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SPORTS FINAL

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DAILY NEWS

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YOUR MONEY

Sweet treats in Brooklyn

JEFF BACHNER

Carmen Rodriguez (r.) and her sister Gina Madera.

Talk about sweet revenge. Three years ago, during the dark days of the recession, Carmen Rodriguez was abruptly laid off.

"One Friday, they tapped me on the shoulder," she recalled. "I came home and said, 'What am I am going to do? How will I pay the rent?'"

Forced to reinvent herself after a 30-year career in retail management, Rodriguez decided to pursue her passion and open up a cupcake bakery in Williamsburg.

Today, her one-year-old venture, Brooklyn Cupcake, is piping hot.

The cupcakes, which draw on Rodriguez' Italian and Puerto Rican roots with flavors like dulce de leche and tiramisu, have been an instant success in the neighborhood and beyond.

Sales this year are on track to reach $400,000 and a second shop is in the works. The Daily News recently dubbed Brooklyn Cupcake's treats, which cost $2.50 a piece, the best cupcakes in New York. There's even talk of Rodriguez starring in a reality TV series.

Tomorrow, Rodriguez will be recognized for her achievements by the city when Brooklyn Cupcake is named Brooklyn Small Business of the Year.

To get started, Rodriguez turned to friends and family. She raised a total of $85,000 to fund her fledgling cup-cakery, including $40,000 from her mom.

Rodriguez and her sister, Gina Madera, 42, renovated a 600- square-foot storefront on Union Ave. that had been vacant for 20 years. Neighbors helped out, providing services at reduced fees.

"It has been unbelievable," Rodriguez said. "I was so blessed."

Phyllis Furman

RICHARD HARBUS

Steven Smith cleared out the piles of junk (l.) at Oak Point Property in the Hunts Point section and is about to build a nature preserve.

'Garbage man' cleans up

Bronx developer turning notorious dumpsite into fresh food hub

BY PHYLLIS FURMAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Steven Smith looked past 10 million pounds of garbage in the South Bronx, and saw a gem in the making.

Ten years ago, when Smith took over Oak Point Property – a 28-acre parcel in Hunts Point sandwiched between the Oak Point railroad yard and the East River – it was a notorious, massive illegal garbage dump and a hangout for criminals.

After Smith's then-employer, global electrical giant ABB, abandoned plans to build a power plant on the site, the property tumbled into bankruptcy. Mired in legal woes and facing $60 million in claims, few wanted to touch it.

But Smith, an engineer and power plant developer, saw potential in what was one of the largest undeveloped private properties in New York City. He left his job at ABB, cashed out his retirement savings and severance and became Oak Point's trustee.

Today, after years of legal wrangling and a $6 million environmental cleanup, Oak Point is out of bankruptcy and on the verge of becoming a fresh food distribution hub with the potential for bringing hundreds of jobs to the South Bronx.

"I'm the garbage man," said Smith, 59. "We turned it into a viable piece of property."

The city – which Smith had previously battled over its past plans to build a jail at Oak Point – will on Tuesday name Oak Point Property the Bronx Small Business of the Year, in its annual Neighborhood Achievement Awards.

Smith's original plan after taking over Oak Point was to plow ahead with a power plant. But community opposition overpowered him.

In 2008, after listening to suggestions from local leaders, including Bronx Congressman Jose Serrano, he switched gears and decided to focus on food, becoming part of a larger trend that has food distributors expanding in the South Bronx.

The payoff: In 2010, after completing the last part of the massive cleanup, he struck a deal to sell 12 acres to Jetro, a food wholesaler that sells to groceries and restaurants, for $25 million.

Jetro has already built a distribution center at Oak Point surrounded by trees – where there were once piles of garbage.

On his remaining parcel, Smith is developing an $85 million, 300,000-square-foot, three-story distribution center with a rooftop greenhouse. He's in the process of raising money for the project and hopes to open its doors by next year.

Looking to capitalize on the local farm movement, Smith is seeking tenants that specialize in distributing farm produce, dairy and meat from New York state.

Potential occupants include Gourmet Guru, a distributor of New York state dairy products and organic foods; and Greenmarket, a local farm aggregator.

"He can now house companies that bring jobs and pay taxes to the City of New York," said Anthony Riccio, chairman of the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corp. and vice president of Harlem River Yard Ventures.

A retail farmer's market is also slated for the site. But perhaps the biggest change will be a 3-acre nature preserve that Smith agreed to build as part of a settlement with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

While Oak Point's recent past was mired in garbage and mob ties, centuries ago it was the hunting and fishing grounds of the Weckquaesgeek Indians.

In the 1800s, Oak Point was home to the mansions of the Leggett family and Cuban sugar importer Inocencio Casanova, and was the site of one the city's original amusement parks, the Oak Point Pavilion.

Smith has had as many twists and turns in his efforts to redevelop the site.

"So many times we were on the edge of total disaster," he said. "I am extremely tenacious. When I get my mind on something I just keep going."

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LOCAL BIZ STARS

Organized by New York City Department of Small Business Services, the annual Neighborhood Achievement Awards honor individuals, businesses and groups that help build neighborhoods and create jobs. The following are the local businesses who were recognized this year:

- **Manhattan Small Business of the Year:** Coogan's Restaurant
- **Brooklyn Small Business of the Year:** Brooklyn Cupcake
- **Queens Small Business of the Year:** Brooklyn Grange Farm
- **Bronx Small Business of the Year:** Oak Point Property
- **Staten Island Small Business of the Year:** Beso and Bayou
- **Entrepreneur of the Year:** Bronx Brewery