



## Island grows as exodus slows

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Staten Island Advance/Jan Somma-

Hammel Motivated by a good deal on a new home, Bernardo Pace and his 17-year-old daughter, Gina, moved to West Brighton from Brooklyn in November. STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Staten Island population growth is being fueled by the return of an old trend: The steady exodus to New Jersey and Pennsylvania has slowed significantly and the borough has again become a prime destination for newcomers from Brooklyn and other nearby locales seeking better schools and more space for a bargain price.

With the U.S. Census estimating 491,730 residents in 2009 and a substantial increase expected when the 2010 count is complete, new Staten Islanders did not hail primarily from foreign countries, as has been the case for most of the last decade.

In fact, more people arrived from nearby to settle in, according to data released in the annual population estimate by the agency.

The analysis of IRS residency figures, birth and death records, and other official data showed people settled here in 2009 from other parts of the country in roughly equal numbers as they did from other parts of the world -- even as population growth in other parts of New York City remained fueled almost exclusively by immigration.

So, did the down economy once again turn Staten Island into a destination for residents from other boroughs, who come seeking space without a sky-high price tag? Or did the sagging real estate market convince Islanders to delay plans to sell their homes and uproot?

"This is certainly a reversal from the last few years, when you were looking at more foreign-born coming in and a net-out migration of residents to New Jersey," said Jonathan Peters, a professor and research fellow at the College of Staten Island, who tracks the borough's population. "Maybe it's been a lower price area in the city, maybe some of the economic pressures are forcing other people to look; it could be people moving back with their parents, not willing to sell their house."

He said this year's data resemble the Island of old, when newcomers were primarily former Brooklynites who laid down roots and stayed.

After the 1964 completion of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, new Staten Islanders arrived in droves: The 1960 census put the population at just under 222,000. Twenty years later, the number had increased by nearly 60 percent. By 2009, the number of residents had more than doubled.

Bernardo Pace might be the face of the newest Staten Islanders.

The former resident of Park Slope, Brooklyn, looked for a home to buy in that borough before realizing anything he could afford there "was depressing," and Staten Island presented a much more economically sensible option, especially in light of the recession.

In November, he purchased a two-story home on a tree-lined West Brighton street for less than \$500,000 and lives there with his 17-year-old daughter, Gina. Every day he takes a peaceful, 12-minute bike ride to the ferry, then hops off and pedals a few blocks to the downtown CUNY campus, where he is a professor of English.

"I thought it made more sense to start looking out here, and I could get more for my money -- I went on-line and it was true," said Pace, whose daughter attends Eden II, and used to be one of many students who commute to the school from other boroughs to take advantage of its unique autism program.

Although Pace knew Staten Island as a board member of the school, he said it was only in passing, and he hadn't seriously considered moving here until considering the financial upside.

"It's great; it has been more successful in every way than I hoped for," said Pace, whose older daughter, a college senior, has also grown to love the borough during her visits home from school.

With his warm neighbors and tranquil commute, the easy stroll to Forest Avenue businesses and the blissful lack of parking pressure, Pace said he cannot imagine ever leaving a place which already feels like home.

But many Brooklyn transplants who arrived here in earlier influxes, had begun to view the Island more like a lily pad, living here for a while before jumping off to new locations.

Census figures show a total of 4,500 residents packed up and left Staten Island between 2000 and 2008, before the exodus stopped last year -- many of them, according to Peters, settling in "the 'M' towns in Monmouth County, New Jersey: Middletown, Manalapan, Marlboro and Matawan."

It was immigration that drove 10.8 percent growth here during the same nine-year period: While births accounted for many of the 48,000 new residents during that nine-year period, nearly 13,000 more people arrived here from other countries.

A more detailed picture of residency shifts will emerge after the 2010 Census forms are returned and an official tally is obtained.

Even so, people whose job it is to watch who is moving in and who is moving out have seen evidence that indeed the Island last year held on to its residents, and lured new ones from other parts of the city.

We've always assumed that a good part of our market is from Brooklyn," said Sandy Krueger, the CEO of the Staten Island Board of Realtors. "That push to come into Staten Island from the other communities is strong."

In the two years the organization has tracked such data, there was an increase of home sales to non-Islanders -- going from 23 percent of total sales in 2008 to last year's 29 percent. "I think the recession and the busting of the housing bubble had a bigger impact on people leaving the Island," Krueger said. "The New Jersey market closed over the years with the recession."

Staten Island, long known as the most affordable borough, last year became a bigger draw for people unable to afford the sky-high costs of other areas. And suddenly putting in a little extra commuting time seemed like an acceptable trade-off for a more reasonable cost of living, say real estate agents.

For Jessica Taccetta, an associate broker at Clove Lake Realty, the surprise last year was the rising interest in rentals.

"There was a tremendous call for rentals. ... A lot of people from off Staten Island; they came from everywhere," she said.

Even people with no Staten Island ties decided to give the borough a try when they looked at the costs and did the math, said Norma Sue Wolfe of Gateway Realty, telling the story of a Queens couple who did an Internet search for affordable neighborhoods, then hopped the ferry, explored Clifton and now have an offer to buy a house there.

"Our houses and apartments were less expensive to begin with and are a lot less expensive with the recession," she said.

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