
The Park Slope Civic Council Civic News

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The Park Slope Oral History Project: John Cortese **'You Can't Find a Finer Neighborhood'**

John Cortese lives in the apartment between 7th and 8th Streets on 7th Avenue where he was born 81 years ago, upstairs from the storefront where his family ran a fruit and vegetable store for 90 years. John and his late wife, Rose, raised four children in the same apartment, all of whom went to college. Few people know Park Slope better—or are better known in Park Slope: to experience what it's like to be part of a celebrity entourage, spend a few minutes on the street with Cortese. He is known not just for the grocery or the long walks he used to take up and down 7th Avenue after he closed the store each evening (which merited a "Talk of the Town" entry in the New Yorker magazine in 1989) but for the 50-plus years he spent as an organizer and chief umpire of youth baseball leagues in Prospect Park. One of the fields in the Park is named in his honor, and there is hardly a neighborhood ballplayer or a ballplayer's parent from the last half-century who doesn't know Cortese at least by sight.

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In October 2008, Cortese was among 17 long-time Park Slope residents interviewed by students at the Secondary School for Research at John Jay for an oral history project organized by the Civic Council, the Old Stone House and the Urban Memory Project.

We have been printing excerpts from some of those interviews. Following is John's:

I was born in Park Slope 80 years ago, so I'm here quite a while. I know all the dirt of the neighborhood. You wanna know dirt, you come to me.

When were you born, exactly?

July 8, 1928.

Wow, that's a really long time.

You're darn right.



AWESOME: Forget the gripes (including those aired in this publication) about the long delay in opening the YMCA Sports Complex at the Park Slope Armory, substantially completed in 2007. The facility, dedicated Jan. 11, is jaw-droppingly impressive. The \$16.2 million facility will provide badly needed athletic facilities to local schools and youth leagues while also greatly expanding the exercise options for the Brooklyn public. Also, the immensely creative reuse of a once-threatened landmark sets an example and a standard for developers and preservationists. See for yourself: The entrance is on 15th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues.

And you've been here all of your life?

Still here.

Wow.

I sit outside almost every morning, winter and summer, watching all the neighbors pass by. They all know me. We had a store in the neighborhood. My dad and I had a fruit and vegetable store here. We had the store over 90 years: him 45 and me 45. I retired about 12 years ago. I was president of the 72nd Precinct Community Council for a couple years, and I was president at the 7th Avenue Merchants. I don't know if you ever heard of Seventh Heaven? I started it 25, 30 years ago. First we called ourselves Seventh Avenue Merchants, but they wanted to upgrade the name. They told us it meant pushcarts in the street. So they upgraded it to the Seventh Avenue Chamber of Commerce.

I ran a baseball league in the area, the Park Slope Baseball League, for 53 years, and I'm still active with the umpires. I don't do much, but I get to the games, I pay the umpires, I bring them their checks every Sunday, which is the most important part. Mayor Koch made me the commissioner of Prospect Park baseball, which I still am.

Let's see, what else? Oh, I was president of Sing Out Brooklyn, which was affiliated with Up with People. Did you ever hear of Up with People? Up with People was a big thing 20, 30 years ago, it was on a style of God bless America—you know, America love it or leave it, real gung-ho.

That's a lot of accomplishments.

Oh I've seen a lot. In fact, My sister, who just passed away—she was 85 years old—came to this school when it was known as Manual Training High School. My daughter came here too, when it was

See Cortese, page 6

Shop Local—Before the Coffee Gets Cold

A lady walks into a store... Sounds like the set-up for a joke, except it's not so funny when she doesn't buy anything.

Think about some of the stores along 7th Avenue in the Center Slope with longevity that have come to seem inseparable from our sense of place: Community Bookstore, Little Things, Clay Pot, City Casuals, the drug stores Prospect Gardens and Palma Chemist, Roma Pizza, Carroll Cleaners.

Another of those stores is Leaf & Bean, a 36-year veteran at 83 7th Avenue between Berkeley and Union Streets. Owners Karen Hue and Vikki Cook met at the store, where they worked for over 10 years before purchasing it from its original owner in 2003. (Vikki worked at the Montague Street Leaf & Bean until it closed in 1994, when she transferred to Park Slope.)

