

DAILY NEWS

MORRISANIA HOSP'S NOW A HOME

URBAN HORIZONS IS UP & RUNNING

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A hollowed-out relic from the dark days of the 1970s completed its transformation yesterday into a sparkling South Bronx Cinderella. Officials cut the ribbon at the long-abandoned Morrisania Hospital, which has been converted into a \$23 million housing and economic development project. Urban Horizons has put housing, medical clinics, job-training programs and after-school care under a single roof. "I just fell in love with this building when I first saw it," said Nancy Biberman, the project's mastermind and president of the Women's Housing and

Economic Development Corp. "I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great to do something there someday?'"

Morrisania Hospital stood abandoned for more than 20 years, turning from a place where people sought help into a hulking drug den and dumping ground. But with Biberman's vision, the urban blight has been wiped from the landscape. After nine years of planning and renovation, hope once again lives within the old hospital's yellow brick walls. Working with the city, the Bronx borough president's office and other agencies, the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corp. converted the 11-story shell at 168th St. and Walton Ave. into a 200,000-square-foot complex with 132 low-income housing units, including 48 for formerly homeless families.

"This is the best apartment I've ever had," said Antonio Cortijo, who moved into a spacious two-bedroom unit almost two years ago after being selected in a lottery. "You can leave your door open here."

Although tenants began occupying the building in 1997, officials decided to delay the ribbon-cutting celebration until Rafael Hernandez Public School 218 opened, which it did in September, and other programs were operating. The newly built magnet school sits next to the former hospital, completing the renovation of an entire city block. "What made sense was for the world to see the programs that we had promised up and running," said Biberman. Urban Horizons also includes a fitness center with close to 400 paying members, welfare-to-work programs and a culinary arts training program.

The Urban Horizons Food Co.'s 4,000-square-foot kitchen now stands where ambulances used to bring patients. There, students create gourmet platters under the guidance of Felice Ramella, a graduate of the French Culinary Institute, and executive chef Jill Rose, formerly of Manhattan's four-star Lespinasse. "We're turning out people who really want to be doing what they're doing," said Ramella, the center's director of food service operations. "And they're proud of it."

One floor down, in the basement, Didria Brown teaches a class of welfare recipients how to land a job. She guides them through the process of shaking hands, introducing themselves and discussing the job they'd like. "We knew there were critical things for this community," said Biberman. "We knew people wanted to work and get off welfare, so we added that, too."

The hospital was gutted for the renovation, but 60-year-old photographs displayed throughout the complex remind the building's new tenants of what once was there. Biberman looks at the photos with pride, remembering how she used to wade through piles of garbage when the renovation started. "We've created a perception here of safety, quality and beauty," she said. "We think it's important to bring the beauty back."