



## Barrio Latina Out to Save East Harlem

By Madeline Salazar

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Sometimes in life when you get angry and it acts as a call to action.

For East Harlem's Marina Ortiz, the call came over gentrification, displacement of long-time residents and the decline of Latino life in her community of El Barrio.

"I was both delighted and appalled by all the changes going on in East Harlem – in particular the city-sponsored real estate project "Uptown NY", which called for two million square feet of development

along East 125th Street," she explains.

Soon after the city unveiled the project, she realized that insufficient information was being provided to the community. "So many critical details on the project were only presented verbally and there was no resource where residents could turn for information," she said. It was then that she decided to create the very resource that was needed. "I am the sort of person that if something is not there, I'll create it," she explains.

With this call to action, Marina created a website/watchdog agency called East Harlem Preservation (EHP), to promote, preserve, and protect the neighborhood's rich cultural and architectural history.

After East Harlem residents were able to convince the city to drop its plans for the mega project, she noticed there were many other issues in the neighborhood that people did not know about. "So the website blossomed to provide information about everything that's going on in East Harlem," she explained. "We're not against change. We simply want to help retain the flavor of el Barrio. We don't want it to become just another extension of the Upper East Side."

The organization operates [www.eastharlempreservation.org](http://www.eastharlempreservation.org), which provides news and updates on issues of public concern to residents and business owners in East Harlem, El Barrio and surrounding communities.

The website focuses on environmental matters, over-development, and affordable housing issues in El Barrio.

Marina says that while most newspapers focus on the negative aspects of the neighborhood like “blood and bullets,” she would rather portray more positive aspects such as the rich mix of cultures, the architecture, and the people. She loves being a witness to so many nationalities living and working together.

“Here in East Harlem, the “fight” has taken on a local meaning. Sometimes, you have to decide on the smaller battles,” she says. Recently, Marina made citywide headlines as the plaintiff in a lawsuit to stop the City’s plan to privatize the public ball fields on Randall’s Island.

Although Marina is a member of many local agencies including Community Board 11, the East Harlem Historical Organization and Hope Community, it is the website that has become her passion, consuming over 50% of her free time.

She also finds time to give neighborhood tours, coordinates public forums, documents issues of local interest and helps promote the work of local organizations and nonprofit agencies.

Many feel there are tangible results of Marina’s work. She points out that more people attend local events and community forums as a result of the publicity given them on the website.

“It is satisfying when people thank you for creating a more positive outlook on East Harlem” says Marina. She says she is most grounded when people thank her for being such a fountain of information.

Marina points with pride to her 2006 proposal that Hope Community commission a large mosaic of the poet Julia de Burgos and to her volunteer work on El Museo del Barrio’s petition campaign to rename East 106th Street in honor of the Puerto Rican poet, Julia De Burgos. “It was personally rewarding because Julia has always been my inspiration,” she said.

Marina enjoys what she does at EHP because it has helped bring her closer to what she most enjoys – Puerto Rican culture. One of her favorite activities is co-hosting local poetry events such as Hope Community’s summer series, “Poetas con Café.” She is also the founder and editor of [www.virtualboricua.org](http://www.virtualboricua.org), which has also helped cultivate a passion for photography.

<http://www.latinweekny.com/?c=118&a=1313>