

Once burned out, the South Bronx rises again

By JOANNA WALTERS

DAVID Huggins and David Nigro are reaping the rewards of pioneering.

The couple, a Wall Street trader and a computer programmer, felt they were moving to the end of the earth when they bought their 1890-built house in the South Bronx in 1999.

But they paid just \$165,000, and their old friends from the Upper West Side were charmed by the rapidly gentrifying area. The South Bronx, once famous for its burnt-out apartment buildings, seemed more like Brooklyn's Williamsburg.

"I've walked home at 3 a.m. and never had a problem," says Nigro.

Now the couple are leaving their four-story, single-family brownstone on 140th Street, with approximately \$400,000 in their pockets. Despite more than \$200,000 in profit, they're only leaving because Nigro has been transferred to New Jersey.

Welcome downtown to the rebranded South Bronx.

The area's informally defined center is around the commercial streets of 149th and Third Avenue, north as far as 161st Street and south as far as the East River.

But even the edges of neighborhoods like Mott Haven and The Hub are getting fancier.

"In terms of access to cable television, Internet connections and things like movie theaters, it is not happening," says Angel Lopez, who along with his wife, Libertad, bought Huggins' and Nigro's house. "It is coming up fast. We have more space for when we start a family. Maybe seven or eight years ago, it would have seemed crazy. But not now."

"We thought we would take it a chance," Lopez, 39, adds. "It seems pretty safe and it's close to Manhattan — that's the big attraction."

Both he and his wife have a 15-minute subway commute to their jobs on Upper East Side, where Lopez is a professor of politics at Hunter College, and Libertad works for a housing agency for the homeless.

Troy Antonio is renting a loft in The Clock Tower, a huge local building that had fallen into graffiti-splattered dereliction and is now slowly being transformed into designer apartments.

A budding film-maker, he studied at SUNY Purchase and moved to the South Bronx last year from Spanish Harlem. He rents his 900-square-foot loft for \$1,150 a month — although

he claims the developers failed to tell him that the square footage included the hall, and his actual space is more like 600 square feet.

"I love it here," he says. "I want to buy eventually, and I do not care if I become really rich."

It's certainly trying to be, judging by the number of hipster bars. G-Bar offers jazz and Italian food. The Blue Ox is often favored by Wall Streeters on their way to Yankee Stadium. The Rail, which has polished steel tables and post-industrial funky decor, is partly an art space and partly a bistro.

points out that a brick was thrown through the window of The Rail on a recent night, two Bronx natives seated at the bar celebrated its arrival in the neighborhood in the last six months.

"It's brought life to the area; it was bad and dirty before," says Paul Ramirez, a student at Bronx Community College who works part time in Manhattan to support his performing arts studies. "I used to go out after work in Manhattan a few times a week, but now I come here instead."

He and Laviera, the bar-

tender, say that it was important that Bronx locals not be forced out of the area by rent increases imposed on the back of gentrification. They also would like to see more community business courses to help persuade Bronx kids to stay in the area and get jobs, leaving school or college. Meanwhile, some former residents are taking notice of the changes. Ramirez's cousin, Edwin Garcia, an engineering consultant, moved to Florida from the Bronx with his wife six years ago because he thought it was dangerous to live in that part of New York. Now he is considering moving back to the Bronx and starting a family because he cannot believe how much it has improved.

Pam Loddell, a single mother with kids ages 8, 7 and 4, moved to the area from Manhattan so she could afford to send her kids to school.

She's renovated her loft since buying it four years ago. "It's an ongoing thing," she notes.

As far as the neighborhood, she says it's really booming. "You can still buy an entire town house for \$325,000 and it's nice. These developers who were in Williamsburg opened up some buildings around here, so there's a pretty big influx of downtown people."