomed by.

“That arm should be down rather than up,” Erick directed. “On that double, take all six counts. Skirts all the way up. One, two, three, angle yourself. Four, five, six.”

Erick & Ballet Folklorico Nueva Juventud: rehearsal with fans



At first they tapped out the beat with their feet. Then, Erick put on music. The uptempo mariachi music of *Las Alazanas*, a popular song from the state of Jalisco, floated from the speakers. A woman passing by called out, "I love it! It's so good!"

Erick & Ballet Folklorico Nueva Juventud: Las Alanzas rehearsal



Some joggers jogged around them; other passersby slowed down to look at the dancers; some stopped to take pictures or videos. A man on a motorcycle popped his kickstand and settled in to watch. A woman pushing a stroller with a sleeping baby stopped, put her foot up on the median, rested a hand on her hip, and enjoyed the show. After several songs, she applauded and kept walking down the Open Street.

Erick has become adept at negotiating the shared space of 34th Avenue. Throughout the rehearsal, he graciously accepted the occasional compliments from passersby, and smoothly handled the sporadic interruptions. When a car pulled out of a spot behind them, the dancers paused and made space for it to pass. The driver called out, "Thank you!" "You're welcome!" Erick replied as he pulled away.

Empty parking spaces don't last long in Jackson Heights. Moments later, a driver moved the barricade aside and nabbed the vacated spot.



The dancers made it all look effortless, but the temperature had climbed to 90 degrees. The only evidence of exertion showed when one dancer removed her mask to wipe her red, sweaty face.

"You get used to it," said Cindy, one of the dancers, who has been practicing ballet folklorico since she was seven years old.



Erick has also been practicing since he was seven, when his mother enrolled him and his sisters in Ballet Folklórico Nueva Juventud. Three brothers, Damaso, Edolay, and Jose Vargas - who happened to live right across the street from Erick's family - created the group to educate local youth in Mexican traditions. They met after school at St. Joan of Arc church on 35th Avenue.

After more than a decade, the brothers decided to focus on their families and stop leading the dance group. They asked the dancers if anyone wanted to take over Ballet Folklórico Nueva Juventud. "I was 18 at the time, a full-time college student with a full-time job," said Erick, who is now 26. After some hesitation, he stepped up to take on the role of director.

It was a bumpy transition from group member to director; most of the other dancers ended up leaving the group. "I bit off more than I could chew," Erick remembers. But he gained experience, learned to become a better teacher, and eventually fell into a rhythm.

Today he is proud to be continuing the work of the Vargas brothers, educating the next generation, and showing that traditions will continue no matter where you are.



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UP ↑

ALVARO TAUTIVA



After a tearful night spent reflecting on his sacrifices, Alvaro Tautiva faced the fact that he had to close his martial arts academy.

It was July of 2020. Only two years earlier, he had finally realized his dream of opening [AT JiuJitsuNYC](https://www.atjiujitsuNYC.com/) in Jackson Heights, right on Northern Boulevard, where he grew up and still lives. His father, wife, and two young daughters had helped paint and plaster the studio before it opened, and friends had helped with plumbing and electrical work. In what he calls “the beautiful grind” to support his family and his fledgling business, he worked nights as a doorman on the Upper East Side, his lost sleep taking a harder toll on his body than any blows he endured in jiu-jitsu matches. His hard work began paying off in 2019: his school had 120 members, and business was good enough that he made plans to quit his night job the following year.

But when the COVID-19 pandemic swept the city and Governor Cuomo ordered non-essential businesses to close, Alvaro could no longer hold classes in his studio. While some loyal members kept paying fees, membership – his main source of income – dropped more than 70%. “We had loans and credit cards to pay off. We were hemorrhaging money,” he said. By July, the academy had only 25 members, his annual \$30,000 real estate taxes payment was overdue, and he saw no way to keep his business afloat. “Thinking of all the work not just me, but my friends and family put into the place - it was despair.”

Alvaro told his landlord that he had to give up the studio. “Fine,” his landlord replied. “Can I paint over your sign?” The following morning, a fresh coat of paint covered the “AT JiuJitsuNYC” sign and the storefront listing appeared on Craigslist.

That night, Alvaro’s father had a dream. “The dream was a vision. I saw a dark picture, him losing his place and the people who support him here.” Alvaro Tautiva Senior told his son, “You have to stay here.”

In the interview excerpt below, Alvaro explains why this was just what he needed to hear:



34th Avenue Oral History

Alvaro Tautiva 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Dad's Dream



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BRIDGET: SO THEN, WHAT DID YOU THINK WHEN YOUR DAD TOLD YOU ABOUT THAT?

ALVARO: I BELIEVE ANYTHING MY DAD SAYS. MY DAD IS, UH, ALMOST BEEN RIGHT, KINDA SCARY STYLE. YOU KNOW, I FIGHT, I'M LIKE, “NO, YOU CAN'T BE RIGHT!” THEN HE'S RIGHT. SO [LAUGHS]. HE'S RIGHT! HE WAS RIGHT. I NEEDED TO STAY. HE GOES, “NO, YOU NEED TO STAY HERE.” AND ONCE HE GAVE ME THE CONFIDENCE—IT SOUNDS KIND OF CORNY, LIKE, I NEEDED MY

DADDY TO GIVE ME THE CONFIDENCE [LAUGHS]. BUT MY DAD GAVE ME THE CONFIDENCE, AND I JUST, I BELIEVED. I HAD IT IN MY BRAIN, AND HE KIND OF PUT IT INTO THE ETHER, SO I JUST RAN WITH THAT.

Alvaro borrowed money from his brother and launched a GoFundMe crowdfunding campaign. He paid half of his real estate taxes, joined a payment plan for the rest, and repainted his sign. Then he started holding outdoor classes one block south of Northern Boulevard, on 34th Avenue.

