

Artist opens exhibit that poses boro foreclosure solution

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Brooklyn resident creates interactive audio piece at vacant storefront in downtown Jamaica

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BY IVAN PEREIRA

The foreclosure crisis has devastated hundreds of thousands of families in southeast Queens who worked hard to purchase their first homes, and while government agencies and banks try to find an economical solution to the problem, artist Michael Premo said he has found a sociological solution.

The Brooklyn resident, along with fellow artist Rachel Falcone, have created a special interactive art exhibit at a vacant Jamaica storefront in which foreclosure victims can record audio anecdotes about their experiences and also get advice from housing experts on how to get back on their feet.

Premo, who works with Falcone in collecting audio stories from regular Americans for the nonprofit group StoryCorps, said the "Housing is a Human Right" exhibit would not only chronicle a major part of recent New York



A new exhibit will use the personal experiences of southeast Queens foreclosure victims to inform the public and give them a deeper understanding of the housing crisis.

Photo courtesy Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning

history but give victims a form of catharsis.

"Art does what nothing else does, which is provide a place to think of things differently and in a creative way," he said.

Stories are currently being gathered and recorded at a former beauty salon and this weekend

interested participants can take part in a foreclosure workshop. The workshop's location near the bustling, commercial downtown Jamaica area has proven advantageous for Premo's project.

"Just the nature of Jamaica Avenue and the street traffic, there have been a lot of people

coming in," he said.

The exhibit, sponsored by the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Chasama Studios and the Neighborhood Housing Services of Jamaica, comes at a time when neighborhoods such as Jamaica, St. Albans and Springfield Gardens have been hit with more foreclosed homes than anywhere else in the state.

The cause of the foreclosures stems largely from fraudulent loans offered to lower- and middle-class families in the area, according to Premo.

The artist said he was moved by the statistics and stories he had read about the crisis' impact on the community because many of the victims were fooled and lost everything.

"Southeast Queens is a fascinating neighborhood ... because it was one of the highest zones of minority homeownership," he said.

So far Premo and Falcone have been able to persuade about

20 people to tell their stories for the full exhibit that will go on display later in the year. The artist said some homeowners are unwilling to participate because they have a strong sense of failure.

"It was surprising about the number of people who were reluctant to share their story because of the pride involved," Premo said.

The exhibit's young volunteers have helped ease the concerns of would-be participants and helped them record their stories. Once they are done recording, the homeowners tend to feel more relieved and have a brighter outlook on their condition, according to Premo.

"The goal is to build a collective power of storytelling. They can realize that it is not their fault," he said.

For more information on "Housing is a Human Right," log on to housingisahumanright.org or call 1-888-955-6653.