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LONG ISLAND JOURNAL; What Affordable Housing Crisis?

By MARCELLE S. FISCHLER

LIKE many of their neighbors on the North Shore, Laurie and Andrew Bocca of Syosset have renovation fever.

The Boccas recently enlarged their kitchen with a row of honey-colored wood cabinets and installed a beveled blue countertop that complements their star-spangled curtains. They turned the deck into a foyer, installed new carpeting in the living room and redid a bathroom. Last year they added a bedroom and a half bath.

Just across Jericho Turnpike, a newly renovated stucco colonial with double doors and granite floors on a half-acre lot is on the market for \$1,400,000, with property taxes of \$15,000 a year. But the Boccas' place is altogether different.

They live in the Syosset Mobile Home Park, an enclave of 70 trailers tucked in an industrial pocket between an office building and Ralph's Ices along Jericho Turnpike. While there are a handful of mobile home parks in Suffolk County, the Syosset park is the only one in Nassau.

A double bed and desk are a snug fit in the Boccas' new bedroom, which increased their living space to 870 square feet. The half bath makes the toilets on commercial airliners seem spacious. But on an island where low-cost housing is practically nonexistent, and along a strip of the Gold Coast where a half million dollars barely buys a starter home, the Boccas, who paid \$45,000 for their trailer 10 years ago, feel as if they are living like royalty.

"We are blessed that we have this," said Ms. Bocca, 39, pleased that her two children, Angela, 4, and Andrew, 6, will not have to share a room that barely fits bunk beds. As soon as it's cleared out, Ms. Bocca plans to move Angela into the tiny storeroom just past the washer and dryer.

"It's very affordable home ownership," Mr. Bocca said. "You have more pride in yourself than actually renting."

Moving to a larger home was not an option. Mr. Bocca, 50, earns \$37,000 a year as a highway maintenance supervisor with the State Department of Transportation; Ms. Bocca is a stay-at-home mom.

"We had no place to go," Ms. Bocca said. "My husband and I couldn't even afford to rent an apartment in Nassau County."

"Would I like somebody to drop me a house in the middle of Muttontown?" she continued. "I am not going to stand here and lie and say no. But it is what it is, and we should just be thankful for what we have today, here and now."

Ginnie Vignola, the manager, said the trailer park, which opened 43 years ago, is totally owner-occupied. The trailers fetch \$50,000 to \$90,000. "They turn over instantly," Ms. Vignola said. "We don't have to advertise."

Residents rent the land the trailers stand on for a monthly fee of \$550. The fee includes water and sewage hookup, snow removal and taxes. Parents push strollers and children bicycle along the smoothly paved roads in complex, where nearly every home has a short driveway and room for a second car to park on the street. The trailer park is in the top-rated Syosset school district.

Like the Boccas' place, many of the trailers have been redone with vinyl siding, insulated windows, wood decks and additions poking out to the side. Most are tidily kept; others look like rusting hulks in the midst of a junkyard. Trailer hitches poke out from the fronts of the long, narrow cabins; propane tanks that fuel stoves are propped to the side. Electric meters face the road. Laundry is draped over clotheslines.

In September, Teresa Walch finished a master's degree in accounting at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University in Brookville and is studying for the examinations to qualify as a certified public accountant.

"I am doing it here in the mobile home park," Ms. Walch said. "And after I get it I plan on staying in the mobile home park."

Ms. Walch, 42, lives in a three-bedroom trailer with her children, Wolfgang, 10, and Karina, 7. Her boyfriend, Bobby Carman, 43, a tow truck operator, sold his own trailer to move in with Ms. Walch two years ago. To her delight, he added a carport. It practically touches the trailer next door.

"Maybe the children would like a bigger backyard, but I tell them. 'You have the whole area here as the backyard,'" Ms. Walch said.

She said she grew up in a big house with a big backyard in Franklin Square. She doesn't miss it.

"This is probably the happiest place I've lived," Ms. Walch said. "It's a very secure neighborhood. It's very tight. Everyone is ready to pitch in if someone needs help. It is one of the best-kept secrets in Nassau County because of the affordability and the school district."

The cramped quarters don't faze her.

"You would be surprised how much room there is in the mobile home if you organize it correctly," Ms. Walch said. "From this perspective, more isn't always better. More can bring more headaches, more problems, more to do, more responsibility."

Elizabeth and Mark Stout bought their 650-square-foot trailer eight years ago. They would like to move to Wantagh or Seaford with their son, Scott, 3, but prices are farther out of reach than ever.

"This is pretty much where we are stuck until we start making the money," said Ms. Stout, 31, a baby sitter.

Meanwhile, the couple renovated their kitchen and added new paneling and new rugs, hoping their mobile home has also surged in value.

"People have been telling me they are making lots of profits off of this place," Ms. Stout said.

But as much as the mobile homes are a godsend to working-class families, they are dogged by a persistent stigma. Though the trailer park is set back from the main road and has a no-trespassing sign on a fence up front, passersby gawk as if an alien spaceship had landed on a suburban parking lot.