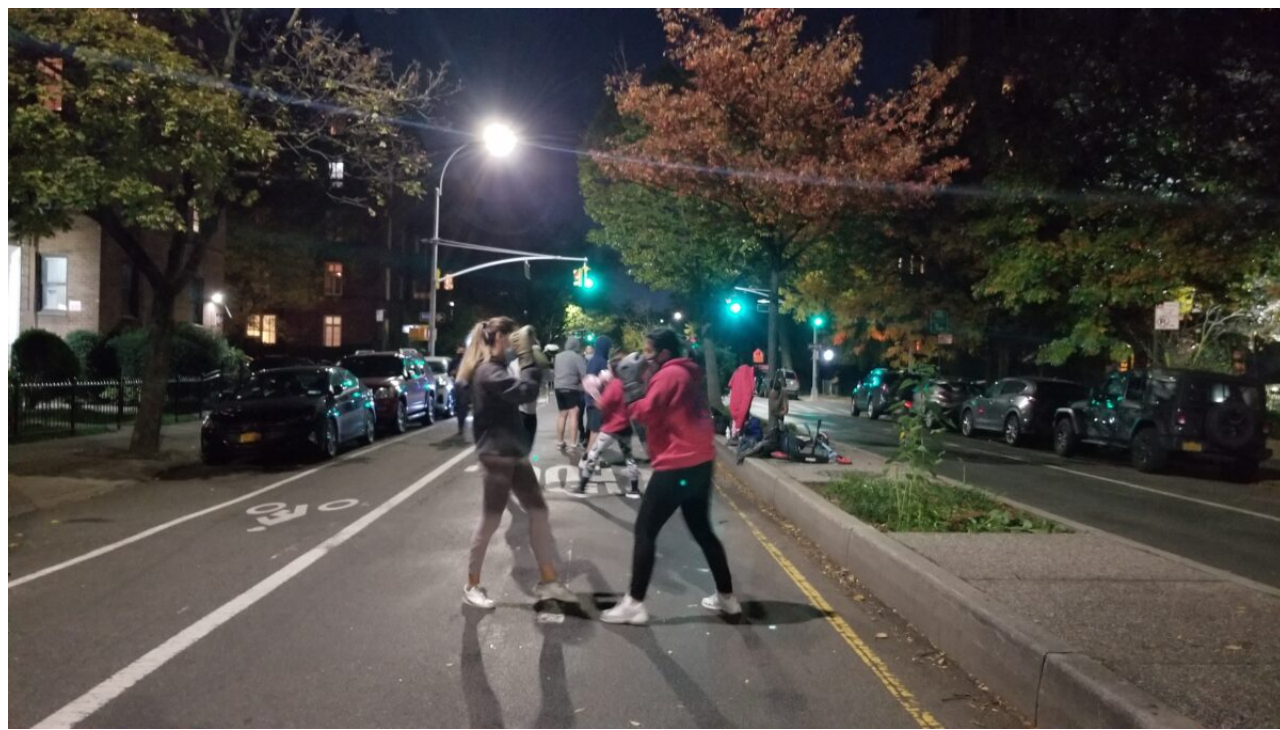
"We were blessed to be a block away from 34th," said Alvaro. "Doing the classes on Open Streets was the biggest turning point. That has been major."



Since he began outdoor classes in August 2020, passersby took notice and more students joined, bringing him more income. One new student, Oliverio Bosi, 15, who started kickboxing classes in October, said he joined after his parents saw kids practicing while they were out for a walk. "They came home and said, 'It looks cool, you should try it out.'"

By the fall of 2020, membership climbed to 60 students, and the bulk of Alvaro's income came from the group classes that met beneath a street lamp on 34th Avenue near 82nd Street. One November evening, students gathered at the median for a kickboxing class. The brick wall of an apartment building rose behind them, lights glowing in the windows. When the instructor,

Rocco Giambrone, set up a speaker and started blasting music for the class, a figure appeared at one window, closed it, and receded. Residents and users of 34th Avenue are constantly negotiating the shared space.



With Alvaro assisting, Rocco started the warmups, leading students through squats, lunges, and jumping jacks. "Lift through your heels, keep your back straight! Good!" The students wore sweatpants, hoodies, and leggings, but one student was wearing slippers. Alvaro motioned him over. "What shoe size are you?" He took off his sneakers and gave them to the student, joking, "We better not spread COVID on our feet!"

Even as early winter darkened the days earlier and chilled the air, Alvaro continued holding four outdoor classes a week, and offered free lessons for children. AT JiuJitsuNYC took a break over the winter and resumed outdoor classes in May 2021.

"July was awful! Scary! Depressing!" Alvaro said, remembering 2020. "Thinking, if I can't make it here in Jackson Heights, when I'm from here, who's gonna make it here? Amazon's gonna buy everything?"

Alvaro's father and stepmother also own businesses on Northern Boulevard. Here, he reflects on his family's connection to the neighborhood, and his frustration with the challenges small business owners face:



34th Avenue Oral History

Alvaro Tautiva 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Local Businesses

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MY FAMILY HAS OWNED A BUSINESS OVER HERE FOR, I WANT TO SAY, THE BETTER PART OF TWENTY YEARS. MY FATHER'S BUSINESS IS A BLOCK AWAY. AND I ALWAYS WANTED TO DO IT ON NORTHERN BOULEVARD. IF YOU'RE FROM JACKSON HEIGHTS, YOU KNOW THE IMPORTANCE OF NORTHERN BOULEVARD. NORTHERN BOULEVARD IS JUST KIND OF LIKE THE HEART AND SOUL OF JACKSON HEIGHTS RESIDENTS, I THINK.

PEOPLE ARE REALLY STARTING TO SEE THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES. LIKE, IF EVERY PLACE WAS A STARBUCKS AND EVERY PLACE WAS A TARGET, I THINK THAT IT TAKES A LOT OF THE CHARM FROM NEIGHBORHOODS, RIGHT? AND THEN, MONEY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD STAYS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, RIGHT? LIKE, I LIVE SEVEN BLOCKS AWAY FROM THE SCHOOL. YOU KNOW, AND EVERYONE THAT WORKS THERE LIVES IN QUEENS AND LIVES AROUND THE NEIGHBORHOOD. THAT DEFINITELY ADDS VALUE, ONE TO THE BUSINESS, AND TWO, TO THE COMMUNITY.

AND I'M FROM THE COMMUNITY, SO I HAVE A GOOD SENSE OF THE PEOPLE, OF VALUES OF ALL OF US OVER HERE. I'M A KID FROM HERE. SO, IF A KID FROM HERE CAN'T SUCCEED IN JACKSON HEIGHTS, THEN THERE IS A BIG PROBLEM. IF SOMEBODY FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD CAN'T RUN A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, THEN WHAT'S THE AMERICAN DREAM? THE AMERICAN DREAM IS TO BE ABLE TO START FROM YOUR COMMUNITY AND EVENTUALLY GROW. YEAH.

Alvaro is making enough to cover rent for the studio, where he teaches private lessons, but has to keep up his night job to cover his own rent. He hopes to hang on like this until the pandemic subsides, and someday make AT JiuJitsuNYC into the kind of community institution he longed for when he was growing up in Jackson Heights.



ESTHI ZIPORI



Esthi remembers driving fast on the open road, friends sitting beside her, music blasting, yellow sand dunes stretching outward, and nothing but the headlights competing with the brilliance of the stars shining over the desert. It's the ideal of driving sold to us in car commercials. But she's driving an armored truck, and she and her friends have guns at their hips. They're 19-year-old soldiers completing compulsory service in the Israeli military, guarding a base on the border zone between Israel, Egypt and Gaza.

