Tradition tastes fresh in Little Italy

In recent decades, many of those settlers’ families moved out to the suburbs. There was a business downturn in the late 1980s, and even 20 years ago, the neighborhood was “hard to walk,” said Frank who said there were a few empty storefronts on the street and in the Arthur Avenue Retail Market which opened in 1968 by MastroSeparo Lillo.

But while Manhattan’s Little Italy has been largely subsumed into Chinatown, the area around Arthur Avenue and East 187th Street is thriving, serving hundreds of pupils of tradition, not only to New Yorkers but to busloads of tourists from around the world. It stems from a blend of the hard work of its long-time merchants, the faith in the community of new arrivals, the ambitious work of the BID and the renaissance of the Bronx as a whole.

It’s better now—there are no storefronts with the gates down so the neighborhood looks good,” said Orlando Cacciatore, who arrived from Italy in 1966. He makes world famous clams at Casa Della Mazzarella. He also welcomed the increased diversity in the neighborhood.

“Other neighborhoods, like Morris Park and Throggs Neck, have more Italian-Americans now, but our neighborhood, transformed the community early on,” he said. However, Cacciatore, “we’re not a Historic relic.”

Last year, the BID introduced the New York Pizza Festival, which put 40 top pizza makers on the street, cooking in gas, coal and wood ovens. The BID activity markets the neighborhood, now selling Little Italy development firms coming into the Bronx to build.

Nonprofits: Committed to the community

“The Bronx has been rebuilt, often at the grassroots level by community advocates and local nonprofits. They have been aided, of course, by government, foundations and others, like M&T Bank.”

“We understand how access to fundamental resources can help cultivate and sustain an area for generations,” said Blair Rister, M&T Bank’s regional president for the New York City market. “We are committed to continued investment in not-for-profit organizations that provide these essential services to children, individuals, families and seniors throughout the borough.”

There are numerous not-for-profits throughout the Bronx working on a wide array of initiatives over the past three of them:

BronxWorks With 500 employees in 40 locations serving 50,000 people annually, BronxWorks covers the entire borough, offering free, in-person support and advice anyone in need. “We do so much,” said Eleanor Torres, executive director of BronxWorks. “We take a holistic approach.”

There are two focuses. BronxWorks works with people in crisis—the homeless, or those on the verge of becoming so, the chronically ill and people suffering from severe food insecurity. While the organization opened a shelter for homeless single adults, it also works on eviction prevention and, if the client in question is a senior, the organization might connect them to a senior center for more support.

BronxWorks also works on the big picture. “We help families with children break the cycle of poverty and build it with force with livable and sustainable wages,” Torres said. That might mean after-school programs that can range from elementary school help to free SAT prep to a recently expanded workforce development program that has helped 300 BronxWorks clients hired by the construction and development firms coming into the Bronx to build.

Sustainable Bronx South Bronx Housing Program but 50% retains its focus on home turf, providing a sustainable environment and living for people.

We provide green-jobs training for folks who are disconnected from the workforce because of homelessness, low education levels or involvement in the criminal justice system,” said chief development officer Ilene Broncz. To sustain these changes, the organization has expanded its mental health services and financial coaching. “The programs are not free and we are underbanked and we want to ensure they do not use financially predatory services,” Broncz said. SBBS has recently expanded from two to three different training programs in green infrastructure and solar installation for 185 people annually. “We leverage our program slots into permanent employment,” Broncz said, adding that 70%-80% of trainees get jobs annually and 70%-80% of those are still employed one year later.

The Bronx Defenders The Bronx Defenders is, as the name says, a public defender organization but the organization does not stop there. “We are also seeking to radically transform both the way people are represented in the legal system and in legal systems is said,” executive director Justin Oldsman.

Oldsman emphasizes the Defenders’ holistic approach. “We don’t just address the case, we look at the client and address all the drivers of their involvement with the legal system and the devastating consequences of that involvement.”

If someone is arrested on a drug charge, the Defenders also help find services related to substance abuse, and others if the arrest might prompt eviction from public housing or custody issues or deportation. “We don’t focus on the entry point; we will be there at every point,” said. “These systems are super-interrelated.”

The Defenders’ systemic efforts include class-action litigation, such as a case where the NYPD had been using stop and search as a tactic and, in addition to policy reform work on topics like bail reform and police reform, the Defenders have been organizing. “We get people from the community into that work as much as possible, to be decisionmakers for Oldsman.”

At M&T Bank, understanding what’s important means realizing the role a bank plays in people’s lives. And then living up to those responsibilities, by helping families, businesses and communities thrive. It’s what we’ve been doing for more than 160 years. Learn more at mtb.com.

M&T Bank is proud to support The Bronx community and its endeavors.

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Frank Franz’s grandfather arrived in the Bronx from Italy and built a house near Arthur Avenue in 1910. Franz, the founder of the Bronx Little Italy Business Improvement District (BID), was born in that house 65 years ago and still lives there today.

So, Franz can testify to how much Little Italy has changed. “We used to address people you saw on the street in Italian first,” he said, but now the neighborhood is far more diverse thanks to an influx of Albanians and Latinos, mostly Mexicans, who moved in after many Italian Americans moved out.

But in a city that prizes constant evolution, what’s more astonishing is how much this neighborhood has not changed.

“It really stayed the same in a lot of ways—there are a lot of stores that have been around for so many years,” said Chris Borgatta, who has spent the last 43 years in his family’s Borgatta Ravioli & Egg Noodles business, which opened in 1938.

Bakalinos are the best example of how deeply rooted Little Italy is in the traditions and its past. Egidio Pasto Shop opened in 1912, Modena Bakery debuted six years later, DiFallipo Prosciutti dates to 1925, and Artuso Pasto Shop just opened just after World War II. Their Maker Gio’s Pasto Shop, which was founded in 1960, is a robotics start-up.

“I remember being five years old and being in there with my father in his store,” said Gio’s son Jerome Reguano, who now runs the shop. The store recently made its Broadway debut in the musical Broadway “A Bronx Tale.”

The storefront was included in the set design because Gio’s is a favorite of the writer and star Chaz Palminteri.

It’s just not parents passing on to their children their food businesses and restaurants like Marlos, which opened in 1919, there are other efforts to keep the tradition alive. Examples include Belmont Library and Eincho Farmers Coastal Culture and the traditional Fermento Festival, run by the BID, which is 85 August. The event transformed the community early on.

However, Franz said, “we’re not a Historic relic.”

“...history, tradition and culture live here,” Frank Franz, Bronx Little Italy Business Improvement District