The store stocks a wide variety of teas and coffees (as in "leaf" and "bean") from around the world, and its owners have a well-trained staff steeped in expertise about coffee characteristics, types of brews and equipment. Vikki and Karen have sought out interesting giftware and serving pieces, fun gadgets and accessories, colorful tablecloths and napkins, and high-quality confections, baked goods, jams



Leaf & Bean co-owners Karen Hue and Vikki Cook got into character for Snowflake Celebration in 2008. Their store has been a fixture in the Center Slope since 1976.

and olive oils. They pride themselves on carrying products not available elsewhere in the neighborhood.

In 2005, Vikki and Karen felt a sea change. A fire destroyed their next-door neighbors, Zuzu's Petals, Olive Vine restaurant and a small grocery. (Luckily for their patrons, Zuzu's and Olive Vine found new homes.) The hair salon across the street closed "for development" and the site has been vacant now for several years. The Fabric Alternative closed its doors after many decades, and several other storefronts had short-lived tenants, in part because of soaring rents. What was once a destination block, with neighboring businesses linking errands to one another, was now gone.

Bring on a recession, and things got worse. Shoppers started looking for bargains, and the big stores—Fairway, Costco and Ikea—lured penny-conscious buyers with their large parking lots and expansive inventories. The mom-and-pop stores that give character to our Park Slope "downtown" have suffered.

Decreased revenue means increased debt and a growing inability to restock shelves. So when that lady walks into that store and doesn't see the tea kettle or type of coffee she was looking for, she leaves. She may not return. Or, as Vikki and Karen have noticed, she may declare, "I'm so glad you're still here," then walk out without making a purchase.

Leaf & Bean's owners are passionate about keeping their store alive and remain hopeful. Vikki emphasizes, "Christmas threw us a lifeline, but now we need the life boat." So, beyond featuring new merchandise, regular window-display changes and a pink coffee card (buy so many, get a half pound for free), they're eager to think outside the tea caddy.

Ideas are percolating: Reach out to a broader clientele with welcome baskets to new homeowners through realty offices; fulfill gift lists for corporate groups; address some of the needs of the kosher community. They're willing to go radical. How about a multi-tiered membership drive where a customer prepays for one year, two years or life, in return for incentives like permanent storewide discounts? "Instant savings," says Vikki.

The store has a homey, well-designed website (www.leafnbean.com), and Vikki and Karen would like to expand their Internet presence and encourage online shopping "without losing the charm of shopping in the store," says Karen. And they'd like to serve beverages: hot coffee to go and iced drinks in the summer.

The owners are grateful for, and sentimental about, the loyalty of the community. "Our customers' patronage does not go unappreciated," says Vikki. Karen adds, "For the people, by the people. That's my mantra."

If we're being more cautious about *how* we spend our dollars, let's also be mindful of *where* we spend them. Shopping local has never been more urgent.

—Judith Lief, Trustee and Recording Secretary

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News & Notes for the Civic Minded



Reinventing Grand Army Plaza. In October and November 2008, Grand Army Plaza was temporarily transformed into an exhibit space filled with ideas for its permanent transformation into an accessible, usable—and used—public plaza. The Design Trust for Public Space has now published *Reinventing Grand Army Plaza: Visionary designs for the heart of Brooklyn*, featuring the 30

designs that were on display and that were culled from 200 submissions from 24 countries in an international competition co-sponsored by the Trust and the Grand Army Plaza Coalition (GAPCo).

In introducing the book to PSCC trustees at their January meeting, Design Trust Executive Director Deborah Marton said the purpose of the competition, the exhibit and the book, and even of some of the less-practical designs, was to spur fresh thinking about the Plaza. Such thinking, it is hoped, will lead eventually to a master plan for a re-imagined public space and, eventually, to its actual construction.

PSCC is a charter member of GAPCo, which came into being following our 2006 community forum on traffic and transportation. *Reinventing Grand Army Plaza* may be downloaded from <http://designtrust.org> or purchased for \$15 by calling 212-695-2432, x 13.

Will We Ever See Green at 4th and Sackett? In 1999, A grand garden was planned down to the ground-cover for the barren lot at the corner of 4th Avenue and Sackett Street. The only hitch was there could be no garden, called GreenSpace, until the city turned the land over to the neighborhood, and that wouldn't happen until work was completed on the Brooklyn-Queens section of Water Tunnel 3, which runs several hundred feet below the lot. Many years ago, workers used the lot's Shaft 22B to gain access to the tunnel.

In an article about GreenSpace in the October 2007 *Civic News*, a city official said work on the garden could begin in November 2009. Curious to know why the mayor has yet to show up for the ceremonial first shovel, we contacted the city and received the following reply: "In response to your question on the shaft 22B site, activation of the tunnel's Brooklyn-Queens section is anticipated in 2013. Construction for the community garden at the shaft 22B site at 4th Avenue and Sackett Street will begin after engineering and operational assessments of the tunnel work are concluded."