"They come through to sightsee," said Rita Moody, 49, whose two-bedroom trailer was brand new when she moved into it in 1998. "A lot of people buy an ice and then take the scenic tour through."

She said her old residence, an apartment in Hicksville, cost her \$1,500 a month, plus utilities. Ms. Moody, a widow who is disabled and lives with her daughter, granddaughter and a menagerie of pets, bought the 14-by-60-foot mobile home outright for \$65,000.

"Trailer parks get a really bad rap," Ms. Moody said.

Jillian Holmes ticked off the stereotypes she has been confronted with so often that she uses a post office box and is reluctant to tell people that she and her husband, Ed, 24, and their daughter, Alexandria, 13 months, live in a 9-by-13 extension of her mother's 60-by-12 trailer, a "princess model" with a vaulted ceiling in the living room.

"Jerry Springer, trailer park trash -- they are always fighting, and they have no teeth," Ms. Holmes said. For the record, she smiled broadly, showing off a full set of teeth.

"Most of the people in Syosset think, 'Oh, they live in a mobile home, they're poor and they are worthless,'" said Ms. Holmes, 22, who works in a bed-and-bath shop nearby. "That's not true. We all work, we all support each other, but we just can't afford a \$500,000 house."

The hurtful remarks have needled Ms. Holmes ever since her parents divorced and she moved to the trailer park from a three-bedroom house in Bethpage 10 years ago. She said her years at Syosset High School, class of 2001, were a nightmare.

"I was always getting made fun of because I didn't have the designer clothes, the Gucci pocketbook, the piranha bag," Ms. Holmes said, mocking the pricey Prada designer label.

She recalled the cruel whispers that swirled through the school bus when it reached her stop. "I had stuff I bought from Kmart and Target that I could afford," Ms. Holmes said.

When classmates talked about vacations in Florida or the Caribbean during school breaks, Ms. Holmes said she pretended she was also going away.

"Most people in this area take for granted the fact that they live in a house," Ms. Holmes said. "They have a maid. People have tennis courts in this area. There are a lot of rude people in this town. They act superior to everybody."

When they can afford to, she said, she and her husband hope to move off the Island, perhaps to Arizona, where housing is more affordable.

Mr. Bocca said he worried that his children would grow up having to defend themselves, "being looked upon as undesirables and uneducated." Andrew, a first grader, was already having a hard time, he said.

"The bus goes to million-dollar homes and all of a sudden it comes here," Mr. Bocca said. "Kids say things, and he is just treated differently."

Ms. Bocca said that Andrew was on a bus for children with special needs even though he was not a special needs student. She said that after Andrew was spit on and physically abused, she complained to the district transportation department but was told no other buses were available. Ms. Bocca started driving her son to Robbins Lane Elementary School.

In a phone interview, a district spokeswoman, Randi Sachs, said that no buses were set aside exclusively for students with special needs. Ms. Sachs wondered whether Ms. Bocca "didn't want her child on a bus with special needs children."

When she was growing up, Ms. Sachs said, other children teased her because she had pimples.

"You can always find a reason to pick on a kid," she said. "We have children from many different kinds of backgrounds, and we teach tolerance and understanding in every school. We have an exceptional character education program in every school. Our children are taught to treat one another with respect, dignity and compassion."

Around the corner from the Boccas' trailer, a Nassau County narcotics officer who sometimes uses the alias Ken Lauranzano was building a platform bed in his 12-by-52 trailer.

Asked why someone with a six-figure income and a vacation home upstate would move into a trailer park, Mr. Lauranzano replied, "I got divorced, what else?"

Before his marriage broke up, Mr. Lauranzano, 45, lived with his wife and two daughters a mile and a half away in Syosset in a \$600,000 colonial.

Mr. Lauranzano looked at condominiums and smaller homes in the area before settling on the two-bedroom trailer a year and a half ago. He paid \$34,500 and gutted the place, renovating with fake wood laminate floors and freshly painted walls. A flat-screen television is in the living room, across from a white sofa plumped with cushions. In the spring he plans to redo the exterior and install new windows.

"You are living compactly, but I lived in Manhattan for a while," Mr. Lauranzano said. "It's the size of my apartment there and certainly cheaper."

Mr. Lauranzano said living in the trailer park was also a good barometer by which to judge the character of potential girlfriends.

"If you meet a woman in a bar and say you are from Syosset they think you are living in a \$600,000 house," Mr. Lauranzano said. He said that when he brought a date home recently, she fled.

Mr. Lauranzano said he liked living close to his children, who often spend the night. In the morning, he drops them off at Robbins Lane Elementary.

"This is my choice," he said. "I'm 20 feet from the Laundromat. It sounds crazy, but it's like a little vacation area."

Mr. Lauranzano said that more mobile home parks should be built.

"Where else are you going to get a place with two bedrooms for this money?" he said. "On Long Island, this is a home run."

E-mail: lijournal@nytimes.com