Esthi emerged from military service disillusioned. "I didn't want to live in a place where I have to constantly be at war with everything and everybody. I wanted to be in a place where I can just be me, and work toward something, do something meaningful," she reflected. She decided to study abroad, and is still studying today. As a doctoral student at New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), she researches urban streets, sustainable mobility, and the realities of using

cars. "I'm focused on this question about the future of streets, and a big part of the future of streets has to do with the present, which is cars," Esthi said. Studying urban form, she learned about the numbers of fatalities and injuries caused by the car system, and came to see automobiles as a menace.



Listen to Esthi reflect on her relationship with cars:



[34th Avenue Oral History](#)

Esthi Zipori 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Car Studies



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NOW I'M WORKING ON MY PHD IN URBAN SYSTEMS. SO, I'VE STUDIED THE CAR SYSTEM NOW FOR ALMOST SIX YEARS, AND IT IS TERRIFYING. THE ROADWAY IS A SCARY, SCARY PLACE. I MEAN, WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE NUMBERS OF FATALITIES AND INJURIES OF PEOPLE INSIDE CARS, PEOPLE OUTSIDE OF CARS, IT'S JUST LIKE A MENACE. AND NOW I JUST SEE IT ALL THE TIME, EVERYWHERE I GO.

BUT THE GOVERNMENT, THE POLICIES, THE OBSESSION WITH CARS, YOU KNOW, PEOPLE JUST WANT TO BE COMFORTABLE. SO, I DID A LOT OF DRIVING IN MY LIFE, TOO. AND NOW AS SOMEONE WHO IDENTIFIES AS A CAR-FREE HUMAN, I FIND IT VERY AMUSING, CAUSE I DO LOVE FAST CARS AND I WOULD LOVE TO GO ON A TRACK AND DRIVE REALLY FAST, BUT I REALLY DESPISE THEM IN CITIES [LAUGHS].

NOW, EVEN IF I MOVED TO A PLACE THAT MIGHT REQUIRE A CAR, I'M GONNA MAKE SURE THAT I FIGURE OUT A WAY TO LIVE WITHOUT IT.

Through her studies, she was taken with the idea of post-automobility, a future where people don't rely on automobiles. She sold her car in 2015, and has relied on public transportation, walking, and biking ever since. "With the climate emergency, I'm one of the very anxious persons. I worry about the future of all of us," she said. "I don't think we're doing enough and I don't think we're doing it quick enough."

She sees programs like Open Streets as a solution that can mitigate harm to the environment. Esthi and her husband, Mark Blinder, were delighted when 34th Avenue closed to cars. "We loved it from the moment we saw it. Because of my research and my advocacy that stems from that research, we're big fans."

Esthi experiences the 34th Avenue Open Street as an academic and as a vendor – she and Mark make up the Sandwich Therapy duo, selling Israeli/Georgian/Middle Eastern sandwiches, salads, bowls, and desserts on 34th Avenue.



Mark was between jobs when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and during the ensuing hiring freeze his H-1B visa, which had allowed him to practice his profession as a social worker, expired. He began cooking more and toyed with the idea of selling food. When 34th Avenue became an Open Street, he finally decided to give it a shot. They live around the corner from Travers Park, the only park in Jackson Heights, which borders on 34th Avenue. One day in September 2020, Mark made some shakshuka and fried eggplant sandwiches, put them in a thermal bag, and headed to the park. He didn't sell much.

Mark and Esthi quickly realized they needed a proper vending station, and acquired a folding table and the necessary materials. They moved from the park to the avenue, and established a regular schedule on weekends. Sandwich Therapy was born. Within a month and a half, it became their main source of income; they usually make \$300-500 a weekend, as long as the weather isn't too bad.