We could get no more details about this four-year delay, but Com-

munity Board 6 District Manager Craig Hammerman has asked the city for clarification, and we will report on any response. While we wish the city were more forthcoming with information, Hammerman reminded us, in fairness, that Water Tunnel 3 is one of the largest civil construction projects ever undertaken. Work on the 60-mile tunnel began in 1970, and 24 "sandhogs" have died in its excavation.

The October 2007 *Civic News*, with the story about the lot and the garden, is on our website. GreenSpace plans can be seen on landscape designer Meg Webster's website: <http://megwebsterstudio.com>.



Whither 4th Avenue? GreenSpace may still be years away and development has slowed, but the radical transformation of 4th Avenue and its environs continues, for better and for worse. Because of the significance of this transformation to our neighborhood, the Civic Council has chosen "The Future of 4th Avenue" as the subject of its annual community forum, to be held this year in the St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall (entrance on 4th Avenue between 8th and 9th Streets), beginning at 7pm on March 4. Panelists will address such issues as traffic, housing, economic development, infrastructure and cultural life along the strip once touted as the future Park Avenue of Brooklyn. Additional details will be available soon on the Civic Council website.

Where to Recycle What: This list, compiled by PSCC Trustee Candace Woodward, is updated from the December *Civic News*:

- **Batteries:** J & R Television, 108 7th Ave.
- **CDs/DVDs, VHS/Cassettes and Their Cases:** 3R Living, 276 5th Ave.
- **Crayons:** 3R Living.
- **Clothing:** Wearable Collections, GreenMarket at Grand Army Plaza, Saturdays 8-4.
- **Compact Fluorescent Light Bulbs:** Tarzjan Hardware, 193 7th Ave.
- **Electronics:** Mr. Rubbish Electronics Drop-Off Center, 88 9th St. (between 2nd Avenue and Smith Street).
- **Hand-Held Electronics and Cell Phones:** 3R Living.
- **Ink Cartridges:** 3R Living.
- **Plastics:** Park Slope Food Coop, 782 Union St. To see which plastics are accepted, go to www.foodcoop.com.
- **Plastic Bags:** Key Food, 130 7th Ave.; Barnes & Noble, 267 7th Ave.; Rite Aid, 249 7th Ave.; CVS, 341 9th St.; C-Town Supermarket, 327 9th St.
- **Running Shoes:** JackRabbit, 151 7th Ave.

CALENDAR

For details and additional listings, go to parkslopeciviccouncil.org.

PSCC Monthly Meeting

Thursday, Feb. 4, 7pm, New York Methodist Hospital
Executive Dining Room

PSCC Community Forum: The Future of 4th Avenue

Thursday, March 4, 7-9pm, St. Thomas Aquinas Church Hall,
4th Avenue between 8th and 9th Streets.

Spring Civic Sweep

Saturday, April 17, 10am-2pm. Sign up and pick up supplies in front
of the Prospect Park YMCA, 9th Street

51st Annual House Tour

Sunday, May 16, noon-5pm. Details to follow.

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Viewing Brooklyn

Breaking the Victorian Ice

My column in the January 2007 issue was about ice skating in Prospect Park in the late 19th century, and how crowds would flock to Prospect Park Lake when word spread that the “the ball’s up,” meaning that a red ball had been hoisted to the top of a flag pole indicating that the ice was thick enough to skate on. The park, however, was not the only place for skaters to go. Baseball parks in several parts of Brooklyn would be flooded in the winter and turned into skating rinks, including our own Washington Park (known for a time as J.J. Byrne Park). Also, there were still small ponds in Brooklyn that were popular with skaters once they froze over.

In Fort Greene, a facility known as the Clermont Skating Rink was originally a man-made, covered pond allowed to freeze in the winter, but it proved hard to keep the ice in good enough condition to accommodate large crowds. In 1897, it was converted to an indoor rink with a refrigeration system to freeze the ice, and it soon became the site for regular indoor hockey games, races and skating carnivals.



Above, a Harper’s Weekly illustration shows Axel Paulsen breaking the speed record for 25 miles in front of thousands at Washington Park on Feb. 2, 1884. Right, a baseball game played on ice at Washington Park, as illustrated in the Jan. 26, 1884 issue of Harper’s Weekly. The game pitted a team of Brooklyn professionals against a team of amateurs put together by Henry Chadwick, the “father of baseball,” seen here holding a pad behind the batter.



