

Chelsea Now



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City agencies try to remake the Garment District

BY CHRIS LOMBARDI

City officials met privately with garment-industry insiders on Monday at Parsons School of Design, soliciting feedback on new zoning proposals and, in the process, bringing to a head competing visions of the Garment District's future that is leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of some fashion entrepreneurs.

At the request of the Garment Industry Development Corporation, the nonprofit advocacy arm of apparel designers and manufacturers, representatives of the New York City Economic Development Corporation, the Fashion Center Business Improvement District and the Department of City Planning sized up the state of

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Realbirth a haven for expectant parents

BY LAWRENCE LERNER

On a lazy Sunday afternoon recently, nine young couples sat calmly around the perimeter of a square red-carpeted room on padded vinyl mats, leaning back against the wall with bed pillows squeezed between them or situated beneath the women's swollen legs. As the instructor gesticulated from the middle of the intimate space, amid photos of newborns along one of the walls, many of the female students strewn about the floor periodically repositioned themselves for comfort,

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Chelsea Now photo by Jefferson Siegel

Catherine Cook, superintendent of the Bayview Correctional Facility, standing outside the prison's front door on the corner of 20th Street and Eleventh Avenue last week.

■ FIRST IN A SERIES

BY CHRIS LOMBARDI

Catherine Cook, superintendent since 2005 at Bayview Correctional Facility on West 20th Street and Eleventh Avenue, has spent more than half her life working at prisons — most recently as deputy superintendent at the famous Sing Sing prison in upstate New York. When Chelsea Now asked Cook last week if Bayview, a small, medium-security women's prison, felt relaxing by comparison to Sing Sing, Supt. Cook leaned back in her chair and smiled.

"It is and it isn't," she said. "Being superintendent — it's very different." She is happy that, unlike upstate towns that resist having a prison close by, the response of Chelseans is typically blasé: "Oh, so that's where you work." Most of them, she admits, don't notice.

Ask your average Chelsea resident about the prison down the block, and you'll get a blank stare. Even the thousands who go into Chelsea Piers each day may never have looked closely at the tall, elegant 76-year-old building across the street, at 550 West 20th Street, with the hard-to-miss blue "Department of Correction" sign. Some know the Knox Martin mural, "Venus," that looms large on its southern wall—soon to be obscured by a new Jean Nouvel condo tower at 100 West Eleventh Avenue—or remember the controversy that erupted in 1986 when it turned out that some phone calls to Motor Vehicles, asking for information, were actually being answered within those stone walls. But for the most part, the prison has been a quiet neighbor, changing as the neighborhood has, but with a distinctly different rhythm.

In 1978, when the 44-year-old Seamen's Home began housing the new Bayview women's prison, Chelsea already contained a number of smaller-scale correctional projects, from the Shepherd Center on 22nd Street to a post-prison halfway house at the Church of the Holy Apostles. Meanwhile, an explosion of new prison initiatives, in the wake of the 1971 riot at Attica State Prison, helped inmates go out on work release, get federally funded job training, or go to college funded by federal Pell Grants. In the years since then, both the neighborhood and trends in corrections have shifted dramatically—several times.

Now, with Superintendent Cook at the helm, the prison's 300 inmates are busy all the time. Riding the wave of the newest philosophy in corrections, all prisoners begin to plan for the future from their initial day of detention, often first coming to grips with substance abuse, domestic violence and other mental health issues. Nearly half the group of current inmates—114 women—are already on "work release," going out to jobs in the

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Bayview prison: A Chelsea neighbor often unnoticed

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shifting their fluffy pillows in unison with their bulbous bodies, their gaze fixed on Erica Lyon, the woman holding forth.

"Usually, pain is a warning sign for us, a sign that we've injured or broken something. But labor is one of those rare circumstances when you experience pain as a cue to where your body is taking you next, rather than as a warning sign," Lyon said. "It actually signals progress in labor, and seeing it this way helps us embrace it and take the mythology out of it."

Those encouraging words, coming off Lyon's tongue with as much empathy as ease, were part of her childbirth education class at Realbirth, a well-trodden space that has become a Chelsea institution since opening a few years ago, carving out a niche as a reliable, nondoctrinarian source of information, inspiration and support among couples—gay and straight—considering either a natural childbirth or hospital delivery.

Founded in June 2004 by Lyon, a former childbirth educator at Chelsea's Elizabeth Seton Childbearing Center, Realbirth is certainly not the only place where expectant parents can turn in New York City to prepare for the arrival of their long-awaited offspring, though it seems to have set the standard in Manhattan for this type of education, packing classes with students from New York City and as far away as New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut, as well as Upstate New York.

