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Rain or shine, Bird Lady tends to her feathered flock

BY LAWRENCE LERNER

On a Tuesday afternoon in early December, as dusk threatened to cut short the crisp winter day, Marie Palladino walked with a determined stride and eagle-eyed glare down 13th St. between Seventh and Eighth Aves. Reaching into a large clear plastic bag full of birdseed, she sprayed the contents far and wide along the sidewalk, under trees and through the occasional wrought-iron fence into a commercial driveway or residential courtyard.

Stopping near the corner of Seventh Ave., she peered across the street at a

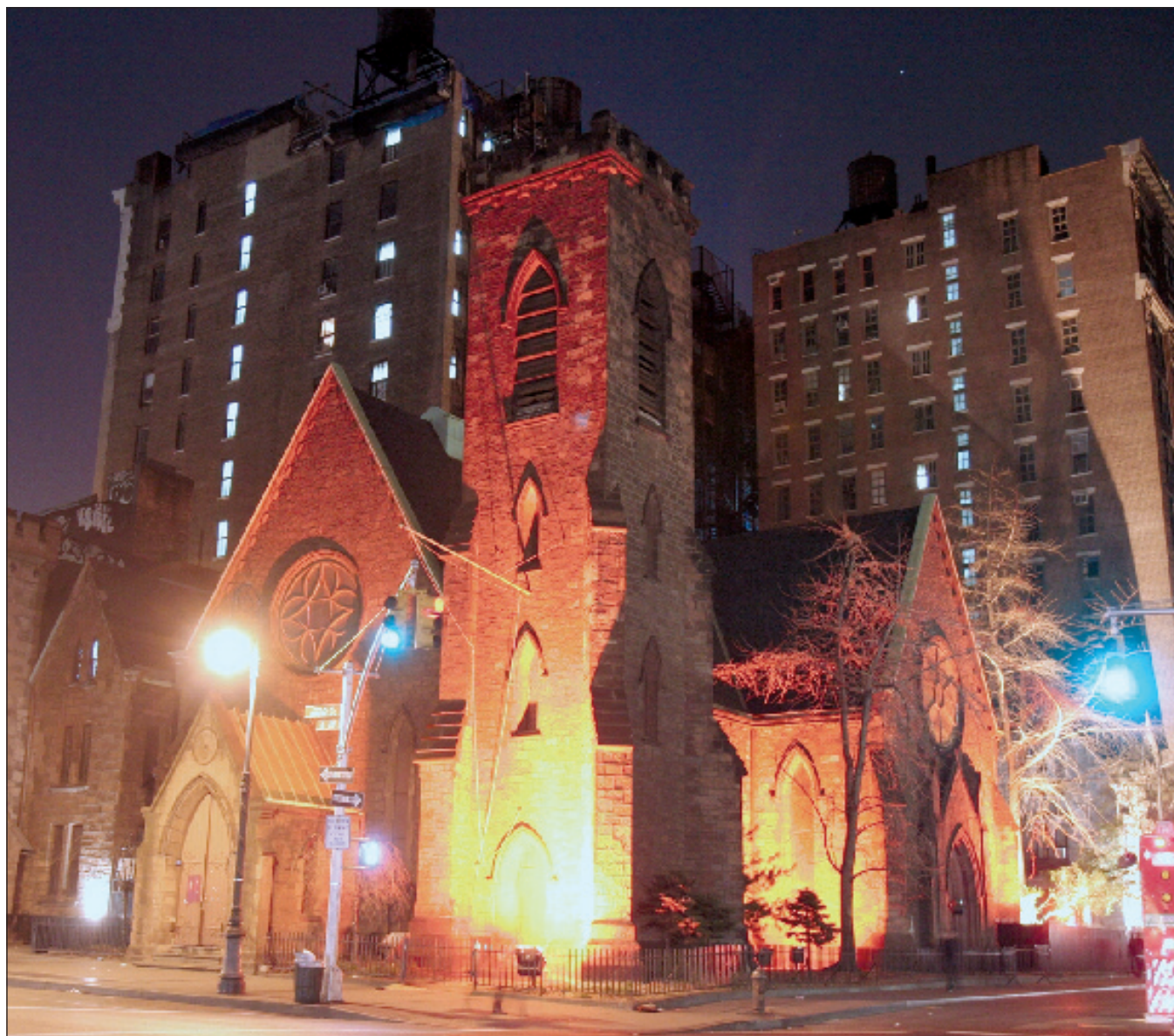
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Young Muslim designer is balancing her faith and fashion

BY KRISTEN V. BROWN

The walls of Sarah Musa's cramped, two-bedroom Bleecker St. apartment are covered in clothing sketches and fabric samples, but her roommate doesn't mind. She's a fan of Musa's three-year-old clothing business, Haya, Arabic for "modesty," which is headquartered here. Haya is a line of conservative-yet-fun clothing Musa designed with young Muslim women like

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Chelsea Now photo by Jefferson Siegel

Avalon, the former Limelight disco, was closed on Wednesday night since there was no party. The club has been closed a lot lately.

