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Searching for an Extra Hour of Sleep

Burdened with a 90-minute commute from Newark, a teacher scours Harlem and the Bronx for a place with outdoor space — and a shorter trip to work.

By Joyce Cohen



Darrell E. Roberson in his new one-bedroom apartment in Soundview, the Bronx.
Katherine Marks for The New York Times

After he moved to New York in 2001, Darrell E. Roberson bounced around the Bronx and Harlem, often sharing an apartment with roommates. “People were moving in and out of town, or people had life happening, and that caused me to shift my plans,” he said.

Eventually he moved out to New Jersey and found himself living in [Teachers Village](#), in downtown Newark — a new development primarily for educators — paying \$1,420 a month for a one-bedroom. From there, he commuted to the South Bronx, where he works as a middle-school special-education teacher.

It wasn’t until he first made the 90-minute trip that he realized how burdensome it was going to be. With a walk to Newark Penn Station, a ride on either New Jersey Transit or the PATH train, and a switch to the

subway in Manhattan, “the commute was really killing me,” said Mr. Roberson, who is originally from Oakland, Calif. “You are on pins and needles: Am I going to get to work on time? Coming home could be even longer. I started thinking, ‘Is this really worth it for me?’”



The apartment, in the Lafayette Boynton Apartments complex, is on a high floor, with a balcony and views of the World Trade Center to the south and the George Washington Bridge to the west. Credit Katherine Marks for The New York Times

So last spring, after enduring the commute for nearly two years, Mr. Roberson, now 39, resolved to return to New York, preferably to Harlem. He went on the hunt for a one-bedroom with good subway access, laundry in the building and outdoor space.

“I like having access to outside without going totally downstairs,” he said. “I want to know what the weather is doing.”

His price range was \$1,600 to \$1,900 a month. But in Harlem, the one-bedrooms he liked rented for the low \$2,000s. In the past, broker fees had typically been one month’s rent; this time around, he noticed, they were higher.

“The Bronx is just a hop, skip and jump away,” he said to himself. “I don’t need to live in Harlem. I am coming back to the Bronx.”

He considered a one-bedroom in an older, six-story building on Cedar Avenue in University Heights. Rents started at around \$1,400, but the apartments lacked outdoor space and the building was closer to the Metro-North train than any subway line.

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Parkchester, the massive housing development on 129 landscaped acres, was an obvious option, where one-bedrooms also started in the \$1,400s. Mr. Roberson had friends who lived there and knew it well, but he decided that laundry was a problem. With no machines on site, he would have to make a trek to a laundromat.



Mr. Roberson considered a one-bedroom in a six-story building in University Heights, but it lacked outdoor space and was closer to the Metro-North train than the subway. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Mr. Roberson, who has two graduate degrees in education, provides early-intervention services for children after school hours. One client, Julie Barreto, lived with her two young sons in a one-bedroom in the [Lafayette Boynton Apartments](#) in Soundview, a neighborhood, like Parkchester, to the east of the Bronx River Parkway. The four-building complex, built in 1969 as part of the Mitchell-Lama development program, has nearly 1,000 apartments.

“I know the Bronx well, but for some reason, this side I wasn’t too familiar with,” said Mr. Roberson, who worked with Ms. Barreto’s older son. He started arriving early to their appointments, taking the time to walk through the neighborhood and nearby Soundview Park.

The Barretos’ one-bedroom was spacious, with a balcony and a dining room. Mr. Roberson appreciated the unobstructed Manhattan views, even taking some photos from their balcony. “There was something within me that said, ‘I think this is going to be home,’” he said.

Ms. Barreto has lived in her apartment for nearly eight years. “I’m new here,” she said. Some of her neighbors have been there for decades.



The massive Parkchester complex had affordable one-bedrooms available, but no laundry room on site. Credit Katherine Marks for The New York Times

“We started to talk about his life, about our life,” Ms. Barreto said. “I knew he was planning to move because he told me he was waiting to finish his lease. I said, ‘You know, the office is just down the block.’ I encouraged him to move here because it was really convenient for him.”

Mr. Roberson saw several one-bedrooms before choosing one on a high floor. Some had shared balconies, partitioned in the middle, but he has his own. His view is slightly obstructed, but it includes the World Trade Center, the George Washington Bridge and La Guardia Airport.

The bathroom is small, the closets are large, and the laundry is in the basement. His rent is \$1,615. (The application fee is \$50 per adult.)

“He saw the added value of living here,” said Steve Seltzer, the general manager of the complex. “It is so much more expensive in Harlem.”

Mr. Roberson arrived in the summer. “We met in the street the day he moved,” Ms. Barreto recalled. “I said, ‘Wow, we are going to be a neighbor!’”

Mr. Roberson’s apartment is near a garbage chute, so he can hear the trash thundering down. And on Saturdays he catches noise from two additional rental buildings currently rising at the complex. But all things considered, he finds his new home sufficiently quiet.



The Lafayette Boynton Apartments complex, built in 1969, offered apartments with balconies and views of Manhattan. And there was a laundry room in the basement. Credit Katherine Marks for The New York Times

“My neighbors are very long-term people here, and that’s a good sign,” he said. “People were very welcoming.”

He discovered that one school colleague was a 14-year resident, saying she was “instrumental in helping me get acclimated to my new environment.”

Mr. Roberson appreciates the [ShopRite](#) that recently opened in nearby Bruckner Plaza. And with outdoor parking at the apartment complex available for \$100 a month, he plans to get a car.

As for his commute, the trip to school now takes 20 to 30 minutes on the Bx5 bus and the 2 train, giving him an extra hour to sleep every morning. “I love the fact that I live so close to work,” he said.

“I remember complaining to my friends. Now they say, ‘You have not complained about your commute whatsoever.’ I don’t have a terrible commute anymore. It just disappeared, and I’ve been happier as a result.”