As Sunday's class progressed, Lyon continued by inviting the couples to share their biggest fears as their due dates approached. The class obliged, starting with an expectant mother with long brown hair and tired brown eyes, who shot up her hand. "I'm afraid it'll be more than I can handle," she said as several women around the room nodded their heads knowingly. "I fear that if I do need meds, I'll end up having much less control over my labor than I want," another chimed as Lyon worked her way around the room. Finally, a woman raised her hand tentatively and said, "To tell you the truth, I've never been down this road before. I think the unknown is the scariest part."

Lyon, who had been bulleting the comments on a white board with a marker, turned to the students, clasping her hands and wearing a look of recognition. "Fear of the unknown is a big obstacle for many women about to give birth. But think about it: How many unknowns have you navigated in life since you were a kid? And how have you usually handled these situations?" she asked rhetorically. "You've had a road map and a support system, hopefully, and then you've put one foot in front of the other til it's over. And best of all, you lived to tell about all of them. It's the same thing with this experience."

"In fact, birth is powerful for women precisely because you go through this monumental moment where no one can hurt us, and we come out the other side intact. Forever after, you get to carry around a feeling of, 'All right, you gonna mess with me now?' precisely because you go from being vulnerable, to not dying, to strong."

The talk of women-centered empowerment is one of the hallmarks of Realbirth, which is heir to a venerable midwifery-natural birth tradition here in New York City. Lyon started it out the ashes of the



Chelsea Now photos by Lawrence Lerner

Students in a childbirth education class at Realbirth practice a massage technique to be used as a pain-coping strategy during labor.



Erica Lyon, director of Realbirth, holds a skeletal pelvis while explaining how babies move down into the pelvic cavity during labor.

Elizabeth Seton Childbearing Center in 2004, a year after that space was shuttered because of the skyrocketing cost of malpractice insurance. Elizabeth Seton, which had opened in 1996, was itself the successor of The Childbearing Center, which opened in 1975 as a pilot project of the 89-year-old Maternity Center Association and was the country's first freestanding birth center, located on East 92nd Street in Manhattan until its closure the same year Seton opened.

Realbirth continues in the tradition of Seton by offering childbirth preparation, breastfeeding and newborn-care classes for expectant mothers and their part-

ners. Since Realbirth prides itself on being nondoctrinarian, the childbirth preparation class comes in two varieties: one for women who want to do natural childbirth or are considering pain medication but want to know all of their choices, the other for women who have decided to use the epidural as their main pain-coping tool.

"Our instructors don't teach you hospital procedure. We arm you with information and teach you the questions to ask so you'll know all of your options as you go down the path to childbirth—which means choosing and talking with your medical provider, approaching birth and then advocating for yourself once you're

in labor," said Lyon. "What makes a birth a positive experience is not whether or not a woman gets the epidural, but that she makes the choices and is treated respectfully when she's vulnerable."

Regardless of which option they choose, Lyon suggests expectant parents take the childbirth prep class at the beginning of their third trimester, leaving time at the end to take the newborn care and breastfeeding classes if they choose.

"We don't want folks to take it in their second trimester because there's a physical and psychological change that happens in the third trimester, which signals the body preparing for labor," said Lyon, whose book, "The Big Book of Birth" (Penguin Group USA), was released last month. "At that point, we start to feel big and unwieldy, the baby's kicks get stronger, we toss and turn at night, and we're hungry to hear how we're going to get through it. In the second trimester, we're still enjoying the pregnancy and we're not yet focused on getting the baby out."

Least parents think they're on their own after the child has arrived, Realbirth also offers post-partum workshops, support groups, and creative play and educational activities for parents and their babies during the transition to parenthood. These include lactation and post-partum depression support groups; a dad workshop; a seminar on vaccinations and their efficacy; baby music classes; and courses on CPR and safety, baby sign language and infant massage.

But it is the childbirth education classes that lie at the core of Realbirth's curriculum, taught as they are by a variety of childbirth educators, all of whom are certified through the Childbirth Education Association of Metro New York, a compre-

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Realbirth offers a haven for expectant parents

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hensive two-year education certification program—available only in New York City—that focuses not on one methodology such as Lamaze or the Bradley method but draws from multiple tools that are useful to mothers as they move through labor. These include pain-coping strategies like physiological positioning, breathing, hydrotherapy, massage, acupressure, medications, vocalization and the active role a spouse or support person can play.