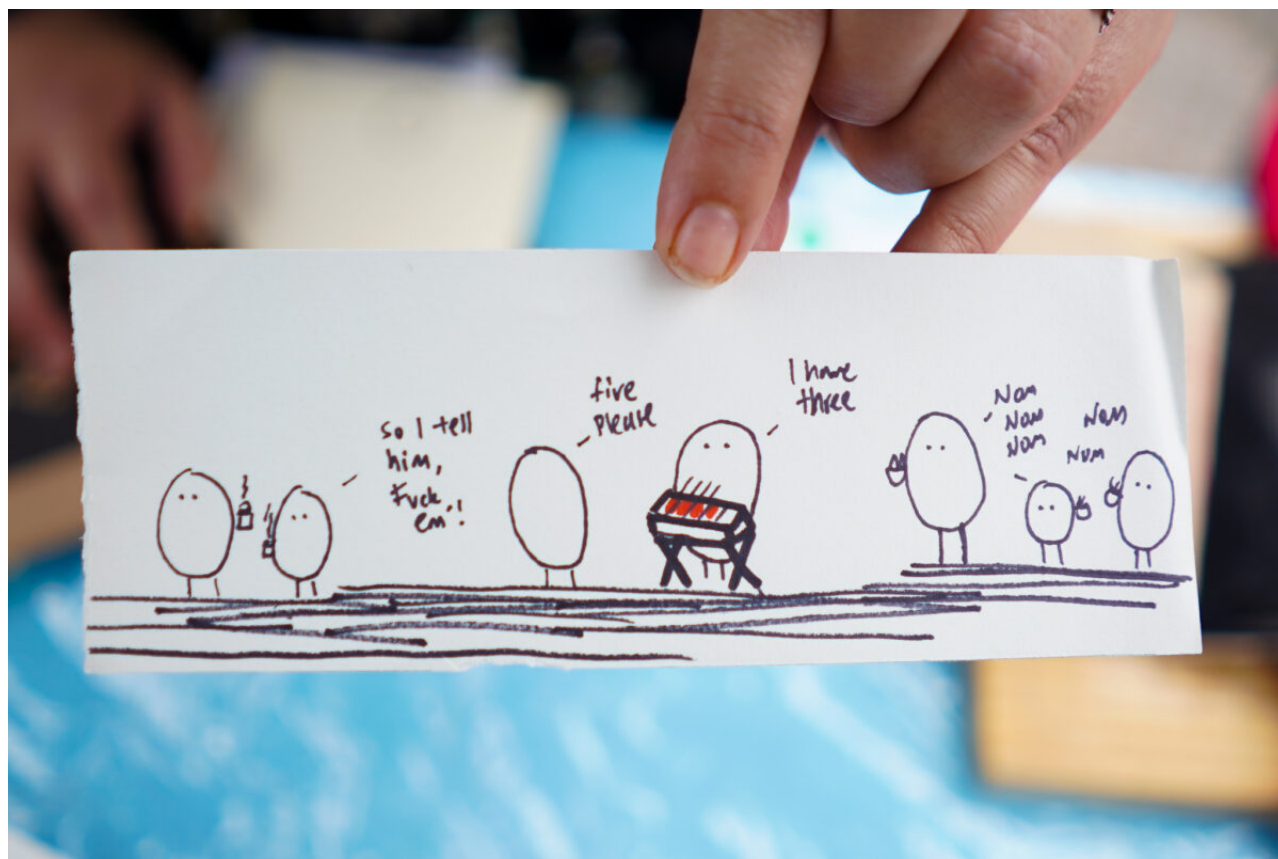


On a warm Saturday in September 2021, the sprinkler in Travers Park was on, kids screeched as they splashed in the water, and people peeled off layers of clothing to sunbathe on the park's sole patch of grass. Esthi, with blue hair and blue-tinted shades, appeared on the Open Street pulling a blue wagon full of food to her usual spot: a patch of cement on the median hemmed in by shrubbery and sunflowers. "Medians fall between the cracks of urban management," Esthi said. They aren't governed by the rules that apply to sidewalks, crosswalks, and parks, and are friendlier spots for vendors.

She set up their blue canopy tent, covered their folding table with a blue tablecloth, and hung up signs with reusable velcro advertising the menu for the day. On the table she arranged food samples with toothpicks and labels, and her original artwork.



Before studying architecture and urban systems, Esthi went to art school. She keeps up an artistic practice, painting abstract pieces that play with color and texture and drawing whimsical cartoons she calls “Egg Buddies.” Some drawings are inspired by her vending experiences: the egg characters stand on the street drinking tea and chatting. She frames and sells some pieces at the Sandwich Therapy stand. “It’s more of an outdoor art exhibit than a serious attempt to sell,” she’s quick to explain.



She was hoping to grade some of her students' assignments while vending, but realized she'd forgotten to bring her notebook with grades. She'd wait an hour until Mark dropped by. While Esthi operates their stand, Mark cooks at home and visits the station to replenish their offerings and give Esthi bathroom breaks.



While many other vendors in the area sell at high volume and low price points, Sandwich Therapy offers pricier, but more substantial meals, like hearty chicken schnitzel sandwiches; chakhokhbili, a Georgian chicken stew; and shakshuka bowls with tomatoes, pepper, onion, and eggs over rice. “We love the food we make,” Esthi said. “We eat all the leftovers.”

A regular customer, Richard Osterweil, stopped by. He didn’t have to tell Esthi what he wanted; he always gets borscht. “This soup is wonderful!” Richard rhapsodized. “It gets me through the week. And it helps me lose weight because it’s very filling and low calorie.” Mark was making summer borscht, a kefir-based cold beet soup with potato, onion, cucumber, radish, and boiled egg, but next week planned to switch to winter borscht, a hot version with cabbage.



Richard asked Esthi about what she was reading. In the middle of their conversation, a plastic bag blew by. “Hold on!” Esthi yelled. She chased down the bag, then placed it in the small garbage bag at her station.

Esthi vends on Saturdays and Sundays from 11am till 3pm, closing earlier when they sell out. In between customers, she reads, listens to music, and tries to do work, but mostly she sits and observes. Spending several hours on 34th Avenue each week, she’s gained an intimate familiarity with the street’s rhythms. Below, Esthi describes what she sees and hears on the Open Street:



34th Avenue Oral History

Esthi Zipori 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Open Street Sights a...

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ONE OF THE BIGGEST THINGS I NOTICE ALWAYS IS THE BREEZE, HOW LOVELY THE BREEZE IS ON THE OPEN STREET. AND HOW QUIET. I JUST LOVE THAT YOU CAN'T HEAR CARS. I LOVE THAT YOU HEAR SNIPS OF MUSIC. LIKE A WEEK AGO, THERE WAS A GUY WITH A VIOLIN PLAYING ON 34TH AND 78TH. AND IT WAS JUST THE BEST.

IN TERMS OF OLDER PEOPLE, YOU SEE MORE OF THEM WALKING SAFELY IN THE ROAD, MEETING SOME FRIENDS. RIGHT ON 34TH AND 77TH, THERE'S THE PARK, AND THEY PUT A BUNCH OF BENCHES RIGHT NEXT TO THE CURB. BEFORE THAT [CREATION OF THE OPEN STREET], YOU DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO WATCH. LIKE, YOU'D WATCH THE CAR DRIVE. BUT NOW, YOU HAVE PEOPLE WATCHING AND YOU CAN SEE THEM GOSSIPING ABOUT EVERYTHING AND EVERYBODY.

AND WITH THE KIDS IS THE ABILITY TO RUN. I SEE A BUNCH OF 14 YEAR OLDS RIDING BIKES BY THEMSELVES, NO PARENTS' SUPERVISION REQUIRED. YOU CAN SEE A KID—EVEN THE YOUNGER KIDS, FIVE, SIX—AND THEY'RE RUNNING AROUND AND THEY'RE SAYING HI TO OTHER KIDS IN THE STREETS. I THINK THAT'S MY FAVORITE THING, SEEING SMALL KIDS BIKING OR SCOOTING BY THEMSELVES AND SEEING THE PARENTS NOT RUNNING AFTER THEM LIKE CRAZY, LIKE THEY HAVE TO DO IN THE SIDEWALKS, BUT JUST CRAWLING BEHIND. I SEE SO MANY KIDS MAKING NOISE [LAUGHS] AND THAT'S WHAT THE STREETS ARE FOR, TO GET ALL THEIR ENERGY OUT AND RUN AROUND AND BIKE.

AND IT'S JUST SO NICE TO HEAR THOSE SOUNDS WHEN I'M OUT THERE IN THE STREET, THAN HONKING AND REVVING AND JUST THE CONSTANT WHITE NOISE OF CARS DRIVING. YEAH. THE QUIET, THOUGH, THE QUIET. YOU NOTICE WHEN THE OPEN STREETS ENDS AND, EVEN FROM MY APARTMENT, YOU START HEARING THE HONKS A LOT MORE.

I REALLY ENJOY SOMETIMES RANDOMLY SEEING THE PEOPLE DOING ZUMBA, OR SEEING ANOTHER STREET VENDOR. I LOVE STREET VENDORS OF ALL KINDS, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY'RE SELLING SOMETHING THAT I HAVEN'T SEEN BEFORE BEING SOLD ON THE STREET. SOME PEOPLE SOMETIMES LEAVE BOOKS, WHICH I ALSO LOVE. I LOVE THOSE KIND OF, YOU KNOW, LEAVING A FEW THINGS WITH THE NOTE, "TAKE ME, I'M FREE."

