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Where it's hip to be hopeful - Camden is attracting young leaders eager, if not always encouraged, to inspire change.

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They are ambitious and enthusiastic and are committing themselves to Camden during its most optimistic time in recent history.

Through new lenses, they see not the old Camden battles but a fascinating place to begin their careers of medicine or development, education or community building.

They are new leaders, all in their 20s or 30s, emerging in New Jersey's poorest city.

There is Alana Walls, 27, who is launching Camden's fourth charter school.

And Daria Chacon, 29, a Lockheed Martin software engineer who moved to Camden and found its problems so compelling that she quit her job and enrolled in medical school, aspiring to become a community doctor.

Anthony Mazzealli, 29 and a resident at Cooper University Hospital, gushes about his waterfront apartment and trying to lure his Philadelphia college friends over the river.

For now, the movement involves just a few dozen people, but it could hold significant ramifications for a place long challenged by weak or corrupt leadership.

"We're young enough and naive enough to be excited about things," says Erica Claggett, 26, the new president of the Cooper-Grant Neighborhood Association. "We have different perspectives because we didn't grow up here."

Some longtime city leaders say it is a perfect match between fresh eyes and a small, troubled city.

"I think, over time, these people are going to form the nucleus of the new leadership of Camden, particularly the civic leadership," says waterfront leader Thomas Corcoran, 60, who has a residency requirement for his mostly young staff at the Cooper's Ferry Development Corp.

"That's what the city needs - young, independent-minded people who aren't going to accept the system the way it has been."

Over the years, Camden had attracted a trickle of young urban pioneers. Now a growing number appear to be staying put instead of moving on.

The movement is most pronounced in Cooper-Grant, a tiny, renewed neighborhood between the waterfront and Rutgers University that has the highest concentration of new young professionals in Camden.

Just ask activist Frank Fulbrook, 55, who spent almost 20 years as neighborhood

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president until Claggett unseated him last fall in a 25-24 vote.

"Some of the yuppies are extremely arrogant," Fulbrook says. "They don't have much respect for those of us who took Cooper-Grant from rock-bottom in 1981 and made it the best neighborhood in Camden prior to their arrival."

Well-known for his encyclopedic knowledge of the city, Fulbrook helped launch a revitalization effort when almost half of Cooper-Grant's homes were shells. He hoped to attract middle-class people.

His work paid off. The neighborhood is now prime real estate and home to a diverse, largely harmonious mix of neighbors who throw legendary block parties and have developed a special rapport.

But to Fulbrook's surprise, Cooper-Grant's new residents began to challenge everything from his three-hour meetings to the design of a more than \$8 million housing project.

"Some of the people who have been here for a long time have learned to work within a certain paradigm. It's changing, and that makes them uncomfortable," says neighbor Anthony Perno, 28, a manager with Cooper's Ferry.

The generation gap came to a head over the association's major proposed project, the construction of 28 market-rate homes. Some new residents successfully fought to include some rowhouses, saying many potential buyers wanted an urban lifestyle free of high-maintenance yards.

An angry Fulbrook maintained that the change lowered the selling value of the homes, increased the project's cost, and delayed it for a year.

He predicted that as Camden's renewal efforts spread, the same kind of clash could occur in neighborhoods such as Cramer Hill, where a \$1.2 billion redevelopment proposal includes market-rate housing.

"The newcomers have done some good, and some harm, to Cooper-Grant, and anybody who would deny that is not being honest," he says.

Perno says his generation fought for better city services, from parking policies to maintenance.

"You have some really young people who are really eager to see some change," he says. "They do recognize what has happened and do appreciate those who have come before them. And their eagerness to carry that torch forward can be misinterpreted as arrogance."

'So much potential'

The sun is setting on downtown Camden, but the group is just gathering inside Hank's Bar on Cooper Street.

In the tradition of past Camden leaders who congregated at watering holes such as the Zog and the Tavern, Perno and a few others have started convening monthly at Hank's to gnaw buffalo wings and chat about school vouchers, the recovery act that funnels state aid to the city, and other issues.

Tonight, Mazzarelli has brought along friends who worked on Joseph Torsella's U.S. House campaign in Northeast Philadelphia. Mazzarelli asks Perno if he knows of any job in Camden for one of them. "And guess where he wants to buy?"

Perno smiles. "Let me guess, and the first nine don't count. Cooper-Grant?"

A graduate of law and medical schools and winner of a national award for spearheading a student-run clinic for the uninsured in Camden, Mazzarelli says the city is the best place around for smart people his age.

"There is so much need here," he says. "There is something unique about the people of Camden, in their passion for the city. You spend time here, you just want to spend more time here. There's so much potential."