The conversion of baseball fields into skating rinks produced a strange phenomenon: baseball games played on ice. An illustration in the January 1884 *Harper’s Weekly* shows a baseball game underway in Washington Park. Henry Chadwick, often called the “father of baseball,” can be seen in the drawing holding a pad, no doubt keeping score with his recently devised “box score” system, which he adapted from a cricket scorecard. According to *Harper’s*, Chadwick had put together an exhibition team of amateurs to challenge the professional team that used the park regularly. That team had several names over the years, including the Superbas and the Wonders, but the one that stuck was the Trolley Dodgers in its shortened version, the Dodgers. Charles Ebbetts, the team’s future owner, might have been in the crowd as well, because he was hired the previous year as a ticket taker at the park. In January 1911, Ebbetts bought the Pigtown dump site in Crown Heights for \$750,000 and then built Ebbetts Field.

On Feb. 2, 1884, the rink at Washington Park drew thousands of onlookers to watch the Norwegian speed skater Axel Paulsen skate 25 miles in 1 hour, 23 minutes and 28 2/5 seconds, breaking the world record by more than 25 minutes. *Harper’s* reported that “hundreds chased from side to side of the great quadrangle to catch



Viewing Brooklyn, N. Y.

**From the collection
of Bob Levine**

a glimpse of the tireless skater as he passed the most favorable points of view." Paulsen made a name for himself not just with his speed but also with what *Harper's* called his "fancy skating," which is why the jump made by figure skaters today is called an "Axel."

The story about the baseball game in Washington Park noted how on grass "a grand hit would have elicited applause," but the act of hitting a ball on ice "may have evoked audible sounds of merriment... and the insecurity of steel-shod feet" caused "amusement to the on-looker." Allowing oneself to have a good time and actually showing it was contrary to the era's Victorian codes—just look at all those straight-faced photos on what are known as cabinet cards from the late 1880s, and consider the formal layout of our brownstones, where husbands and wives enjoyed separate bedrooms. So, adults getting on the ice, falling, laughing about it in mixed company, and even banging elbows with people from other classes must have helped break down some of the mores that pervaded the new neighborhood of Park Slope.

Speeding skates across the ice (even if many women just sat in chairs with runner attached) in Washington Park and Prospect Park must have given Park Slopers a special feeling of freedom and escape from the choreographed strolls of other seasons. Combine ice skating with that new invention, the bicycle (a story for another column), and one begins to wonder if it's our physical neighborhood, very much including Prospect Park, that helped create and nurture the image of Park Slopers of today. The lead to a *Brooklyn Eagle* story in December 1892 may have summed it up best: "Skating at the Park. Thousands Enjoy the First Day's Sport on Ice. The Crowd was Largest in the Evening. Good Skaters, Bad Skaters, and People Who Could Not Skate at All Were There."

— Bob Levine, Trustee and PSCC Historian

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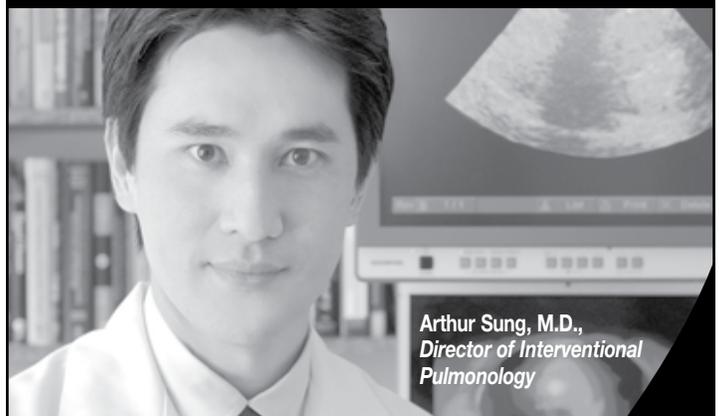
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Cortese, continued from Page 1

known as John Jay, and it had a reputation that wasn't that good. She came here from a Catholic school. The nuns were very upset. They came to see me at my store. But when she graduated she got scholarships from Stony Brook, where she majored in biology.

When it was Manual Training, this was a great school. The greatest. Their rival in football was Erasmus High School. They always played on Election Day. They could lose every game of the season as long as they beat Erasmus on Election Day. They used to have a rally the day before at the Prospect Theater—now it's a C-Town—on 9th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues. That was some rivalry. You could lose 12 games in the year but if you won one game against Erasmus, that was a winning season.