OH, I KNOW! AND THE BUTTERFLIES! I'VE NOTICED I KEEP SEEING HUGE BUTTERFLIES, GORGEOUS—I RECENTLY SAW ONE ORANGE WITH, LIKE, A BLACK PATTERN. JUST ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS. AND I LOVE SQUIRREL-WATCHING. EVEN THOUGH I'VE BEEN HERE FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, SQUIRRELS GET ME EXCITED EVERY TIME I SEE THEM. IT'S JUST LIKE, I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS THE NORMAL ANIMAL RUNNING AROUND IN OUR CITY. IT'S JUST SO AWESOME.

She also sees elements of her studies play out in the theater of the street, sometimes witnessing clashes between pedestrians and drivers. The “us vs. them” mentality held by some pedestrians and drivers reminds her of why she wanted to leave Israel.

Here Esthi explains how the Open Street feels like a battlefield:



[34th Avenue Oral History](#)

Esthi Zipori 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Open Streets as Battlefield

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SO, WHEN I'M ON THE OPEN STREET, I GET TO SEE THOSE POLICIES LIVE. I GET TO SEE SOMETIMES THE SMALL FIGHTS BETWEEN THE DRIVERS THAT ARE SO PISSED THAT THEY HAD TO GET OUT OF THEIR CAR TO MOVE THE BARRICADE, SO THEY DON'T MOVE THE BARRICADE BACK, AND THEY MAKE SURE THAT THEY DRIVE REALLY FAST THROUGH THE STREET TO TAKE THEIR TURN, RIGHT? OR THE PEDESTRIANS THAT, EVEN THOUGH A CAR DRIVER TRIES TO BE, YOU KNOW, SOMEWHAT RESPECTABLE WILL KIND OF HIT THEM—THE CARS, I MEAN—AND WILL BE LIKE, "NO,

YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE." OR SOMETIMES WHERE A PEDESTRIAN WILL HELP CAR DRIVERS AND BE LIKE, "YEAH, I'LL CLOSE THE GATE FOR YOU. DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT." I SEE MORE OFTEN THE INCIDENTS OF DRIVERS BEING FRUSTRATED BY THE OPEN STREET THAN PEDESTRIANS YELLING AT CAR DRIVERS.

I THINK THE OPEN STREET, IT BREAKS THE MOLD. AND THAT'S WHAT'S SO SCARY FOR SO MANY PEOPLE. THEY DON'T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH IT. AND FOR SOME OF THEM, THE STREET IS A BATTLEFIELD.

I TOLD MARK THE OTHER DAY, FOR ME, I GREW UP AT A TIME PERIOD WHERE BUSES EXPLODED. SO, I REALLY GOT DESENSITIZED ABOUT ALL OF THAT. AND THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS IN ISRAEL REALLY. CAUSE IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME. AND YOU HAVE TO FIND SOMEONE TO BLAME, RIGHT? I THINK LIVING OUTSIDE OF ISRAEL REALLY GAVE ME A LOT OF PERSPECTIVE ON A LOT OF THINGS, AND ALSO BEING IN THE UNITED STATES SO LONG THAT I'VE ALSO KIND OF SEEN BEHIND THE SCREEN OF WHAT AMERICA TELLS EVERYBODY IT IS AND WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS, THAT I NOW ALSO UNDERSTAND THE CURTAIN THAT WE PUT ON OURSELVES IN ISRAEL, AND WHAT WE TELL OURSELVES THAT WE ARE, AND THEN HOW WE ACTUALLY BEHAVE.

BUT YEAH, ALSO, YOU KNOW, THE AMERICAN CAR CULTURE HAS TOTALLY TAKEN OVER ISRAEL. AND IT'S SUCH A TINY COUNTRY THAT IT'S REALLY, REALLY DIFFICULT, LIKE, YOU CAN'T GO ANYWHERE WITHOUT A CAR. AND YOU'RE PRETTY MUCH IN TRAFFIC ALL THE TIME BECAUSE EVERYBODY'S IN THEIR OWN CAR. SO NOT ONLY ARE THEY CONSTANTLY STRESSED ABOUT GETTING SHOT AT OR STABBED AND ALL THE TRAUMA OF EACH PERSON'S OWN MILITARY EXPERIENCE, AND THEN ALL THE STRESS FROM BEING IN CARS; IT'S JUST KIND OF A POCKET OF PRESSURE ALL THE TIME.

I MEAN, VIOLENCE IS COMPLICATED, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE FIGHTING FOR SOMETHING YOU BELIEVE IS YOUR FREEDOM. WHO CAN TELL YOU THAT IT'S NOT? AND THEN WHY IS THAT NOT ALLOWED? RIGHT? LIKE WE SEE IT IN MOVIES ALL THE TIME, BUT IF IT'S A WHITE AMERICAN DUDE, IT'S FREEDOM. BUT WHEN IT'S AN ARAB, SUDDENLY IT'S NOT. NOW THOSE ARE CONVERSATIONS I WISH I COULD HAVE WITH MY BROTHER, FOR EXAMPLE, BUT HE'S SO LOCKED INTO THE MINDSET OF US VERSUS THEM.

AND I KNOW IT'S WEIRD TO SAY THAT IT'S THE SAME WITH PEOPLE DRIVING CARS AND PEDESTRIANS, BUT THAT'S HOW THEY FRAME IT A LOT OF TIMES, RIGHT? US VERSUS THEM. "YOU'RE TRYING TO TAKE SOMETHING AWAY FROM US THAT'S OURS." AND IF WE CAN'T HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CARS AMONGST THE SAME COMMUNITIES, HOW CAN WE EXPECT TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ON MUCH MORE COMPLICATED STUFF BETWEEN COUNTRIES?

In this battleground, people are warring over potential futures, and Esthi is firmly entrenched, fighting through education.

"I always felt like maybe I can contribute a bit more into making life better," Esthi said. She's found her calling in contributing to our understanding of urban systems. She teaches at NJIT and encourages her students to imagine what's possible for the future. In a class she created, "From Private Cars to Public Spaces: An Exploration of the Green New Deal," she asked students to design 15-minute cities, neighborhoods where daily necessities can be accomplished without cars.



Esthi also teaches about the past and future of streets. Listen below for her rundown on the history of streets:



34th Avenue Oral History

Esthi Zipori 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: History Of Streets



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BRIDGET: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE HISTORY OF STREETS?

