

ONE SEPTEMBER EVENING in 1974, Jack Stokvis was walking home to his bachelor brownstone through a drab section of Jersey City, N.J. Moving briskly past Van Vorst Park, where an elderly woman doctor had recently been stabbed to death, he glanced ruefully at the rubble-strewn vacant lots and abandoned homes with their burned-out windows.

A 30-year-old urban planner, Stokvis knew all the statistics about Jersey City, America's most crowded metropolitan area (12,963 people per square mile). A tradition of city-hall graft had drained its spirit and resources. A study funded by the federal government ranking America's 65 largest metropolitan areas in 123 categories (including crime, unemployment, environment) called Jersey City worst of all.

Stokvis was returning from a weekend in New York at a conference run by Back to the City, Inc., where he had seen a film called *The Street of the Flower Boxes*. Based on a children's book, it told the true story of an ugly, riot-ripped New York slum street that had been transformed by the magic of flower boxes into a safe, pleasant neigh-

*Jersey City has shown how mere flower boxes can seed a revolution against urban decay*

## The Miracle of Flower Power

BY PEGGY MANN



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borhood. An article, distributed after the show, told how the story had been filmed on a *different* slum street because the original had become too pretty.\*

Jack Stokvis was excited. Could such a miracle work for a whole city—*his* city?

When Stokvis went to work the following Monday, the only city official he could find who was interested in the program was Councilman Morris Pesin, chairman of the Jersey City Historic District Commission. The commission would back Stokvis—if he did not request any city funds, and if he confined his efforts to his own time and to the half-dozen historic districts under Pesin's jurisdiction.

Whatever else might be said about it, Jersey City was the oldest city in the state, settled by Dutch colonials in 1630. Each of its historic districts had a neighborhood association. Stokvis sent each association president a copy of the flower-box article and invited them to a meeting in city hall.

At the meeting, Stokvis told the group that he had a plan so simple they would be flabbergasted when they saw it transform their neighborhoods. Schoolchildren would take orders for low-cost flower boxes, he explained, use the down payments to buy boxes and flowers wholesale, and then assemble and deliver them. The flower boxes would inspire people to paint doorways,

hang curtains, clean out trash and spruce up their homes and streets.

Representatives of three historic districts listened politely, but were not convinced. Three others were willing to give Stokvis's vision a try: 26-year-old Yvonne Balcer, from the dying Van Vorst Park area, now overrun with winos and drug pushers; Tony Nicodemo, head of a neighborhood association in the once-vibrant, colorful 30-block Italian Village; and Joe Duffy, a retired accountant from Paulus Hook, Jersey City's oldest section, now threatened by industrial expansion.

Stokvis and his converts rented (for \$35) the NBC film that he had seen, and set up a schedule for showings in neighborhood schools that spring. In the assembly hall of Holy Rosary grammar school, in the Italian Village, students cheered and applauded the film. When Nicodemo asked for flower-box salesmen, there was a field of wildly waving hands. He gave out order forms, and after school the students sallied forth.

They showed up the next morning with dozens of orders—but only \$17 in cash. Most people were not prepared to put out \$4.25 for a planted window box until it was delivered. The Van Vorst kids met another obstacle: the murderer of the elderly woman had not been caught, and parents were reluctant to let their children approach strangers.

Yvonne Balcer found a young ally, 13-year-old Robert Rodriguez. The

\*See "Miracle of the Flower Boxes," *The Reader's Digest*, July '73.

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boy, whose father had once owned a small farm in Puerto Rico, was growing three cornstalks in front of their brownstone. Robert said to Yvonne, "Sure, I help you. Great idea! The only flowers we ever see around here are plastic."

Robert's parents were frightened, but there was no stopping the boy. "He's a born salesman," Yvonne said, "who can give a spiel in Spanish or English." Still, even Robert could collect only COD's.

One evening, Stokvis consulted with his neighbor Frank Gillmore, who had been enlisted for the project by Joe Duffy. "We've got over 1000 orders," Jack said, "but only 31 people paid in advance. I've got \$500 in my savings account. That will pay for the first load of flower boxes. When we collect on those, we'll have money for the second batch."