Twilight for former Limelight, as owner shops mini-mall idea

BY LAWRENCE LERNER

The owner of the former Episcopal church that once housed the Limelight nightclub and is now home to Avalon wants to turn the building into a mini-mall.

Ashkenazy Acquisition Corp., the building's landlord, is reportedly reading the writing on the wall as upscale condo projects and restaurants invade the western edge of the Flatiron District, making the 12,000-square-foot club, which has a history of trouble in the neighborhood, evermore the pariah in the increasingly gentrified area.

"We can't wait till we can convert the

church into a retail space," said Rudy Klotsman, Ashkenazy's vice president of leasing, who said that a couple of months ago he received instructions from higher-ups to find another tenant for the Gothic-revival brownstone church on Sixth Ave. at 20th St. "At the end of the day, we want to become a friendly neighbor. We've always been looked at as a bad neighbor in the Flatiron and Chelsea, and we'd like to move beyond that."

But community pressure may not be all that is driving the landlord to test the retail waters by floating the mini-mall concept. Avalon has also been having big financial problems. In mid-September, the Internal Revenue Service closed the club

temporarily for nonpayment of taxes to the tune of \$125,000, which the club reportedly paid. But on Sept. 28, club promoters reported seeing I.R.S. seizure signs posted throughout the club. As of this week, however, Avalon was semi-open for business once again.

Meanwhile, reports that Avalon will shutter its doors in early 2007 — due to money problems or community concerns — are not necessarily true, according to Klotsman.

"If we have a tenant for the space by the beginning of the year, then yes. If not, then no," he said, adding that "It also depends

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Rain or shine, Chelsea Bird Lady tends to her flock

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stone ledge jutting slightly off the southern wall of the United Methodist Church, where fewer than 10 pigeons remained, scattering birdseed about her feet in hopes of luring them down.

"See, I'm very late. It's 4 o'clock. They go in at dusk," Palladino said in a frustrated tone as some of the birds glided toward her, landing a few feet away and gobbling up the food. "I'm glad I made these guys happy, but I definitely missed them today."

For Palladino, a short, solidly built woman with deep brown eyes and a splash of short, graying hair, this was familiar territory, a stomping ground she frequents three or four afternoons a week with bags of birdseed or bread in hand. On this day, she looked right at home as she followed her regular route that takes her through the borderlands of Chelsea and the West Village, dressed in a brown turtleneck sweater, jeans and black leather coat, a black leather bag thrown across her torso to complete the ensemble.

Yet there was also an edginess about Palladino, a drive and determination that betray her passion for what she calls the "outcasts" of New York City's animal kingdom: the lowly rock doves, known more commonly as pigeons. Boasting a 20-year track record of avian altruism in one of the world's foremost urban jungles, Palladino has gone about her work feeding the birds with the devotion and intensity of Jane Goodall. And that — duly or unduly — has earned her both approbation and scorn among those who live in and frequent the neighborhood, where she is widely known by her adopted moniker: the Bird Lady.

"People started calling me that years ago. I don't know where or how it started, but I think it's kind of cute and it fits," said Palladino as she exited Jackson Square Park at Horatio St. earlier this month. "If you talk to people, they don't know my name, but they'll say, 'There's the Bird Lady,' as I'm doing my route."

Rain or shine, Palladino can be seen nourishing her winged companions, making her rounds on 12th and 13th Sts. between Seventh and Eighth Aves., and moving to her favorite spot, Jackson Square Park, before heading to Associated Market at 14th St. and Eighth Ave. to buy more birdseed. She re-emerges to cover 14th and 15th Sts. between Seventh and Eighth Aves. before returning to Jackson Square Park for one final feeding around 3 p.m.

Palladino seems to have the unspoken support of many in the neighborhood, getting bread after-hours from certain delis and markets nearby, who leave it out specifically for her as well as for the area's homeless. She buys six bags of birdseed for each day's feeding at \$1.29 per bag, which she pays for partly from donations and partly out her own pocket.

"There are people in the neighborhood who like the birds but are afraid to feed them for fear of being targeted by neighbors who don't like the pigeons," said Palladino over coffee after completing her route. "A couple of people who live near Jackson Square Park, who don't want to be seen feeding the birds, help out. They'll call me or leave money with their doorman," said Palladino.

