



The Star-Ledger

Investing in Newark

Sunday, September 16, 2007

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Ade Tugbiyele Sedita and Christopher Sedita first lived in Newark when they were students at the School of Architecture at New Jersey Institute of Technology.

After graduating in 2002, they left the city because of drugs and crime.

"We just didn't feel like it was a good living environment, if we were going to get married and have a family," Ade Sedita said.

But last July, they moved back. Not only that, they decided to invest in the city, opening an art store on the corner of Halsey and New streets in a space that had last been used as a shoe store.

"There were signs of a hopeful future," said Ade Sedita, who worked for Mayor Cory Booker's transition team and is now a third-year doctoral student at NJIT studying urban systems. "We thought that maybe we could be a part of helping that happen rather than waiting till it's all done."

The store, Newark Art Supply, is one small sign of change in a neighborhood that some describe as Newark's Greenwich Village. Located just east of University Heights, the neighborhood, a mix of storefronts and apartments, attracts students from Rutgers University-Newark, NJIT, Essex County College and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey as well as workers from nearby offices downtown.

And since Rutgers opened a new dorm last year and University Center, a privately owned and operated dorm, opened a few weeks ago, there are more students in the neighborhood at night.

Along with the art store, a number of other businesses that appeal to the neighborhood's demographic have opened in the last few years. A popular eatery, 27 Mix, opened two years ago, and Alliance for the Healing Arts began offering yoga, meditation, belly dancing, Reiki and counseling services in January.

A few blocks down on Halsey Street, Harvest Table Fresh Food Eatery, which opened in January, offers made-to-order sandwiches, salads and fruit smoothies as well as Wi-Fi and occasional workshops and events.

Harvest Table owner Carissa Borraccine said she spent "a couple years" trying to decide where to open the restaurant, looking mainly at Montclair and Jersey City before settling on Newark.

"I just saw all this action and activity that was going on in Newark," said Borraccine, who lives in Montclair. "I had never really considered Newark, and I was like, 'Oh my god, this is it.'"

Newark Art Supply is situated between the Village Hotel and a Chinese restaurant. A mixed-media sculpture of a bull by artist Jerry Gant sits in one of its windows. Small plants sprout from handmade plant boxes just outside on the sidewalk.

A surrealist artist inspired by the likes of Frida Kahlo and Salvador Dalí, Ade Sedita treated parts of the

store as a canvas. One of her designs includes blue hands, orange swirls and the word Ase, a Yoruba word she explains as "the energy that comes from our hands when we are painting or doing anything crafty."

Sedita said she and her husband both aspired to start a business. She went through the Prudential Young Entrepreneur Program, a training program run by the Greater Newark Business Development Consortium.

They wanted to start something sooner rather than later, she said -- before other responsibilities and bills began to crop up. But it wasn't until October that they decided to be in the business of art supplies. The store opened three months later, in January. The consortium provided them with some technical assistance and financing.

"It was largely intuition," said Ade Sedita, a Brooklyn-born first-generation American whose parents are from Nigeria. "It was like waking up one day and saying, 'I want to open up an art store.' It was just common sense."

As a student, she and others had traveled 20 to 30 minutes to art stores to get what they needed. "It just made sense that we shouldn't have to travel to pick up materials," she said. "We felt that if we feel this way, more than likely other people feel this way as well."

Three NJIT students in the store on a recent Saturday said they now shop at Newark Art Supply for the materials they need for class. Liz Bramwell, 25, and in her second year of graduate school at the School of Architecture, said she had come to the store that day for drafting supplies and Cray-Pas oil pastels.

"Last year I would have gone to Jerry's," said Bramwell, referring to Jerry's Artist Outlet in West Orange. "Now that they have them here, I'll stop by here to get them."

Mark Quinn, the executive director of the Greater Newark Business Development Consortium, said the Seditas picked an ideal spot for the store, near NJIT, Rutgers-Newark and Essex County College, and, by extension, a host of university students.

Their vision fits in with Newark's development goals, Quinn said.

"Their vision, not just of providing art supplies, but also of elevating art and providing various other types of outlets, an educational outlet for youth and the community in general," he said. "It's really more than a store."

The Seditas hold art shows in the store's backroom and run drawing and painting workshops. They are planning for more classes, with themes such as purse-making and African heritage quilt-making. They will also host more free movie nights -- they showed "Frida" over the summer.

"By setting up a small exhibition for local artists, it brings attention to the shop and also to the district," said John Watts, who owns R.J. Watts, a store two doors down that sells pottery, jewelry and prints.

"People are beginning to think of Halsey Street the way it was thought of in the '40s and '50s, when it was kind of a Newark version of Greenwich Village," Watts said. "Now, it's beginning to have that same feel again."

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