ESTHI: OH YEAH, OF COURSE, I WOULD LOVE TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE HISTORY OF STREETS. IN TERMS OF THE UNITED STATES, I THINK, AND NEW YORK CITY IN PARTICULAR, BY THE 1900S, YOU HAVE STREETS, WHAT WE UNDERSTAND AS MODERN STREETS. WE HAVE SIDEWALKS; THAT'S BEEN AROUND FOR SEVERAL DECADES. BUT MOST OF THE STREETS ARE DIRT PATHS, MUDDY, THERE'S NO MAIN BODY THAT CLEANS IT OR MAINTAINS IT. THE RESPONSIBILITY IS PURELY ON THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE ON THOSE BLOCKS. AND THE MAIN USES IN THE STREETS IS HORSE CARRIAGES. AND THEN THERE'S THE FIRST INVENTED BUS IN LIKE THE EARLY 1920S, THE OMNIBUS, WHICH IS THE FIRST KIND OF PUBLIC TRANSIT VEHICLE THAT ACTUALLY YOU CAN PICK UP

ANYWHERE AND IT DROPS YOU ANYWHERE. IT'S LIKE LIMITED TO 12, 15 PEOPLE. YOU START SEEING ELECTRICAL CARS, ACTUALLY, BEFORE YOU SEE THE GASOLINE CARS. YOU SEE THE BICYCLE GETTING USED.

THE BICYCLE AND THE ELECTRICAL CAR WERE REALLY HUGE LIBERATORS FOR WOMEN TO BE ABLE TO INDEPENDENTLY TRAVEL. AND THAT'S ALSO ACTUALLY ONE OF THE REASONS WHY BOTH OF THOSE TOOLS WERE PUSHED TO THE SIDE FAIRLY HARD ON, TO PREVENT THAT KIND OF INDEPENDENCE. THE BICYCLE ACTUALLY STARTED AS LIKE A RICH PEOPLE TOY, AND ONLY AFTER SOME TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION THAT MADE THE WHEEL WIDER AND THE GEARS EASIER TO USE, THEN WOMEN START USING THEM MORE SERIOUSLY FOR INDEPENDENT TRAVEL. AND ACTUALLY BICYCLE RIDERS ARE THE ORGANIZATION THAT PUSHES PAVING OF STREETS, BECAUSE ALL OF THE MUD AND THE HORSES' MESS, AND IT'S REALLY BAD FOR THE BIKES AND THEY KEEP FALLING OFF.

SO, WHEN WE STARTED GETTING THESE INNOVATIONS IN PAVINGS IN THE 1920S, AND THEN WE START TO GET INNOVATION IN COMBUSTION ENGINE, PRIVATE VEHICLES. AND EVEN THOUGH THEY EXPLODE, AND EVEN THOUGH THEY'RE PRETTY DIFFICULT TO MANEUVER, THEY'RE FAST AND THEY BEGIN TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH POWER AND FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE. SO YOU KNOW, ALL THE WHITE MALES JUMP ON THE OPPORTUNITY. AND WE SEE THIS RISE IN MIDDLE CLASS THAT TAKES OVER GOVERNMENTAL POSITIONS AND LEGISLATES LAWS THAT START TO ORGANIZE THE STREETS, START TO KIND OF INTRODUCE TRAFFIC LIGHTS AND STOPLIGHTS, AND THIS IDEA OF A CROSSWALK, THAT YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO CROSS IN CORNERS.

AND THERE'S HUGE FIGHTS AGAINST THIS. THOUSANDS OF KIDS DIE IN THE STREETS; MOSTLY KIDS BECAUSE THEY'RE USED TO PLAYING IN THE STREETS BECAUSE THE STREETS WAS THE PUBLIC SPACES. THERE WEREN'T PARKS OR PLAYGROUNDS OR ANY OF THAT SORT. THAT'S KINDA ONLY STILL GETTING DEVELOPED. SO THERE'S THIS REALLY BIG PUSH, ESPECIALLY FROM WOMEN, AGAINST THIS KIND OF INCREASE IN COMBUSTION ENGINE CARS, BUT THE LOBBY OF CAR MANUFACTURING AND ALL OF THE SUPPORTING INDUSTRY AROUND IT, THEY WIN THE GAME, RIGHT? INVESTING IN A LOT OF MARKETING, INVENTING JAYWALKING, DOING THIS WHOLE KIND OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THING OVER THE YEARS WHERE IT'S YOUR FAULT FOR BEING RUN OVER. YOU SHOULD BE MORE RESPONSIBLE AND MAKE YOUR WAY FOR THE FAST-MOVING CAR.

AND THEN YOU PROBABLY KNOW THE REST OF THE STORY WITH FORD, RIGHT? HENRY FORD COMES IN AND BRINGS TOGETHER A COLLECTION OF TECHNOLOGY, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE ASSEMBLY LINE. HE MAKES CAR PRODUCTION WAY MORE EFFICIENT, WAY MORE QUICKER, MORE AFFORDABLE. HE GIVES HIS EMPLOYEES A RAISE, SO THEY CAN ACTUALLY BUY THE T MODELS THAT THEY'RE PRODUCING. AND HE ALSO GIVES THEM DAYS OFF, BECAUSE HE WANTS THEM TO BUY HIS CARS, AND THEN HE WANTS THEM TO USE THEM AND MAKE OTHER PEOPLE WANT TO BUY THE CAR. SO HENRY FORD REALLY CREATES THIS NEW FORM OF PRODUCTION THAT SPREADS EVERYWHERE. IN THAT TIME PERIOD, LIKE 1930S, 1940S, THE ROADS ARE STILL A MESS, LIKE THEY'RE PAVED, BUT THERE'S NO MARKING, THERE'S NOT TOO MANY TRAFFIC SIGNS. THE CONCEPT OF PARKING AND PARKING METERS IS GETTING INVENTED BECAUSE THEY'RE STARTING TO SEE DEMAND OF SPACE.

BUT THEN COMES WORLD WAR II. AND WORLD WAR II CHANGES EVERYTHING, BECAUSE WHEN THE WAR ENDS AND EVERYBODY COMES BACK, THERE'S THE PUSH TO PUT WOMEN BACK IN THE HOUSE. AND THERE'S A NEED TO SELL A LOT OF THINGS, RIGHT, TO MAINTAIN THE CONSUMER SOCIETY. AND ONE OF THOSE THINGS IS THE CAR. AND THE CAR BECOMES THE TOOL TO KEEP SEPARATING EVERYTHING. THAT'S WHEN WE START SEEING CITIES REALLY SEPARATING RESIDENTIAL FROM COMMERCIAL, FROM BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY. INSTEAD, CITIES ARE A MIX OF ALL, RIGHT? BUT CITIES ARE GETTING VILIFIED BY INVESTING IN SUBURBS INSTEAD. REALLY CREATING THE SUBURBS, THAT PEOPLE NEED CARS TO DRIVE BACK TO THE CITY TO WORK.