Tell us about your store.

I'm a printer by trade, a linotype machine [operator]. I went to the New York School of Printing. First of all I went to PS 39, that's an elementary school on 8th Street and 6th Avenue. Then, it ran from kindergarten to eighth grade. From there I went to the New York School of Printing. Then I went in the army: '51, '52, '53. I fought in Korea. When I was in the army I only had one thing in mind: when I get outta the army, I want to go back to the store and be my own boss. I don't want people telling me to get up in the morning, what time to

eat, what time to go to the bathroom. So I told my mom and dad, "Please don't sell the store."

So, in 1955 I believe, my father says, "We got an appointment tonight with the lawyer." I says, "What for?" He says, "Well, you know, I wanna do a little business." So I went with my dad to the lawyer and we were gabbing, he made me sign this, sign that, sign the other. Then he says, "Now give me a dollar." So I reached in my pocket and I bought the store from my father for a dollar.

Wow, for one dollar.

One dollar. I bought the store. I still own the building, I have a real estate fellow downstairs, I got great tenants above me, I live on the floor above the store.

Sounds like you're living a good life now.

I love the neighborhood—I really love the neighbors—I love them, love everything about it. *When my cousin came to John Jay—I think it was around 2000—the school was still bad.*

It wasn't bad, it just had a couple of punks who thought they were wise guys, you know. You just had to straighten them out. You needed something to do with them. With me, it was baseball. They would pass my store cursing like a buncha longshoremen. As soon as they got to my store, they stopped cursing, they looked in, they waved, then, after they passed the store, they started cussing again. That was their respect for me, which I appreciated.

You have a lot of people respect you in the neighborhood?

Oh, as I said, you can't find a finer neighborhood.



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The delivery truck in an undated photo in the facing column bore the name "Cortese Brothers," which is how the store was known when it was run by John Cortese's uncle and father, shown here in 1926 (top). In 1978 (above right), John used a ladder to stock the shelves. In 1986 (above), John posed outside the "J. J. Cortese Fancy Fruit and Vegetable Market," an institution on 7th Avenue that closed in 1996.

Everyone seems to know everybody. I can sit outside my doorway and everybody comes by. They hug me, they kiss me, how do ya feel, how do ya do? I'm great. The only thing I have is my knees. You know, I can't walk too far, I can't walk too fast. In fact, the umpires five years ago bought me an electric scooter. So I go to all the ball fields sittin' down in my electric scooter. Of course the umpires love to see me 'cause I bring their paychecks. I'm at the park all day long. All day.

What do you think is your most memorable moment in the neighborhood?

I remember the plane crash on Seventh Avenue. That was 50 years ago. The tail of the plane was across 7th Avenue. The cockpit of the plane hit a church on Sterling Place. The name of the church, I'll always remember, was The Pillar of Fire. That church was a pillar of fire. Really. [The pilot] tried to land in Prospect Park. He didn't want to hit a school. I brought my son down there to see it. It was a sight to see.

Really. [The pilot] tried to land in Prospect Park. He didn't want to hit a school. I brought my son down there to see it. It was a sight to see.

It must have been a tragic moment for the neighborhood.

Oh yeah. Everyone died [except for] the little boy. He landed in a snow bank. He lived in the Methodist Hospital for a few hours, then he passed away. In fact, if you go into the

hospital now, they have everything that the boy had in his pockets in a glass cabinet.

What else do you remember?

The first Yankees game I ever went to. That was July 4, 1939, when Lou Gehrig made his famous speech that he considers himself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I was sitting in the bleachers. If anyone was to have dropped a pin, everyone would have looked up to see where that noise came from. There were over 70,000 fans there. My seat cost 55 cents.

Any last words?

The neighborhood is beautiful. I wouldn't trade this neighborhood for all the money in the world.

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The Park Slope Civic Council

Organized as the South Brooklyn Board of Trade in 1896, PSCC is one of the oldest civic associations in Brooklyn. We identify and address quality-of-life issues important to the community; create and support projects geared to improving and protecting the neighborhood; and assist local non-profit organizations that benefit those living and working in Park Slope. Our many ongoing programs include the Halloween Parade, the Clean Streets campaign, community forums, and a holiday toy drive. Our annual House Tour raises thousands of dollars for neighborhood initiatives. All are welcome to join. To learn more, go to parkslopeciviccouncil.org.

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