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High School for Social Justice Finds New Home

By DAVID GONZALEZ

Homecomings can be rare in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, a place where real estate and reinvention can stop people from returning to the streets of their youth. So imagine the sweet joy being savored by Frances Lucerna and Luis Garden Acosta, who managed to find a permanent home for their small public school — [El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice](#) — not far from where they started it 15 years ago.

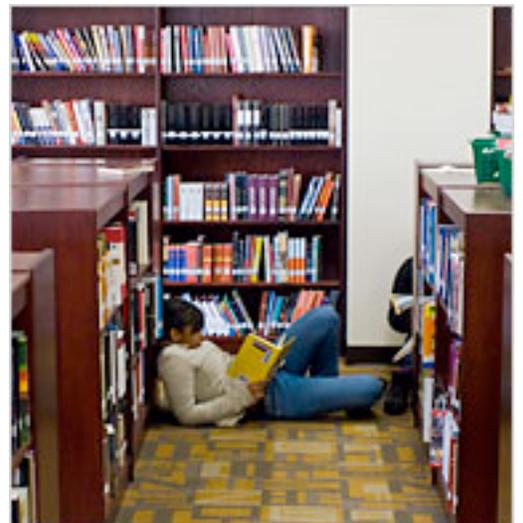
In recent years, the alternative high school — possibly the nation's first founded on ideals of social justice — has been in exile, wandering from building to building after City Department of Education officials ordered it to leave the South Fourth Street community center it had used since 1993. There were concerns over a leaky roof, as well as possibly overburdened wiring.

How El Puente Academy found a place of its own has left its founders' heads spinning. In September, they moved the school into the vacant Transfiguration grammar school, which Ms. Lucerna

attended in the 1960s. It was also the place where her husband, Mr. Garden Acosta, founded El Puente, the community youth group, 26 years ago.

They have gone from sharing cramped space and supplies to having a state-of-the-art building, where labs have the latest technology, the library smells like new books, and sunlight soaks every corner.

“This is the perfect scenario,” Ms. Lucerna said. “It’s full circle. Because of what has happened here with gentrification, we are telling the community we are here. We are going nowhere. We are saying this is our past and this is our future. And the emphasis is on the future.”



Inside the library at El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, which has finally found a permanent home 15 years after it was opened. (Photos: David Gonzalez/The New York Times)

They insist that they had an angel helping them in their near-quirky search for a building in what had been a red-hot real estate market: Monsignor Bryan Karvelis, the long-time pastor of Transfiguration church. Shortly before he died three years ago this month, he summoned the couple to his deathbed and made them promise to return to the parish.

Did they ever. “I believe in faith,” said Mr. Garden Acosta, who is a former seminarian (and a student at Harvard Medical School, too). “I believe there has been a guiding spirit in all of this. If ever I had any doubt, I would certainly be convinced by what has happened here. The spirit of Monsignor Karvelis has guided this. We came home to the place where we founded El Puente 26 years ago.”

When the academy was told to leave the community center in 2006, its founders were careful to stay calm. “We could have chained ourselves to the doors,” Ms. Lucerna said. “But that did not happen. We decided we wanted them to respect our community, not to go into a lot of drama. We were clear we were united as a community, an injustice had been done and that injustice would be rectified.”



Luis Garden Acosta, left, the founder of El Puente, the community group that sponsored the school. Frances Lucerna, his wife, and founding principal of the school. Hector Calderon, the school's current principal.

So, the academy moved into the top floor of a local junior high school — to be precise, a wing that was more or less a construction zone, recalled Hector Calderon, then an English teacher, now the academy's principal.

“Being there was a culture shock,” he said. “My office was in a Home Ec room. My desk was a piece of wood on top of a stove. It was next to where we distributed lunch.”

Being shoe-horned into an existing school went against the guiding principles of the movement to create small public schools. Naomi Barber, who was with the group [New Visions for Public Schools](#) when she helped El Puente start its academy, said schools that had to share a building with traditional schools often had a hard time.

“To anchor your vision you need a space that reflects it,” she said. “If you cannot secure your own space you could always be squeezed out. Space is everything. It is also for a place like El Puente, about human rights.”

But finding that space proved elusive in Williamsburg, where the real estate market took off just when the school started. Ms. Barber, Ms. Lucerna and Mr. Garden Acosta considered dozens of properties, including a factory building that would have been ideal, but years of negotiation and [litigation](#) put it out of their reach.

About two months after being exiled to the public school, the academy relocated to the nearby campus of [Boricua College](#), whose president was sympathetic to the group's plight. In the meantime, petitions and phone calls flooded city offices. Ms. Lucerna and Mr. Garden Acosta also remembered their promise to Monsignor Karvelis.

The pastor, an old-school activist priest, had grown worried about the fate of the parish's former school building, which was occupied only by a day care center.

"The building was almost empty when we went to see him," Mr. Garden Acosta said. "He was on his death bed. He made us promise we would come back. I said yes, even though Frances and I looked at each other and had no idea how."

Once the academy was homeless, they realized that the old Transfiguration school could be the solution. Mr. Garden Acosta said he was stunned by the speed with which city officials agreed to his request to use the former Catholic school. He said diocesan officials gave them a 20-year lease on the property, while the city spent a year and \$20 million to renovate the building.

"The city acted with a dispatch that can only be called miraculous," he said with a smile. "This whole process took two years."

Mr. Calderon no longer has to worry about balancing a plank on a stove. His office is clean and airy, with views of Manhattan, but his sentiments are closer to home.

"This is a testament to the power of community," he said. "A community that says the possibilities are endless. We have our cafeteria. We have our science lab. We have our library. I really feel the building is honoring the best in all of us. That is a great lesson for our young people."

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