Last year, he helped organize a fund-raiser on the battleship New Jersey for an equally ambitious friend, Cory Booker, a 35-year-old Rhodes Scholar who is planning a second challenge to longtime Newark Mayor Sharpe James.

Mazzarelli was the first to sign an apartment lease in the posh Victor Lofts. "People said it was a sacrifice," he says incredulously. "Have you seen the Victor?"

But he and his contemporaries are not exactly moving to a trendy area. For instance, Erica Claggett's biggest dream is getting a neighborhood Wawa.

Physician Jeffrey Brenner, 34, and wife Jenny Greenberg, 30, a Cooper's Ferry project manager, moved to Camden in 1998 from a bustling Seattle neighborhood. The couple joke that they went through caffeine withdrawal until 2002, when a Starbucks opened at Rutgers.

"You walk across the river, and you have a much better quality of life," Brenner said. But they have found rewarding work and a diverse community of friends in Camden.

"Before, we would walk the dog along the waterfront, and you could walk the whole mile and back without seeing anyone. Now you have to keep him on a leash," Brenner says. "It's sort of like a city growing up around us."

Neighbors Daria and Gabriel Chacon, both software engineers, also moved to Camden in 1998.

Daria is now in medical school at Temple University; Gabriel is in law school at Rutgers at night. He explains the switch to more rewarding careers this way: "There wasn't much that I, a software engineer, could do for the neighborhood."

Returning for revival

Many of her peers equated success with leaving Camden, but Melinda Sanchez, 24, has chosen to put down roots where she grew up - Cramer Hill. She earned a master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania, then came back to work for Cooper's Ferry just in time to help Cramer Hill navigate the redevelopment plan.

Camden's stigma has "influenced who I am - wanting to change people's perceptions," Sanchez says.

Alana Walls also returned to Camden, where she attended church as a child. Her family ties have helped her build trust while she gets the Freedom Academy Charter School ready to open this fall and buying a rehab in the Fairview section.

"It means something to people when I say I live here," Walls says. "The concerns here - I'm not listening to them from a business perspective, so I have more insight into what we need to be doing as a school.

"Others my age are not willing to make those sacrifices, but this is my time to focus on the kids. And I'm at a time in my life when I can do that."

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Faces of a New Camden

Alana Walls

Walls, 27, a Willingboro native, left a teaching career in Maryland to open the Freedom Academy Charter School. She paid \$68,000 for a rehab in Fairview. "Camden is attractive to young professionals. I think people see this as their chance to be part of something big and something meaningful."

Anthony Perno

People laughed when Perno, 28, paid \$100,000 for a home in Cooper-Grant in 2000. Hes the one laughing now. The project manager at Coopers Ferry Development Corp. has agitated for better city services for the area, despite what he says is a general resistance to change in the city. "It wears on you, but there is a reward. You remember what it used to look like and how much its changed, and weve been a part of that."

Anthony Mazzarelli

Mazzarelli, 29, is a doctor and a lawyer. He also managed to earn a masters in bioethics and spearhead a nationally recognized student-run clinic in Camden. And hes a medical/bioethical correspondent for Michael Smerconishs radio show. He was an adviser for televisions "E.R." (Hes "never been a big sleeper.") Now a resident at Cooper University Hospital, Mazzarelli just moved to the Victor Lofts.

Erica Claggett

A homemaker who grew up in rural Western Pennsylvania, Claggett, 26, is the new president of the Cooper-Grant Neighborhood Association. She and her husband almost moved to New Hampshire a few years ago but didnt want to leave their "really great" friends and neighbors. "Its not perfect here, but we can see so many improvements coming."

Melinda Sanchez

Raised in Cramer Hill, "a really good place to grow up," Sanchez, 24, got a masters in city planning from the University of Pennsylvania and was hired at Coopers Ferry Development Corp. "For me, its not about the money. Its been in my heart for a long time."

Jeffrey Brenner

Brenner, 34, runs a primary-care practice in East Camden. He now speaks to medical students about setting up an emotionally satisfying and financially viable private medical practice in an underserved area. He is also a board member at **CamConnect**, an independent data repository for Camden.

Caption: PHOTO

MICHAEL PEREZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer Jeffrey Brenner, a physician impressed with Camden's diversity and interesting work, talks with Anthony Mazzarelli (right) at Hank's Bar. Mazzarelli, also a doctor, praised the city's passion and potential. MICHAEL PEREZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer Camden's challenges and opportunities fuel discussions at Hank's Bar among friends (from left) John Kilgannon, Anthony Perno, Jenny Williams, Ian Hoffman, Anthony Mazzarelli and Ben Parvey. Sometimes their desire for change "can be misinterpreted as arrogance," Perno says. Alana Walls; Anthony Perno; Anthony Mazzarelli; Erica Claggett; Melinda Sanchez; Jeffrey Brenner

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