

## Walk down memorial lane



### Shrines to two murder victims in E. Harlem amid crime spike

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THEY ARE THE ghosts of East Harlem: Amid construction of luxury condos and tenement renovations are makeshift memorials to two homicide victims slain on the same block. Candles and fresh flowers accompany the photos, and messages on paper or on walls bid farewell.

Alejandro Almonte, 48, was killed Dec. 1 when a junkie slashed his throat after the hard-working porter refused to give him money. A poem taped to the wall at 428 E. 117th St., where Almonte worked and died, reads, "God felt sorry."

"Drugs," construction worker Mauricio Espinoza said as he made the sign of the cross in front of the memorial. "What else could it be?"

Recalling Almonte as a kind, calm man, Espinoza looked down the block at another memorial, to another victim — Lesenia (Che Che) Figueroa, a young mother felled by a stray bullet in August.

"Now I feel really strange," he said.

Some local residents feel

strange — and scared — with violent crime from E. 115th St. to E. 125th St., east of Fifth Ave., rising in 2006, compared to the previous year.

Though a far cry from the high crime of the early 1990s, residents, both old and new, are wary.

Marian Barnes was on E. 117th St. between First and Pleasant Aves. looking at an apartment when she saw the memorial for Almonte.

"You wouldn't think that with all the construction this would happen," said Barnes, attracted to East Harlem's up-and-coming status and still-affordable rent.

Gentrification has put other parts of Harlem financially out of reach for Bronxite Barnes and her 19-year-old son. And Almonte's memorial is "a little close to home," she said.

Down the block, the makeshift memorial for Figueroa has been moved across the street to make way for scaffolding for yet another building renovation.

The Aug. 16 slaying of Figueroa, a 27-year-old mother of a young son, is still unsolved.

"It's still hard to believe," said her tearful cousin, Amy Pina, 17.



Flowers and candles fill memorial to Lesenia Figueroa (with son in photo l.), who was felled by stray bullet in August. Down the block is shrine (above) to Alejandro Almonte.

A framed photo of the young woman and her 4-year-old son sits proudly atop the entertainment center in the family's small living room on E. 117th St.

"She always used to say to live life like it's the last day," said Figueroa's sister, Jazmin Pina, 16.

Almonte and Figueroa are among nine people killed in the 25th Precinct in 2006, compared with eight in 2005. There were 24 rapes, up from 17 in 2005,

while serious assaults rose about 5%, according to police records.

Community Board 11 member Cora Shelton, who has lived in East Harlem for 60 years, said she is "just amazed" at the level of crime in the area.

Resident Derrick Taitt, a former cop, said the police are "losing the streets, and we're going to suffer."

Speaking at an October community meeting, Deputy Inspector Robert Lenahan said police

were working hard to reduce crime.

Meanwhile, residents and community board members are forming a plan to work with the district attorney's office to create a neighborhood task force. Others plan to bring the City Council a petition demanding more police officers in the area.

"Representation in numbers is what's gonna count," said Alberto Crespo, a community board member.

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