

UCP's quiet, steady expansion has Port Richmond up in arms

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Is United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of New York City biting off a bigger piece of Port Richmond than it can chew?

Established in a storefront at 296 Richmond Ave. for nearly eight years, UCP in the past week has raised the hackles of neighbors and Community Board 1 administrators as word has

seeped out of the organization's expansion of its property holdings and operations in the Port Richmond area.

The expansion encompasses four buildings bought within the past nine months by the non-profit organization, which offers rehabilitative services to the mentally and physically handicapped.

When UCP moved last summer to

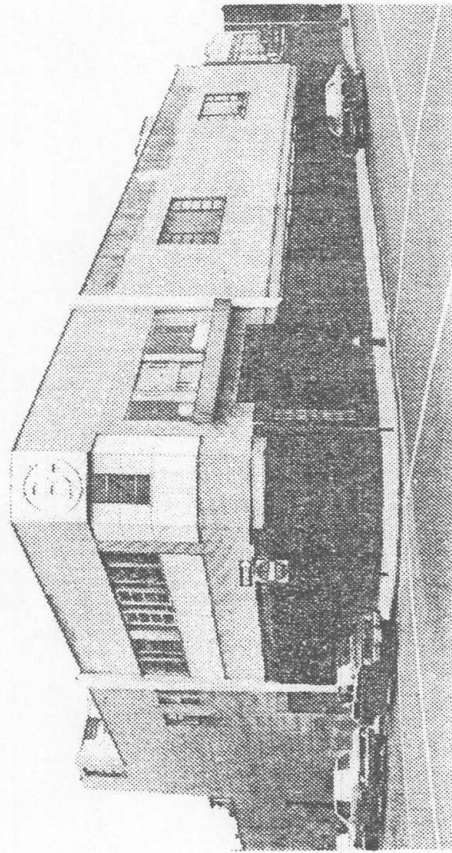
purchase the biggest building, the former Garber Bros. department store, its board of directors solicited and obtained discussion and ultimately good will from Port Richmond residents and the community board. Acquisition of the vacant building, at 281 Richmond Ave., was finalized Sept. 5.

In the same period, however, UCP was quietly moving to buy two occupied frame houses in lots adjoining the Garbers building. That transaction also was finalized Sept. 5.

All three structures were sold to UCP by Port Richmond resident and real estate speculator John Michelotti. A member of the Port Richmond Local Development Corp., Michelotti's relations with UCP, if any, beyond his role as the agent of sale are unclear. But to concerned people in the community, Michelotti, even since unloading the three buildings to UCP, remains a ghost to be reckoned with.

The fourth and apparently the latest acquisition by UCP was made in February. Again an occupied frame home, this building is located behind the Garber store, at 96 Albion Pl. It was

(Continued on Page 7)



The old Garbers building on Richmond Ave., Port Richmond, which was purchased by United Cerebral Palsy.

S.I. Advance Photo by Robert Parsons

sold to UCP by Anna Becker of 43 Tabb Pl., Port Richmond.

Because UCP acquired the three houses without consulting community representatives — in contrast to the frank procedure followed in the case of the Garber building — the organization has fomented suspicion about its intentions.

Community board members point out that the neighborhood has been engaged in the past two years in a concerted revitalization effort. Federal money has been funneled in to help restore the Richmond Ave. commercial strip to a degree of the stability it enjoyed in past decades, before other sections of the Island usurped the North Shore's prominence as a business center.

Civic groups consequently are particularly sensitive to changes in the Port Richmond section and are eager to ensure that some semblance of a master plan is adhered to.

In interviews last week, UCP officials indicated that their plans for the residential property are tentative. The only sure development, they said, is that tenants of the three houses are being asked to relocate so their homes may be razed.

The Garber building, with almost five times more floor space than the current UCP rehabilitation center across the street, will accommodate an overflow of handicapped clients, according to UCP officials. The organization, now serving about 100 Staten Island residents, cites a demand for services from at least 100 more people on the Island afflicted with the condition, stemming from brain damage, known as cerebral palsy.

A check of records filed with the county clerk and the Department of Real Property Assessment reveals that despite UCP officials' vagueness concerning the use to which three of their new parcels could be put, their organization paid generously for ownership.