Feeding the birds, it turns out, is more controversial than one might imagine,



Chelsea Now photo by Lawrence Lerner

Marie Palladino feeding pigeons on W. 13th St. and Seventh Ave., one of the stops on her usual route.

'I'm passionate about the birds because they're such outcasts. I feel like somebody has to care.'

making the Bird Lady a polarizing figure in the neighborhood.

That is mainly because of the bad rap pigeons have taken over the last 50 years, as they became vilified as vermin by the pest-control industry. Woody Allen also didn't help matters when, in his film "Stardust Memories," he likened them to "rats with wings," a tag the once-majestic pigeons have been shackled with ever since.

"Pigeons are incredible birds that have a long history of service to humans, most recently in World War I and II, where they saved thousands of lives. It's a shame people despise them," said Palladino.

"Remember Lola and Pale Male, the two hawks that had nests on a Fifth Ave.

building, and the residents of the building decided to take down the nests? The whole world started e-mailing that they had to put back the nest," Palladino said. "Those hawks really got it made, you know what I mean? But pigeons, nobody likes them. It doesn't matter that they present no health hazard to humans — no more than any other bird. Nobody cares about them. They're nothing but a nuisance to most people."

To support her position, Palladino points to a recent book, "Pigeons: The Fascinating Saga of the World's Most Revered and Reviled Bird," by journalist Andrew Blechman, who argues that it is their overwhelming numbers that make pigeons a problem in urban areas. Blechman insists that the City could humanely cut the pigeon population in half in just two years by placing pigeon coops throughout Manhattan, as they do in some European cities, feeding them there and then collecting their eggs after they breed.

Palladino is grateful that someone with Blechman's credentials is finally speaking out on pigeons' behalf, since she frequently witnesses people abusing them.

"People scare the pigeons out of Jackson Square Park all the time, and netters from out of town swoop in and scoop up the birds for use on shooting ranges," Palladino

said. "People bother them. I mean, they're bothered, believe me. And for what?"

The Bird Lady also takes her own fair share of abuse while feeding her winged friends.

"It can become very stressful depending on how many people come at me, but once they've encountered me, they usually leave me alone, because I come back at them strong and hard," said Palladino, who turned 56 last week and is as vigorous as ever.

"A guy on 15th St., tried to take my picture while I was feeding the birds, and he wasn't doing it for good purposes, so I chased him, and you can bet he ran away," she said laughing. "Or people will attempt to call the police, and I'll say, 'By the time you call the police, I'll be off the block. So, don't waste your time,' you know what I mean? It gets comical. It gets really comical."

But six months ago, the joke turned sour when Park Enforcement Patrol officers handcuffed Palladino to a bench in Jackson Square Park after they caught her feeding the birds there.

There is a "No feeding the pigeons or squirrels" sign at that park, and according to Rule 1-04(g)(2) of the Parks Department regulations, which fall under title 56 of the Rules of the City of New York, feeding pigeons or squirrels is allowed except where explicitly prohibited by the Parks commissioner. Both PEP officers and the Police Department issue summonses to violators. Fines range from \$50 to \$100 and may be contested in court.

According to Palladino, others in the park that day screamed for her release before she was slapped with two summonses and brought to the Sixth Precinct on W. 10th St.

"They manhandled me so badly," she said of the PEP officers, "that I had bruises, which I took pictures of after I went to the hospital. I ended up beating both summonses and then slapped them with a lawsuit. I only got \$500, but it was the principle that mattered."

When Palladino is not feeding the pigeons or fending off detractors, she rescues wounded birds and takes them to Animal General veterinary hospital, on Columbus Ave. at 87th St., where the birds are rehabbed and then placed in her care until they are ready to return to the wild.

"We only give the birds back to those who are capable of giving them their medicine and nursing them back to health," said Rita McMahon, an animal-behavioral specialist at Animal General. "Obviously, we trust Marie, because we've handed many birds back to her after rehabbing them."

Palladino, who considers herself an animal-rights activist, has also been known to rescue and adopt other pets, including dogs, cats and rabbits.

"For 27 years, I lived on W. 14th St., until last year, and people would just drop their animals on my stoop, because they knew I'd take care of them. I got pugs one time, and I fostered them out to a guy who regularly takes them on trips to Fire Island. Boy, do I wish I were a dog sometimes," Palladino said with a chuckle.

Meanwhile, her work with the pigeons continues.

"I'm passionate about the birds because they're such outcasts. I feel like somebody has to care," said Palladino. "And so it's people like me that keep them alive and thriving in the face of unjust adversity."