AND THROUGH THE FIFTIES ALL THE WAY UNTIL THE 1990S, YOU SEE POLICIES CONTINUOUSLY PRIVILEGE THE CAR. FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF, IN THE 1960S, WE HAVE THE NATIONAL INTERSTATE SYSTEM THAT CUTS THROUGH CITIES AND COMMUNITIES, MOSTLY AFRICAN-AMERICAN, MOSTLY BROWN COMMUNITIES, CUTTING THEM IN HALF, COMPLETELY DISPLACING THEM, AND PUTTING HUGE INTERSECTIONS AND HUGE URBAN HIGHWAYS IN ALMOST EVERY SINGLE AMERICAN CITY. AND IT'S JUST LIKE SOMEONE JUST CAME IN WITH A KNIFE AND PUT A HIGHWAY THERE, A HIGHWAY THERE, AND THERE'S SOME LEFTOVERS FROM THE COMMUNITY, BUT YOU COULD STILL SEE THE BROKENNESS OF IT.

SO WE HAVE ROBERT MOSES COMING IN, THAT'S THESE TIME PERIODS AS WELL, IN THE 60S, 70S. ON THE ONE HAND, WITHOUT HIM, ALL THE KIND OF COMMERCIAL CONNECTIONS THAT MAKE NEW YORK CITY WHAT IT IS TODAY, ON THE OTHER HAND, HE WAS A FIRM BELIEVER OF WHAT'S CALLED THE AUTOMOBILE LIFESTYLE. ONE OF THE FIRST PARKWAYS THAT HE BUILT TO THE BEACH HAVE, ON PURPOSE, REALLY LOW BRIDGES, RIGHT? THAT'S THE MOST KNOWN FACT ABOUT THEM, THAT THE BUSES CAN'T GO UNDERNEATH THEM. AND BY THE 1980S, AMERICAN URBAN STREETS ARE ROADWAYS. PERIOD.

SO, THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS, NOT TOO MUCH CHANGED. NOT TOO MUCH CHANGED IN CAR TECHNOLOGY, NOT TOO MUCH HAS CHANGED IN ROAD TECHNOLOGY. CARS HAVE BECOME EXTREMELY SAFER FOR PEOPLE INSIDE, AND EXTREMELY, EXTREMELY DANGEROUS FOR PEOPLE OUTSIDE. ESPECIALLY IN TERMS OF SIZE, THE CARS ARE GETTING BIGGER AND BIGGER.

THE STREET IS PUBLIC SPACE, BUT WE'VE LOOKED AT IT IN THE LAST 50 YEARS AS A THROUGHWAY, NOT AN URBAN PLACE. AND THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE. THAT'S KIND OF THE BIG TRANSITION THAT IS THERE; THAT IT USED TO BE AN URBAN PLACE THAT SERVICED THAT COMMUNITY, BOTH TRAVELING THROUGH IT AND LIVING IN IT. NOW IT DOESN'T. YEAH, STREETS ARE FASCINATING.

BRIDGET: THANK YOU FOR THAT SUPER COMPREHENSIVE AND INFORMATIVE OVERVIEW-

ESTHI: [LAUGHS] CAN YOU TELL I TEACH?

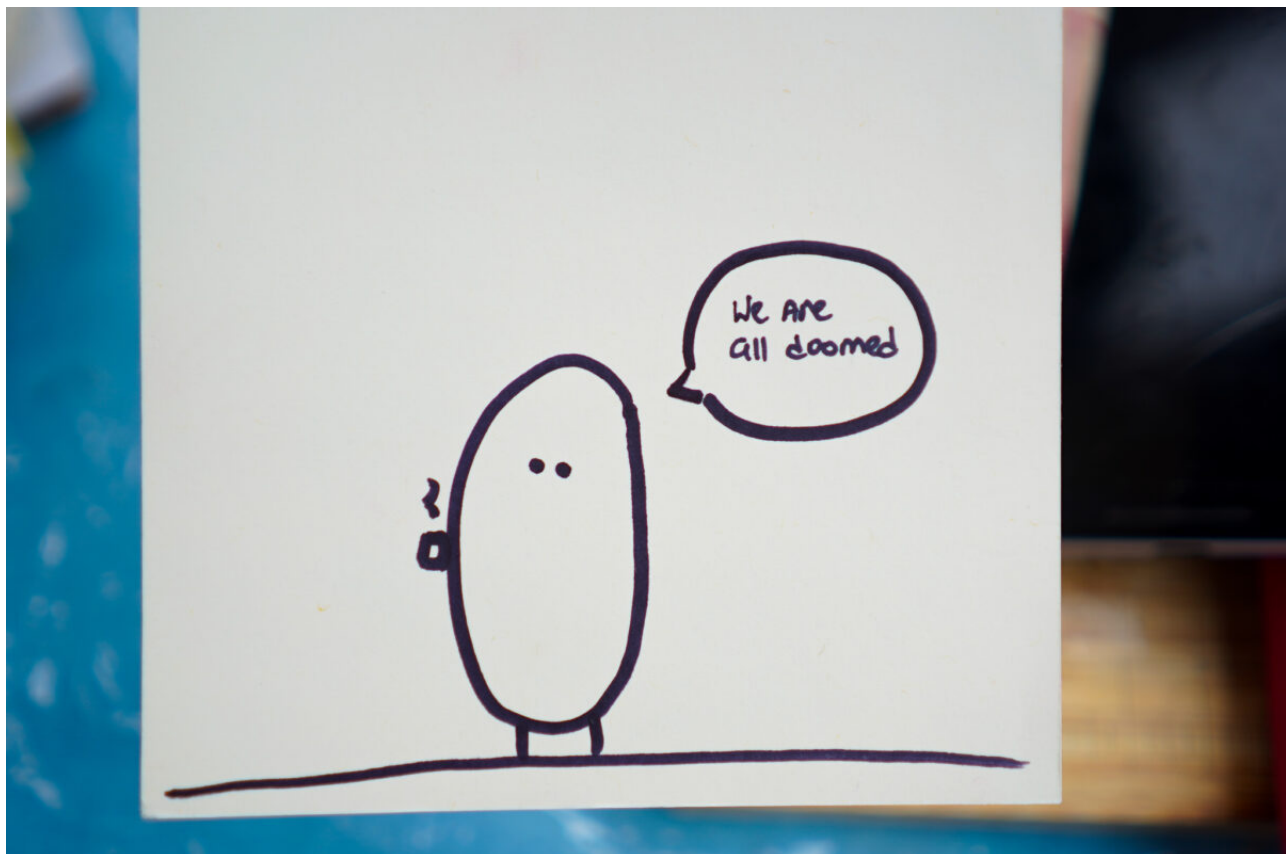
BRIDGET: YEAH, THAT WAS REALLY GREAT. I FEEL LIKE I JUST LEARNED SO MUCH. JUST SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE ALL AT ONCE THROUGH THAT EXPLANATION, AND IT'S PRETTY DEPRESSING.

