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Community Profile: Rogers Park

Moving to its own beat

Independent thought and spirit define Rogers Park

By Jeffrey Steele | Special to the Tribune
November 14, 2008



Rogers Park residents are willing to spend a few more minutes on the Red Line to reside in a neighborhood with a unique take on life. (Nancy Stone/Tribune)

As owner of a [Rogers Park](#) print shop, Kathleen Paluch once printed some T-shirts festooned with the slogan "Made in Rogers Park." When she and her husband Denis traveled, they often wore the shirts, which rarely failed to remind the Paluchs of the kinship folks all over seem to feel for this far North Side Chicago neighborhood.

"Wherever in the country we wore ours, we would get people waving from the sidewalk or from their cars, saying, 'We used to live there!'" Paluch recalled. "When my mother was wearing one of our T-shirts on a trip to Costa Rica, she was walking down a sidewalk when some woman came running out of a shop saying, 'I used to live there!'"

Once a Rogers Parker, always a Rogers Parker, it seems. Whether a current or long-removed resident, folks seem to take pride in their links to the community bordered by the lake, Western Avenue, [Evanston](#) and [Devon Avenue](#).

It may be the independent thought and spirit often attributed to Rogers Parkers that unites them all. These are people who go their own way and think their own thoughts. If they wanted to be just like everyone else, they'd live elsewhere.

"People speak their minds, they're very opinionated, and they have very high standards for their elected officials," says Joe Moore, alderman of the 49th Ward, which encompasses Rogers Park and parts of [Edgewater](#) and [West Ridge](#).

"They are definitely liberal, broad-

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minded and open to city living," said Diane Diedrich, agent with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage, Halsted office.

Kimberly Bares, executive director for DevCorp North, the 15-year-old business community and economic development corporation for Rogers Park, sees that self-determining and autonomous quality in a Rogers Park business community packed with stores that are anything but "me-too."

"The community was built on its reputation as a place that values independent thought and independently-owned businesses," she said.

Nowhere is it more evident than in Jarvis Square, a rapidly revitalizing shopping and entertainment district nestled amid red-brick two flats in the shadow of the ancient, ivy-covered Morse Red Line station. The quaint two-block quarter is chockablock with one-of-a-kind businesses like Charmers restaurant, Poinin Stil Irish pub and DageL and Beli sandwich shop. There's also Taste Food & Wine, a

European-style wine shop and gourmet food store serving tempting imported specialty foods, and Luzzat Restaurant, an eatery serving Indian and Pakistani cuisine.

Among the business owners in Jarvis Square is Marie Walker, who owns Rogers Bark, a pet-grooming establishment at 1447 W. Jarvis St. that opened three years ago.

"I love Rogers Park," Walker was saying recently as she took a break from gently shearing a white poodle, adding she particularly savors Jarvis Square.

"Two years ago, you couldn't walk around here at night without feeling someone was watching you. But now it's turned into everything you'd want in a neighborhood—families with strollers, people walking their dogs, people saying 'hi' to you on the street." Another up-and-coming district surrounds the one-month-old Morse Theatre, 1328 W. Morse Ave., whose arresting blue-and-bronze art deco neon sign reflects the theater's silent-film nickelodeon origins. The 299-seat house specializes in live music and recently added a restaurant next door, The Century Public House.

"It fits in perfectly with our branding and development focus, which has been about creating an entertainment district in that area," Bares said.

That effort will be buttressed by a \$4 million to \$5 million streetscape improvement initiative to grace Morse Avenue with new streetlights, curbs, bump-outs, community identifying signs, street furniture and flower planter boxes. "That will make the street more beautiful," Moore said. "We hope to have it done by summer."

[The Morse Theatre](#) is an appropriate addition to a community already known for its performing arts. "We do have a very dynamic theater scene in Rogers Park," Bares said, pointing to 26-year-old Lifeline Theatre, renowned for creative set designs, as well as No Exit and Heartland Studio. The latter two are connected to Heartland Café, a Rogers Park institution in step with the neighborhood's independent stance.

As Bares points out, it serves "wholesome, sustainable foods," and was doing so generations before anyone knew what the term "sustainable" meant.

The arts focus extends to visual arts. The 15-year-old Greenleaf Art Center, which Kathleen Paluch founded and manages, bills itself as the center for visual arts in Rogers Park. The center offers art classes, group shows and art studios.

For those who seek more active recreation, the community boasts numerous parks, with the best known being Warren Park, offering a fieldhouse, skateboard park, toboggan hill and even the nine-hole Robert Black Golf Course, Bares said.

Rogers Park has long relished a reputation as a renter-friendly community, one in which apartments were both more affordable and more spacious than elsewhere. The

neighborhood east of Clark Street in particular is known as a haven for long-time renters, who stay for the "good-size apartments with sunrooms out in front," some with lake views, said Denis Paluch, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage Lincoln Park Plaza. "The bedrooms and porches are good size as well."

In recent years, some traditional apartments have been transformed into one- and two-bedroom condos, which today are priced from \$140,000 to \$230,000, Paluch said.

Concern that Rogers Park could lose its status as a hub of abundant renting opportunities led to creation two years ago of the Lakeside Community Development Corporation, which "speaks for neighbors who want to retain the Rogers Park rental community, as well as representing the needs of condo associations," Paluch said.

"It's a healthy mix," Moore added. "We're still primarily a rental community, but we have a number of additional condominiums that add owners to the community."

The for-sale market includes two-flats and numerous vintage single-family homes, including turn-of-the-century Victorians on larger lots, Paluch said. Diedrich estimates prices for single-family homes at \$350,000 to \$700,000.

[Loyola University Chicago](#), one of Rogers Park's two largest employers, encourages faculty and staff to buy in Rogers Park through its University Assisted Housing program, said Loyola's director of community relations Jennifer Clark.

The program makes available forgivable loans to employees to gain for-purchase housing in Rogers Park and in lakefront communities served by [CTA's](#) Red Line south to the Loop. Highest loan amounts are awarded to those who purchase in Rogers Park and neighboring Edgewater. First-time and step-up or step-down buyers are eligible.

"The point is to build community in Edgewater and Rogers Park that connects Loyola to the neighborhoods," Clark said.

Lingering notions that Rogers Park is unsafe were among Bares' first hurdles when she arrived at DevCorp North. Four years ago, she launched a per-capita crime study, finding "when we looked at per-person crime rates, the chance of being victimized in Rogers Park was much lower than in contiguous Chicago communities."

For most residents, the bottom line is they prefer residing in a neighborhood that marches to its own distinctive drumbeat. Said Bares: "Rogers Park prides itself on being the antithesis of the cookie-cutter community."

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