

## Woolner facelift a success

Tenants and neighbours of problem buildings realize benefits of improvements

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Prostitutes and drug dealers once roamed the streets of Jane and Woolner, conducting their illegal business in the neighbouring apartment complex known to residents as a haven for criminals.

The previous landlords of the six buildings looked the other way, renting out rooms to all prospective tenants without any background checks.

Dope peddlers and female escorts entered and exited the premises at will with their own set of illegally cut keys.

Police made routine stops to the crime-ridden area with violent incidents reported almost daily.

But that was then.

"When we first moved in here, you were falling asleep to gunshots," said Thea Earng, a resident at one of the Woolner Avenue buildings for the past 15 years. "Now it's quiet ... and the ambulance comes only when someone's sick."

The dramatic change began about a decade ago when a number of community stakeholders took action to start cleaning up one of the worst neighbourhoods in Toronto.

A "rookie" on city council then,

Frances Nunziata (Ward 11, York-South Weston) knew the place well as an area resident and with her parents residing just across the street since 1963.

"It was getting really bad," she recalled. "People were getting really afraid to come into the Woolner buildings."

Nunziata decided to look into the mortgage companies that paid for the buildings and discovered the previous owners were behind in their payments.

With some added political pressure, the mortgage companies handed over ownership to a new landlord.

Stephen Gauci of Woolner Holdings Inc. became part owner in 1995 of all six properties at 200, 210, 220 and 230 Woolner Ave. as well as 777 and 787 Jane St.

"When I took over, I saw the police every half hour," he noted. "The first thing I wanted to do was work on the druggies."

So he paid \$280,000 for 24-hour security guard dogs while working alongside Nunziata and 12 Division police officers to drive out unwanted solicitors.

Getting rid of the prostitutes and vandals was next on Gauci's list. Gauci also admitted paying young neighbourhood kids to spy and report anybody caught spraying graffiti on the walls.

"I'm not afraid to say it."

In the first two years, Gauci estimated investing more than \$4 million in total renovations.

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"We have to plant the seed to get the crop," he said. "It was very hard work. We've come a long way."

His daughter Pamela Gauci helped manage the Jane Street buildings three years ago and together they started to screen tenant applicants more vigorously, which created a more pleasant and safe environment.

"We now have a sense of community," said Pamela, adding she knows most of the current tenants by name. "I tell them this building is safe as you make it."

Woolner resident Esther Delacruz, who also works in the management office providing security around the clock, agreed.

The office phone and radio are never turned off. Any calls after hours are forwarded directly into their rooms.

Paul Aujla, who bought 220 and 230 Woolner Ave. from Gauci in 1997, was equally committed to keeping his tenants safe and secure.

"Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent on security," said Aujla, estimating \$160,000 each year goes toward security guards alone.

He also installed 49 cameras in the two buildings and spent an additional \$150,000 to replace the key entry system into card access only to deter would-be criminals from setting up shop again on his property.

"We spend night and day here," added Aujla, to address any concerns that residents might have.

Pamela nodded in agreement.

"And it reflects on the tenants. They know we care."

Hassan Hochaimi, property manager for Mainstreet Equities Corp., which just acquired 220 and 230 Woolner Ave. buildings from Gauci on March 1, intends to continue with the improvements.

"We're redoing whole suites inside," said Hochaimi, including renovations to hallways. "And we're changing the quality of people inside."

Plans to improve a neighbouring park with the installation of a new playground set and benches designed by local students are also in the works.

The remarkable transformation of the Jane and Woolner buildings hasn't gone unnoticed by the surrounding community.

Residents of Foxwell Street, which borders the apartment complex, have seen their property values soar in recent years.

"Twelve years ago, Jane and Woolner was the cesspool of Metropolitan Toronto," said John Scarr, representing the Foxwell Ratepayers' Association, which also contributed in sweeping the area clean of "dope peddlers and pimps".

"You would have trouble selling the house."

But today, people are fighting over any house that goes up for sale, said the 47-year Foxwell resident.

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At one time, Scarr would never think of going anywhere near the buildings on the other side of Jane Street, which divided the community in half.

"I wouldn't get off the bus by Jane and Woolner and that was in the day time," he said. "It's all one community now."

Sgt. Stephen Nevill of the community response unit at 12 Division remembered the frequent service calls that local police received from Woolner "all the time."

Nevill noted that crime in the area has dropped significantly and commended the new building owners and residents for taking matters into their own hands.

"It's a neighbourhood that was able to help itself."