ESTHI ZIPORI: IT CAN BE. I KNOW. THAT'S WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THE POINTS OF LIGHTS, LIKE THE OPEN STREETS IDEAS AND THE SUMMER STREETS, AND DO WHAT WE CAN TO PUSH IT FORWARD. BECAUSE, THAT'S MY ARGUMENT, IF THE STREET WAS SOMETHING ELSE, WHY CAN'T WE CHANGE IT?

Esthi shows optimism for her students as she encourages them to dream up better worlds. “I have to open their minds to what can we do. And to do that, I have to be kind of almost like a Disney princess a little bit, that says, ‘Yes, we can do it!’”

Yet she is gripped by anxiety over the climate crisis and the future of our planet. In her dissertation, she argues that we’re already living in a dystopia. She doesn’t plan to have children. “I just can’t mentally deal with having a baby and then when they grow up telling them, ‘Welcome to planet earth. Everything’s on fire. I knew everything was on fire and I still brought you here.’”

She thought the pandemic could be an opportunity for real change. “In social science, crisis is an opportunity,” she said. “I always thought, all we need is a crisis as a society. It will get our shit together and we will be able to face the climate crisis. We can better our society, readjust our values and all that jazz. And then we didn’t.” The infrastructural failure of society frustrates her.



In many ways, she’s feeling increasingly pessimistic, but programs like Open Streets present a ray of hope. She believes that by shifting away from personal car usage, making urban streets easier to walk and bike, we can transition our built environments towards a sustainable society.

Esthi has loved Jackson Heights since she moved there: “We feel more at home here than any other neighborhood, because there are so many people like us,” she said. “So many immigrants, so many people missing their families, but loving it here.” Below, Esthi explains what makes her neighborhood special:



34th Avenue Oral History

Esthi Zipori 34th Avenue Oral History Excerpt: Jackson Heights Immigrant Love



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THAT'S WHAT WAS ALWAYS AWESOME ABOUT JACKSON HEIGHTS, THAT WE FELT SO MUCH MORE AT HOME HERE THAN ANY OTHER NEIGHBORHOOD WE LIVED AT, BECAUSE THERE WAS SO MANY OTHER PEOPLE LIKE US, AND THEY WERE ALL AT HOME AND THEY'RE ALL LIKE, "YEAH, THIS IS OUR HOME. IT'S FINE, IT'S OKAY THAT YOU SPEAK ANOTHER LANGUAGE AND THAT YOU LOVE ALL THESE OTHER FOODS, AND THAT YOU'RE NOT AMERICAN. YOU'RE FROM JACKSON HEIGHTS!" SO I THINK THAT'S BEEN REALLY MEANINGFUL.

AND I KNOW THE WAITRESS AT RICKY'S [CAFE]. THE CASHIERS IN THE SUPERMARKET KNOW ME AND WILL SAY HELLO. WE HAVE A BUNCH OF OUR FAVORITE RESTAURANTS THAT, EVEN THOUGH I'M VERY WHITE AND I CAN BLEND VERY MUCH IN, BUT THEY'LL STILL ACCEPT US, YOU KNOW, EVEN IF IT'S A BANGLADESHI SPOT OR A LEBANESE FOOD PLACE. AND YEAH, WE'RE ALL JUST IN JACKSON HEIGHTS. AND I DON'T THINK I'VE HAD THAT FEELING, THAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIP WITH PEOPLE AND THAT KIND OF FEELING OF ACCEPTANCE.

I MEAN, THERE ARE SO MANY IMMIGRANTS AND SO MANY PEOPLE COMING IN HERE JUST LOOKING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT, LOOKING FOR SOMETHING ELSE. MISSING THEIR FAMILIES, BUT STILL LOVING IT HERE. YOU KNOW, HAVING THOSE MULTIPLE LANGUAGES AND LOVING ALL THESE DIFFERENT FOODS THAT THEY NEVER HEARD ABOUT BEFORE. AND ALSO HAVING THAT SAME ANXIETY, THAT SAME FEAR, AND THAT SAME, "OH, I WISH I COULD VOTE, BUT I CAN'T." STILL BEING INVOLVED IN ALL THE POLITICS AND THE COMMUNITY, BUT KIND OF ALSO HAVING THAT DISTANCE AND KIND OF KNOWING THAT YOU CAN FIND CASH JOBS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, YOU COULD DO STREET VENDING, AND WILL BE SUPPORTED BY THE COMMUNITY. AND THAT THERE'S RESOURCES.

AND THE FOOD, I GOT TO SAY, THE FOOD REALLY MADE US FEEL AT HOME HERE, BECAUSE WE COULD FINALLY FIND FRUITS AND VEGETABLES AND THE THINGS THAT WE LIKE TO EAT THAT BEFORE THAT WAS ALWAYS SUCH A STRUGGLE TO FIND.

AND THEN WITH THE OPEN STREETS, WE GOT TO MEET OUR NEIGHBORS A LOT MORE, AND OUR COMMUNITY A LOT MORE, AND GET INVOLVED WITH ALL SORTS OF STUFF. SO I THINK IT REALLY CONNECTED US TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD SO MUCH MORE THAN WE WERE BEFORE. YEAH, YOU'LL HAVE TO DRAG US KICKING AND SCREAMING [LAUGHS] OUT OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

Since 34th Avenue became an Open Street, she's come to love Jackson Heights even more. “The Open Street just kind of made it even more part of our lives and part of who we are,” Esthi explained. “It connected us to the neighborhood so much more. Being on the Open Street and seeing the fun and good things it gives people, it's done wonders for my mental well-being.”



Esthi is on a student visa and will soon be graduating. Because of her legal status, the future is uncertain, but she hopes to stay in Jackson Heights and see how the Open Street evolves. “There’s like a clock always off to the sides, kind of ticking away, that puts in question our place here, because of our status as immigrants,” she said. “I really, really hope I succeed in staying here long enough to see it become what it could be.”

She hopes to see improvements, like removal of parking lanes in Open Streets, expanded bike lanes, permanent infrastructure, and community input on design and amenities. She hopes the community will push further and pedestrianize more streets.

“34th Avenue is proof of how much urban space influences our individual and personal lives, and how we can bring joy and happiness with only minor changes,” Esthi said. “Can you imagine how amazing it would be if we didn’t just settle for the minor changes?”



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