After Sunday's class, Seema Shah-Nelson, a 31-year-old interior designer who recently moved from Manhattan to the Catskills, recalled that her biggest concern coming into the session was whether she could handle the pain.

"What I learned is that there are so many different ways to handle it, and that so many people do, whether through drugs or other non-drug techniques. That in itself helped calm me to the point where I'm not really dreading it anymore—it kind of seems like it'll actually be nice," she said. "I mean, obviously, it'll still be painful and difficult, but it's something to be excited about instead of something to be in terror of. For me, that's huge."

With their family-centered focus, Realbirth's childbirth education classes also emphasize the value of the father's, or

partner's, contribution throughout pregnancy and the birthing process. In fact, several of the men interviewed for this article spoke with surprise about how active a role they could play during labor and delivery. One of them was Oliver Ulich, 35, who works for the United Nations and lives in the East Village with his wife, Dolly Mirchandani, a 31-year-old lawyer.

"I realized it's going to be a lot more work for me than I expected, in terms of massages and other tasks I can contribute when it comes to pain-coping strategies. I may have to get to the gym and get a little bit fitter before doing all that," he said wryly. "But in all seriousness, I think that's a good thing, since it gives me a greater sense of responsibility besides just making sure Dolly gets to the hospital."

Lyon and the other Realbirth educators also stress that as she moves through labor, the mother and her partner will reach junctures where decisions must be made in concert with her healthcare provider (in the best of circumstances) about when and how to proceed. Becoming aware of and owning those choices is central to the approach proffered by the Realbirth course.

That sat well with Mirchandani. "I came into the class quite open-minded about the spectrum of options once I go into labor, and I'm leaving quite open-

minded as well. But mainly, I feel more empowered because I'm more educated about the decision points themselves, and the pros and cons at each juncture," she said. "I actually feel more equipped to make those decisions now, with the knowledge I picked up, and the emphasis Erica placed on informed consent and advocating for yourself when dealing with doctors."

Much of this advocacy takes place around the issue of caesarean sections, not surprisingly, given that the U.S. caesarean rate hovers near 30 percent, almost twice the rate recommended by the World Health Organization.

"You hear about caesarean rates going up in the city. And you think you're in the hands of a doctor and you're supposed to be on the same side, but you feel that 30 percent of the time, they might be on the other side," said 30-year-old Jersey City, N.J., resident Sameer Maru, who took Lyon's class with his wife, Urvashi Maru, who is 28. "So, you need to protect yourself. This class makes you aware of possible pitfalls and how to deal with them."

The Marus also responded strongly to the communal aspect of the Realbirth course, saying it added positively to their experience. "We read a lot before coming in, but you hear so many more questions with eight other couples in the room," said Urvashi Maru. "The discussion goes to

places you wouldn't have taken it, so in the end, you gain a lot more knowledge from this class than a book."

Sameer Maru put it slightly differently. "You know, there's always this thought in the back of your mind, that many people have gone through this before you, that kids are born every day and everything's going to be fine," he said. "But there's still this anxiety, because now it's your turn. So, seeing others in the same setting as you makes a big difference. You feel everybody's in the same boat and you're not the only ones facing this anxiety. It really helped calm me."

After the exhausting all-day class on Sunday, that kind of talk was music to Lyon's ears.

"Look, not only do we have to get you reams of information, we have to keep you awake through it all!" said a self-effacing Lyon, who notes that just being able to do that—all daylong or late at night with a roomful of pregnant women and overworked partners—is a feat in itself. "So, to hear that is just great. There's definitely something to be said for coming together. Community is a powerful thing."

Realbirth also offers classes in Brooklyn and is opening a second location in April at 49th St. and Ninth Avenue in Manhattan. Call 212-367-9006 or visit realbirth.com for further details.

POLICE BLOTTER

Rapper rap

Marvin Bernard, 29, a hip-hop performer known as Tony Yayo and an associate of hip-hop producer 50 Cent, was charged last week with endangering the welfare of a child by slapping the 14-year-old son of a rival hip-hop producer on March 20 because the boy was wearing a T-shirt with the rival's name and logo on the street near 50 Cent's G-Unit studio on Sixth Ave. and W. 25th St.

Bernard surrendered to police at the 13th Precinct March 24 and pleaded not guilty the following day to felony assault and the endangering charges. He was free on \$5,000 bail pending an April 25 appearance in criminal court.

