Scene Changes

Over time, neighborhoods in a city are transformed as their population shifts from one ethnic group to another. Pizza parlors become noodle shops, and stores that once sold men’s suits now deal in saris. Sometimes the businesses stay the same, but the owners and clientele change. A photographic exhibition currently on display at the university’s George J. Sherman and Lottie K. Sherman Museum of Jewish Civilization documents such changes along Hartford’s Albany Avenue from the 1800s to the present day. Now and Then: Albany Avenue is the result of a collaboration of the Hartford Art School, the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies, Upper Albany Main Street, Inc., and the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford.

The exhibition combines new photographs by Hartford Art School students of current merchants, businesses, and religious and cultural institutions with historical photos, videos, and oral histories from the archives of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford. It illustrates the transition of businesses and institutions on Albany Avenue from a predominantly Jewish neighborhood of immigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries to its current community of African American, West Indian, and Hispanic residents and businesses.

Professor Richard Freund, director of the Maurice Greenberg Center, says the exhibition explores the “unique synergy” of Albany Avenue, which until 1960 was the center of Hartford’s Jewish community, and is now being redeveloped by a new group of immigrants and residents.

During the early 20th century, middle-income Italian, Eastern European, and Jewish families moved into the neighborhood, creating a “streetcar suburb” whose workers commuted to the industrial and financial sectors downtown. Post–World War II urban sprawl and the development of wealthy suburbs nearby dramatically altered the ethnic composition of the Upper Albany area, resulting in today’s mix of ethnic groups.

Marilyn Risi, director of Upper Albany Main Street, Inc., says Now and Then: Albany Avenue complements the Micro Business Incubator program that brings students from the university’s Barney School into the neighborhood to assist Albany Avenue business owners (see page 7).

The exhibition is sponsored by the Greater Hartford Arts Council, The Hartford Courant, the Dr. Morris and Emma Cohen Fund of the Greenberg Center, the Hartford Art School, the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford, and the Upper Albany Main Street Project. The exhibit’s curator is Christine Dalenta ’91, ’94.

Now and Then: Albany Avenue, which is free and open to the public, runs through Aug. 15. The George J. Sherman and Lottie K. Sherman Museum is located in the Mortensen Library in the Harry Jack Gray Center. For information or reservations for docent-led tours for groups of up to 20 people, call 860.768.4963 or e-mail lemcoff@hartford.edu.
When Cara Ashnault first walked through the door of a hair salon on Hartford’s Homestead Avenue, she wasn’t there for a haircut or highlights. Instead, the senior in the Barney School of Business had come to give Peaches DaCosta, the owner of Beauty Galore, a “treatment” of her own.

The treatment that brought together the young woman from rural New Hampshire and the single mother from the north end of Hartford is an innovative program called the Micro Business Incubator (MBI) at the University of Hartford.

The brainchild of Associate Professor of Marketing Margery Steinberg, MBI pairs Barney students with small-business owners in the commercially struggling Upper Albany neighborhood, just a mile from the main campus. It works in partnership with Upper Albany Main Street, Inc., a community organization that strives to preserve and revitalize the area’s commercial district and help residents develop a stable neighborhood.

Steinberg explains that Rob Golden, an MBA student at Barney and the coordinator of the MBI program, first approached DaCosta about participating in the program.

“Peaches DaCosta was a prime candidate for the MBI program because she’s open to new ideas and willing to invest the time and effort into upgrading her business,” says Steinberg. “Like many Upper Albany business owners, she possesses strong values and a tremendous work ethic in addition to her outstanding skills as a hairdresser.”

While the entrepreneurs are getting help with everything from developing marketing plans and computerized accounting systems to designing their own Web pages, Barney students gain course credits as well as invaluable practical experience.

At DaCosta’s Beauty Galore Salon, the program has succeeded on all counts. When Ashnault first came into her store in October 2003, DaCosta was running Beauty Galore with lots of personal service but no computerized inventory tracking, no easily accessible customer database, no electronics to speak of—unless you count the blow dryers.

With Ashnault’s help, DaCosta and her salon have come a long way in just 18 months. Ashnault is modest about her own role in the transformation.

“I just helped her learn the basics and overcome her fears,” she says of DaCosta. At the same time, the two developed a close friendship. “Even when school is out of session and I don’t get class credit for it, I still stop by and help Peaches out with whatever I can,” she says.

These days, Ashnault and DaCosta are working on a business plan that will help DaCosta obtain loans to improve and expand Beauty Galore. “Peaches has a vision for Beauty Galore,” says Ashnault, “and I am going to help her realize it.”

In a way, Ashnault’s good work is multiplying well beyond the salon, to the community at large. By helping DaCosta enhance efficiency at Beauty Galore, Ashnault has given the single mother a most precious commodity—more time, both for her two young children and for a new project that will help her community. Called the Single Mother’s Association, it is a commitment DaCosta feels deeply and personally.

“As a single mother, I’ve felt lost and alone,” she says. “I don’t want other women to feel that way.”

The Single Mother’s Association is the logical extension of activities that DaCosta has promoted at Beauty Galore, including a pre-Mother’s Day celebration that Hartford Mayor Eddie Perez attended in 2003 and a popular back-to-school “jam” for Upper Albany neighborhood kids. Last year, 400 children were given backpacks filled with school supplies. Now DaCosta wants to pull all these commitments together and add to them, she hopes, with help from a new friend.

“I’m working on Cara,” she says.

As for getting involved with DaCosta’s new endeavor, Ashnault might be interested. It turns out that working in the MBI program has been a learning experience for her in more ways than one.

“I was a bit sheltered from the world before I came to Hartford,” explains Ashnault. “It was a little intimidating initially to be in the Upper Albany MBI project. But working with Peaches has allowed me to meet so many interesting people. I think we will be in touch for a long time.”