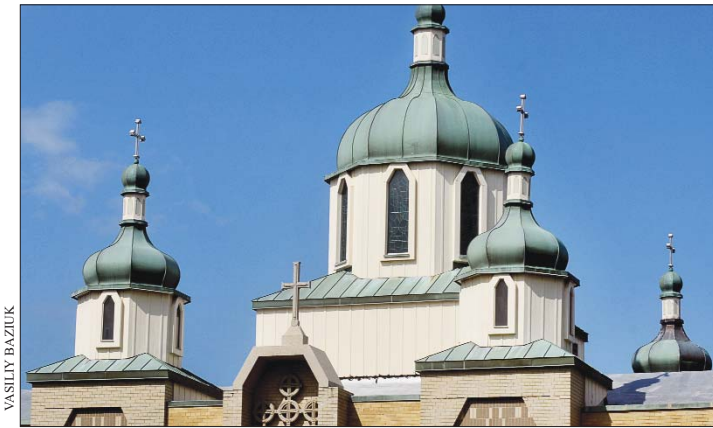


THE DAILY RECORD

WESTERN NEW YORK'S SOURCE FOR LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908



VASILY BAZUK



Shown clockwise from top left: The Ukrainian Catholic Church of Epiphany along Carter Street; The Church of God of Prophecy along Portland Avenue; a view of the Keeler Park Apartments from N.Y. 104.; the B. Thomas Golisano Pavilion & Emergency Center at Rochester General Hospital; St. Stanislaus Church on Hudson Avenue.

14621

BY COLLEEN M. FARRELL

Eugenio Cotto Jr. used to buy drugs in the neighborhood he's now trying to save.

Cotto, who grew up on Wilkins Street in Rochester's 14621 area,

attended the local city schools until 1969, when his family made the move back to Puerto Rico.

When he had trouble finding a job

there, he decided to return to Rochester in 1981. His alcohol and drug habit helped to fuel the illegal trade in the city's Northeast.

"I was fortunate enough to be able to walk away from that when I was around 38," Cotto said.

His first contribution to the community was forming a youth baseball league, which still exists. That wasn't enough, however.

"I started to really open my eyes and see our community was in dire need of all kinds of help," he said.

That's what persuaded him to become more involved. Cotto is now the executive director of the Group 14621 Community Association. Founded in 1974 by residents concerned about property conditions, public safety, drug activity and zoning issues, the association works on behalf of a neighborhood that encompasses a huge chunk of the city. Its borders are the Genesee River and North Goodman Street and Clifford Avenue to the Irondequoit-Rochester border.

The neighborhood has a long history. Its roots are in Carthage, a community that rivaled Nathaniel Rochester's settlement nearly three miles to the north. Founded along the Lower Falls, land was cleared at the settlement as early as 1809, according to the Landmark Society of Western New York.

It wasn't unusual to find wolves, bears and other wild animals



GRAPHIC BY LAWRENCE SEIL

Continued ...

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Shown left to right: A trail marker to the Seth Green Fishing Access Site along the Genesee River; Seth Green Island in the middle of the Genesee River; marker for the trail at Seth Green Park that leads to the river.

Continued ...

roaming the area. By 1818, however, about 40 homes, mills and other buildings stood in Carthage. When Rochester was incorporated in 1834, the little village was absorbed by the new city.

Today, there are some nods to the neighborhood's first incarnation. Seth Green, who established the first state fish hatchery in 1864, has a boulevard named after him along the river. Conkey Avenue bears the name of another early resident, Joshua Conkey, who lived near Beach Street. The Rochester School for the Deaf campus on St. Paul Street originally was the site of the House of Idle and Truant Children for homeless and poor youths.

Streets such as Berlin, Baden Mozart and Rauber pay homage to the neighborhood's plentiful German residents in the late 1800s. Later, Polish and Jewish immigrants and other Eastern European groups made their way here. A group of Polish residents established St. Stanislaus Church, the first Polish Catholic church in Rochester, in 1890.

Once street car service was established, the large farms and nurseries in the area gave way to housing tracts in the late 1880s. Notable residents included Henry Bausch, one of the founders of Bausch & Lomb, who built a home at 1062 St. Paul St. Other residents were the former Rochester Red Wings, who played ball in the old Silver Stadium on Norton Street.

The neighborhood's make-up changed after World War II, when the immigrants who had built up the 14621 area left, and African-Americans and, eventually, Hispanics moved in. Tensions mounted, and in 1964, parts of the neighborhood experienced a riot. Cotto said that when he returned to the city in 1981, he an undercurrent of racial tension in the neighborhood remained.

"We did have a lot of racial disputes and there was a lot of tension when I came here, a lot of cultural segregation and folks were not talking to each other," he said. "Each group had a leader. It was hard to fulfill the needs of the people of the neighborhood."

In a way, 14621 never quite recovered from the three-day disturbances of 1964, Cotto said. Longtime residents, concerned about safety, fled. In time, sections became "havens" for low-income residents and criminal activity, he said.

Vacant houses are a problem today, as are absentee landlords. Re-establishing the area's once flourishing commercial sectors is looming goal.

"We lost quite a few businesses over the years and we've been

trying desperately as a community to bring businesses back," Cotto said. "Little by little, over the last few years we've been able to bring some smaller businesses back to try to offset some of that economic loss, but we're far from where we should be."

Cotto said he is working to bridge any gaps between residents and unite them under the common goal of cleaning up the neighborhood. Slowly, he said, he's seeing progress.

"Kids walk through the neighborhood. They see things they shouldn't see: the drug deals, the prostitution. ... The good thing is we have a movement where folks are coming out to the forefront and saying, 'Look, this is not going to be tolerated.'"

Bringing neighbors together makes their voices louder, and that's getting the attention of agencies, groups, local government — anyone who can help, earmark some grant money or make an investment — to strengthen the community, Cotto said.

He isn't alone in his work. Resident Lenzy Blake began his outreach efforts after a friend, James Slater, was killed in the neighborhood just a few doors down from his mother's home during a robbery by two youths. Slater was a community activist. To honor his friend, Blake formed Slater's Raiders for Peace in 2007.

"I thought if I spent some quality time with some of these young people that maybe, just maybe, I could turn some of these guys around," Blake said.

His group works with anyone looking for an education or job training. Attendees have ranged in age from 16 to 55. It started with 38 participants, many of whom were high school drop outs. Now, its 58 members are pursuing college or career training, Blake said.

Slater's Raiders also have participated in blood drives, feeding the homeless and other community-building activities.

"This is a way to keep [Slater's] memory alive and I tell folks, 'If your name is Blake, Smith or whatever it may be, we're here to represent you, too,'" he said. "How can we eliminate someone else having this type of tragic situation? We were brokenhearted at the loss of Camry McKnight because it shows our failing and it shows we have much more work to do."

McKnight, 12, was shot and killed near the corner of Hudson Avenue and Weyl Street in September. Two other youths were shot, but are recovering.

Cotto said 14621 can't and shouldn't try to hide its challenges: "We have to be honest, we have to have integrity, we have to have humility when we talk [about issues] ... because it's the only way people will believe in us."