The victim, James Rosemond, was wearing a shirt with Czar Entertainment, the name of the rival company owned by his father Jimmy "Henchman" Rosemond, when he was slapped and roughed up by Bernard, according to the charges. It was uncertain whether the defendant knew that the victim was Henchman's son, according to reports.

Face the music

The Feb. 22 Downtown traffic and license violations against the hip-hop performer Busta Rhymes mean that he blew his chances for a no-jail plea bargain in connection with two assault charges last year, one in Chelsea and the other on Chambers St.

Criminal Court Judge Tanya Kennedy on Mon. March 26 withdrew the plea bargain option and set a May 8 trial for the performer, 34, whose real name is Trevor Smith.

Judge Kennedy on Feb. 20 had offered Smith three years probation, six months of anger management and three weeks of community service for guilty pleas on the two charges, which were to have been entered March 26. But two days later, Smith was arrested for running a red light at Warren St. at W. Broadway and for driving with a suspended license, charges that prompted Kennedy to cancel the plea bargain.

One assault involves a charge that Smith last August beat a fan who accidentally spit on the car of one of his crew on Sixth Ave. and W. 19th St. The other charge accuses Smith of beating a former driver who approached him on Dec. 26 at Chambers St. and W. Broadway and demanded back pay.

Turnstile robbery

A mugger hit a woman as she was going through the high wheel turnstile at the northbound Eighth Ave. station on 25th St. at 11 p.m. Mon. March 26 and took her wallet with \$100 cash and credit cards, police said.

Bicycle thief

Police apprehended Jack Esau, 45, on a stolen bicycle at Eighth Ave. at 23rd St. on Tues. afternoon March 27 and charged him with larceny. The owner of the bike had left it outside Spice Restaurant on Eighth Ave. at 20th St. and gave chase when he saw the suspect riding away, police said.

Teen thieves

Three boys in their early teens walked

into Space Downtown, a designer merchandise studio on the second floor of 276 W. 25th St. shortly after 3 p.m. Wed. March 21, and while one of them distracted the woman clerk, the other two made off with a pair of laptops, a digital camera and a wireless mouse, police said. The articles were not discovered missing until after the boys left the premises.

Guest thief

A Chelsea resident brought a man he had met at Baracuda Bar at 275 W. 22nd St. during the wee hours of Sunday March 25 back to his W. 22nd St. apartment a block away and after the guest left, discovered that his wallet with \$10 in cash and credit cards was gone, police said.

ATM robbery

A woman making a withdrawal at the Chase ATM at 475 W. 23rd St. at 3:40 p.m. Sun. March 25 was surprised by a man who

punched her, grabbed the \$200 she had just taken from a machine and fled on foot heading north on Tenth Ave., police said.

DWI

Police charged Jerry White, 46, with driving while intoxicated after they stopped him making an illegal turn onto W. 14th St. from Ninth Ave. at 12:20 a.m. Mon. March 19 and found he had trouble standing when he got out of his car. White told police he had three beers but refused to take an alcohol test, police said.

Chelsea DOA

Police responding to a call about an unconscious man at 250 W. 24th St. found David Zuch, 43, in #2G, who was declared dead at the scene. No criminality is suspected and the Medical Examiner is investigating the cause of death.

— By Albert Amateau

No yolk: Eggstravaganza at Pier 45

Friends of Hudson River Park will celebrate its first annual Hudson River Park Spring Eggstravaganza for children and parents on Pier 45, at Christopher St., in the Village on Saturday afternoon April 7 with egg events (it's the day before Easter Sunday) along with fishing, face-painting and a performance of the giant puppets of Arm-of-the-Sea Theater.

The free festivities begin rain or shine at 1 p.m., when visitors may pick up a treasure map, make their mark on a giant mural and get their first clues for an egg hunt with a prize in store for kids who find all 10 eggs. Of course there will be an egg roll and an egg relay race, as well as egg dyeing and stories told by Mother

Goose. Free freshly pressed apple cider from Dressel Farms in New Paltz and fresh popcorn will be available.

The event, which ends at 4 p.m., also celebrates the ecology of the Hudson estuary. Arm-of-the-Sea, of Saugerties, N.Y., will present a big musical production illustrating the links between communities and their natural environment.

Friends of Hudson River Park is a nonprofit civic group advocating for the 5-mile riverfront park being built between Chambers and W. 59th Sts. For more information on the April 7 celebration, phone Laura Hughes at 212-757-0981 ext. 205 or e-mail her at laura@fohrp.org.