Current deeds to the four buildings indicate a sequence of transactions in the following approximate amounts:

Albion Pl. have changed hands as a package. On July 31, 1978, the parcel was bought by Michelotti from a corporation formed by Paul Garber for at least \$34,000. About 13 months later, Michelotti sold them to UCP for at least \$70,000.

¶ The former Garber store was bought by Michelotti from a corporation formed by Paul Garber for at least \$76,000 on July 31, 1978. About 13 months later, Michelotti sold the property to UCP for at least \$450,000. The land and property involved was assessed at the time by the city Department of Real Property Assessment as an \$80,000 value for tax purposes.

¶ The property at 96 Albion Pl. was sold by Mrs. Becker to UCP on Feb. 8, 1980, for \$44,000. The house and surrounding land has been valued by the city for tax purposes at \$18,000.

The financial picture can be brought into sharper focus if these price tags are viewed as proportions.

For 1061 Post Ave. and 90 Albion Pl., UCP paid 205 percent more than Michelotti had paid a year earlier.

For the Garber building, UCP paid 594 percent more than Michelotti had paid a year earlier. According to Leslie Park, executive director of UCP of New York City Inc., the building will cost another "half-million dollars in renovations."

UCP's president, Leo Hausman, said yesterday that Michelotti's original asking price for the Garber building had been coaxed down by nearly \$70,000. Describing himself as "personally involved in the negotiations" for sale, Hausman asserted, "It looked like a bargain to us."

Hausman went on to emphasize the urgency of the need as perceived by his organization for expanded facilities on Staten Island. The organization's preferred but so far unavailable choices, he said, would have been for space on the grounds of Sea View Hospital and Home or the Staten Island Developmental Center.

To build a structure like the Garbers building from scratch, he reasoned, would have cost \$80 to \$70 per square foot, whereas the purchase factored out to about \$15 per square foot.

The suggestion that some impropriety might be inferred from the transactions

"raises the hair on the back of my head," Park said. "If a controversy raises its head, we may walk away completely."

"If there is a controversy, the residents of Staten Island are going to be the losers," Park continued. "Port Richmond needs to be built up, and we're going to be investing in it. In the first go-round, everybody was delighted with the idea. Certainly the real estate will be improved."

Michelotti had left last week for a trip to England, where he is expected to remain for another week, according to relatives. Efforts to reach him by telephone where he reportedly was staying last night in England were unsuccessful.

Norman Berger, district manager for Community Board 1, noted last week that the board had heard informally of UCP's acquisition of the three houses. He said a board representative had attempted to discuss the matter with Vincent Sclafani, director of the rehabilitation center at 296 Richmond Ave., but had been "unsuccessful at getting hard-and-fast information out of him."

"When the board approved the use by UCP, it was just the Garbers building,"

Berger said. The board, he explained, considered UCP a quiet and responsible presence in the neighborhood. The Garbers building had been boarded up and neglected for several years, so renovation was welcomed, he said.

But, Berger continued, "We are concerned that residential buildings were taken over without first coming to us and apprising us of the expansion. We're wondering what demolition is going to do to the community."

According to Sclafani, his organization is likely to pave the lot at 96 Albion Pl. for parking. The land there is zoned

for commercial use.

Anthony Rondinelli, who lives at 72 Albion Pl., has spearheaded opposition to UCP expansion. Rondinelli insists he isn't trying to prevent UCP from occupying the Garbers building. It is further expansion, he said last week, that he is against. He persuaded 17 neighbors to sign a statement for publication in the Advance urging a moratorium on UCP plans.

"They're looking to knock down three houses," Rondinelli said. "For all we know, this is the beginning of a chain reaction. When anything gets too big, it gets out of touch, elite and unresponsive. It relies more on muscle than on brains."

"UCP gets public funds," he continued. "I think it's showing a callous disregard for the citizens it depends on."

A charitable organization, UCP of New York City relies for its operating budget on contributions and government funding. According to a financial summary prepared by the organization, its total income last year was about \$9.07 million. At the end of the year, it recorded expenditures of \$33,557 more than its income.