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## Change In Chelsea

By Ted Reinstein

BOSTON -- For thousands of daily commuters over the Tobin Bridge, Chelsea is just a fleeting glimpse of a tiny, tightly-packed little city under the bridge. Which drivers are happy to drive by, rather than live in.

For others across Massachusetts, Chelsea is as much a punch line as it is a place on the map. Its long and rich history, especially as an entryway to America, has been largely obscured by a legacy of trouble.

When I was growing up in neighboring Winthrop, one of the city's nicknames was "Che-lousy." If someone mentioned the "Great Chelsea Fire," the standard response was, "Which one?"

The first one in 1908 burned nearly half the city. The second Great Chelsea Fire in 1973 destroyed eighteen city blocks. But fire alone was not the city's only nemesis.

Chelsea's other enduring problem was, well, itself.

For most of its modern history, the city seethed with internal corruption. From Police Headquarters to City Hall, an endless -- and fruitless -- scavenger hunt could be launched looking for signs of honesty, integrity and good governance

Federal probes and court indictments came down as regularly as rain. In 1989, Chelsea's public school system became so dysfunctional it went into state receivership. Not to be outdone, the entire city -- benumbed by bankruptcy and political halfheartedness -- landed in receivership as well in 1991.

Chelsea had bottomed out.

"Yeah, having democracy taken away is totally against our American principles," says Chelsea's present City Manager, Jay Ash. "On the other hand, things were so dysfunctional here, it wasn't only about the budget -- the civic infrastructure had failed, the political infrastructure had failed -- so there was a bankruptcy of more than just finances in Chelsea."

Ash, all six-feet-seven-inches of him, jokes about the city having been forced to go through “the cod liver oil treatment.”

“Wouldn’t wish it on anyone, but having gone through it on the other hand, Chelsea’s much better for it.”

Ash, who grew up in Chelsea in public housing, decided while in college to come back and try to help make a difference here. By most accounts, he has. And so has his city.

Municipal government was changed from mayoral to city manager; the level of crony politics and all that goes with it began to decline. Artists in Boston, plagued by high rents and dwindling studio space, began forging their way to Chelsea twenty years ago.

Today, others have followed, bolstering what has become a growing transplant population of both artists and young urban professionals in general, attracted to value that was no longer possible in Boston.

Young professionals like Brooke Scannell, who moved six years ago from Boston’s (and Mayor Menino’s own) Hyde Park neighborhood. She lives on Chelsea’s waterfront now, and commutes into Boston (“Only seven minutes this morning!”) to her consulting business.

“When I told people I was moving to Chelsea, more than a few people said, ‘Are you crazy?’” laughs Scannell. “I walk my dog in Mary O’Malley Park, I live in a real neighborhood with tons of great neighbors -- I love it here.”

Developers and investors have also talked with the feet -- but more importantly their money.

Along Chelsea’s busy Everett Avenue corridor, a new Wyndham Hotel towers above a Marriott that’s under construction. Across the street, the city will build a new regional headquarters. And a block away, a massive new retail complex is now open, which includes Market Basket’s largest store in New England.

New restaurants (Dockside, Fusion Foods, Larry J’s House of Q) have opened, adding to a food scene already rich in smaller ethnic eateries, together encompassing a UN-like menu stretching from Central America to Europe to the Far East.

But if one element in Chelsea stands out as a sign of hope and a city’s changed ways, it’s Chelsea High School. Once literally a ward of the state, it has stood on its own since 2008. And standards and accountability have been improving ever since.

Attendance, test scores, and graduation rates at C.H.S. have all risen. But that data doesn’t tell the whole story.

“What we always get from folks is a little bit of a surprise when they come in here and there’s this, ‘Wow, this isn’t really what I expected,’ says principal Joe Mullaney. “I would put our students today up against any students anywhere.”

Like Elsa Nunez.

A senior and co-captain of the girls's soccer team, Nunez came to Chelsea from Honduras when she was nine, and spoke no English. Today she's a member of the National Honor Society, a mentor to ninth-graders, and was named Chelsea's "Youth of the Year."

Standing on the soccer field, I ask her what she plans to do when she graduates.

"I will be the first person in my family to go to college," she beams.

Thalia Pliego is already there.

A 2010 graduate of Chelsea High, Pliego is able to afford her studies at Bunker Hill Community College through a full scholarship funded by FUEL (Families United in Educational Leadership), a unique non-profit partnership that provides financial incentives and educational resources to low-income families.

"I loved my four years of high school," says Pliego, who is studying graphic design. "It was great preparation."

Nonetheless, even as Chelsea charts a more hopeful future, it should be noted its present is still entwined with serious problems it must deal with.

Crime, particularly violent crime, will not be as easy to overcome as low test scores. And, as a Chelsea cop points out, "If you can't feel safe going out at night, what good are new restaurants?"

Good point.

With a now minority-majority population, issues around poverty, jobs, and education will also continue to plague Chelsea in ways that will challenge both its resolve and its budget.

And there's the issue of gentrification. While an influx of young professionals will spur further development in Chelsea, it also threatens to raise property costs in ways that will make it even harder for low-income residents to get a leg up.

But even with all that, something has changed in Chelsea. It is not the city I avoided and scoffed at growing up. (And Winthrop, mind you, was no Eden either.) It's not a city that deserves to be a punch line anymore.


"We don't run away from our past, we continue to learn from it," says Ash. "All you can do every day is commit to make sure that no one can stick that on you again. And that's what we're doing here every day."

It sure beats the old days.

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