

Clinton Hill corner is buzzing

from The Daily News, 11/22/03

A dollar goes a long way in Clinton Hill

That was the price of the dingy, three-story building at the corner of Clifton Place and Grand Ave. when the Pratt Area Community Council bought it from the city in June 2001.

Over the past two years, the council gutted and renovated the building at 41-43 Clifton Place, and interviewed perspective tenants. Today, the building, worth well more than a dollar, is at the center of a home-grown neighborhood renaissance that has locals buzzing.

"It's going to be very luxurious," said Felicia Fontrose, who beamed as she regarded 586 square feet of bare pistachio walls, exposed piping and papered-over windows at 41 Clifton Place. The finished space will open on Nov. 29 as the Nu Yu Day Spa. In the meantime, Fontrose and business partner Jacqueline Peters have planned for everything, down to their customers' delicate sensibilities.

"When you're sitting here getting your feet done," said Fontrose, pointing to where the pedicure bench will be, "no one will be here looking."

Luxury has been a rare commodity on this corner, formerly known to locals as "Crack Avenue." Neighbors said scoring drugs seemed easier than finding decent coffee, groceries - or a spa treatment. But a cafe and health food store opened at Clifton and Grand several weeks ago, and the spa and a restaurant are coming soon, fueling talk that the neighborhood's prospects are brightening. Even better, say residents of this traditionally African-American neighborhood, is the fact that each new business is minority-owned and operated.

"If I got a dollar for everybody coming saying, 'We're so happy you're here!' we wouldn't be here," joked Carmen Grau, co-owner of Grand 275, a wireless Internet cafe and lounge that opened in late September.

The cafe - stylishly done up in oyster white, margarita green and grenadine red, accented by a dark wood bar - is relaxed by day and soulful by night, said chef and co-owner Mark Chung. Grand 275 is next to the Pratt Area Community Council-owned building.

"There is actually nothing like this in the neighborhood at all," said Chung, who was born in Guyana and raised in Brooklyn. "There are cafes with liquor licenses, but no one is really doing what we're doing in terms of music and style."

Chung and Grau, both Manhattan restaurant veterans and Clinton Hill residents, said business has improved week by week. Their easy manners - greeting customers by name, letting neighborhood kids run in and out - already have won them fans and regulars.

"When I walked by this place, I was like, 'Finally, a place I can go to,'" said Gemeem Davis, 34, a writer and filmmaker who has visited the cafe nearly every day since it opened. "It's going to energize the neighborhood and give the kids something else to look at other than what it was."

Davis, who has had family in the neighborhood for more than 50 years, said, "It was kind of a desolate area."

Now, Davis said, "You could spend a whole day on this block."

Community leaders credit the Pratt Area Community Council for bringing the block back to life. In

addition to Nu Yu, businesses renting space from the council include health food store Karrot and Dakar, a Senegalese-influenced restaurant due to open in December.

"We are not in the business of providing space to just anybody," said Melissa Lee, the council's commercial revitalization program manager, citing the group's focus on supporting businesses owned by people who live in the neighborhood. "We really look for tenants that are well invested in the community and have a stake in investing in the community."

Encouraging local investment creates "a sense of family and economic vitality," said newly elected City Council member Letitia James. "I hope a lot of developers who come into the area will model themselves" after the council, she added.

Business owners and community leaders are talking to police in the 88th Precinct about improving public safety in the area, Lee said. Better lighting and increased foot patrols are top priorities, she said.

Owners say they've already noticed fewer drug dealers loitering on the block since their businesses opened.

"This used to be Crack Avenue," said Carlos Aguila, co-owner of Karrot. "I bet you a year from now they'll be gone."

Karrot customer Shari Holman agreed.

"This was a drug-infested block. It was a very very rough block," she said. Going from "barely having a decent grocery store," to being able to go around the corner for soy milk is a relief to Holman, who has lactose-intolerant twins.

"I think it's going to be a real sea change for this end of the neighborhood," said Holman.