"I'll match your \$500," said Gillmore, a factory worker who bagged coffee in a Hoboken factory and had three children to support.

Friday, May 9, was Flower Box Day for the three Jersey City neighborhoods. The Department of Public Works supplied a flatbed truck. Gillmore went without sleep after his night shift to accompany the driver to pick up the flower boxes, soil, peat moss, perlite. Their last stop was a flower farm owned by Alfred Schultheis, whose wife, Linda, had grown up in Jersey City. For the average wholesale price of 6.4 cents per three-inch plant, Linda had promised all the petunias and marigolds Stokvis needed.

The first drop-off spot was the Nicodemos' house in the Italian Village. After school, the yard became a mass of shouting kids who wanted to help. Tony set up an assembly line. He drilled drainage holes in the boxes they had bought. Stokvis and Al Zampella, principal of Public School 27, shoveled dirt and mixed in perlite and peat moss. The children planted the flowers, stuck three tablets of time-release fertilizer into each box. As the bright, brimming flower boxes were delivered, women flung open windows to call out: "Hey, I want one, too!" Rosalie Nicodemo soon had a coffee can filled with cash down payments.

The action was repeated in the Balcers' and Gillmores' yards, with one addition. Frank had invested in paint, and the boxes which appeared on the sills of Paulus Hook homes came in soft blues, pinks, yellows. "The flowers were a kind of trigger," Frank said, "igniting people's sense of beauty."

A ripple effect began, exactly as Jack Stokvis had predicted. Residents of the flower-box neighborhoods started painting their doors and window frames, putting up new curtains, cleaning trash-littered streets and lots. These areas "seeded" neighboring districts. For the first time, families began moving *into* the old areas, instead of out, putting their time and money into restoring the rundown homes. Two hundred people attended the first meeting of a citywide Preservation and Restoration Association. Nine months

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later, they received a federal grant to aid in the rehabilitation of brownstones in the historic districts.

In Paulus Hook, Colgate-Palmolive, whose factory on the Hudson River had been buying up unoccupied homes, razing them and paving over the lots to expand its work area, gave the city a gift of \$20,000 to build a new park, plus an additional \$8000 for planting trees. In the Italian Village, the resurgence of life after the flower boxes appeared was given an official name: *risorgimento*. The green, white and red of the Italian flag sprouted as paint was donated "to help out the flowers."

Stokvis talked to art departments at Ferris High School, Jersey City State College, and Kean College in Union and, as a result, students came out in brigades on Saturdays to paint Village signposts and trash baskets. A dirty, cement-covered railroad embankment was transformed into a brightly colored mural, featuring a huge, smiling sun, and the words: WELCOME TO THE VILLAGE. Martin Holloway, art professor at Kean, adopted *risorgimento* as an official class project. His students adorned many of the 120 Italian specialty shops' storefronts with colorful identifying murals: sausages, cheeses, wines, fruits, loaves of Italian bread. Two graffiti-filled walls were painted over with two four-by-six-foot directories of the Village, showing shops, restaurants, parks, monuments, schools, clubs, churches.

The Italian Village streets are today crowded with pedestrians, and

the section's crime rate is one of the lowest in the city. The Village is now drawing weekend shoppers from miles around, even from New York City. Tony Nicodemo summed up the resurgence: "The flowers brought pride to the area—and we took it from there."

Because I was the author of that children's book from which *The Street of the Flower Boxes* was filmed, Jack Stokvis invited me to tour the three transformed Jersey City neighborhoods. I was overwhelmed by what I saw. Our small block in Manhattan might have been considered a fluke. But here major sections of a whole grimy city were being transformed.

Of course, there is much to be done. But, for the first time in many years, residents of each of the three areas have united and taken concrete action toward a single goal: the preservation and restoration of their neighborhoods.

Stokvis's program is now going citywide. Representatives of 500 local organizations were invited to last April's flower-box meeting, held in city hall. Afterward, an exhausted but exhilarated Stokvis told a reporter: "Window boxes seem to be a magic catalyst. They make their own urban renewal. I know of no other program that costs so little in time and money and inspires so many people to do so much so quickly."

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