

QUEENS NEWS

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Taking green to new level

City's first hydroponic rooftop farm in Jamaica

BY JOHN LAUINGER
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A SHORT DISTANCE from the Long Island Rail Road's Jamaica Station lies an old industrial building that backs up to the tracks.

Few train passengers have probably ever paid any mind to the one-story building at 148-02 Archer Ave., currently home to a church.

But the building's rooftop, littered with rusted nails once used to secure railroad ties, could play an important role in the future of food production in the city.

Three young entrepreneurs are preparing to transform it into what is believed will be the city's first commercial-scale hydroponic rooftop farm.

The startup, called Gotham Greens, will feature a 12,000-square-foot greenhouse, slated to begin construction in the fall and yield its first harvest early next year.

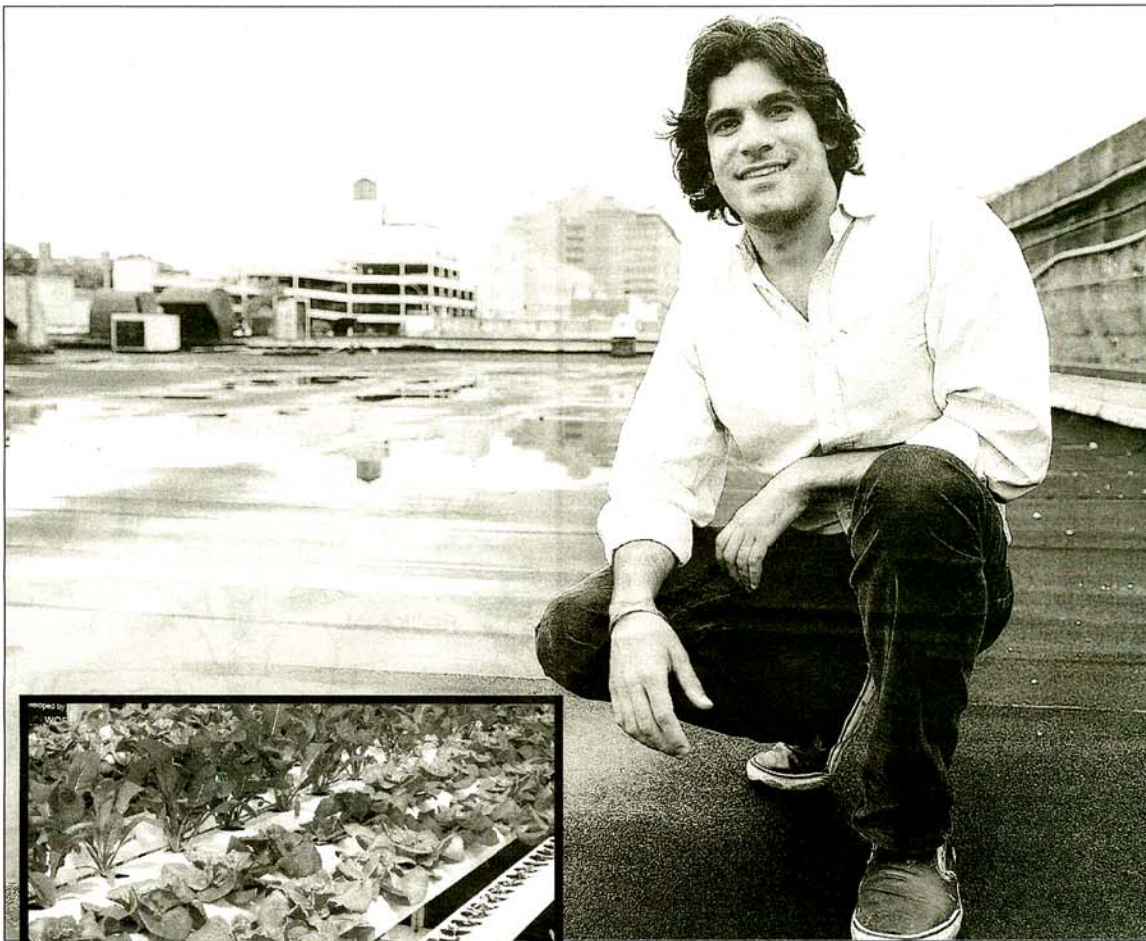
It will use a water-based, soil-free method to grow roughly 30 tons of vegetables and fruit each year for sale to local markets and restaurants.

The groundbreaking venture aims to use an untapped urban resource — rooftop space — to meet an emerging demand for locally grown produce.

"We are trying to demonstrate that sustainable, urban agriculture can be economically viable in the city," said the company's greenhouse director, Jennifer Nelkin, 30.

Nevin Cohen, an assistant professor of Urban Environmental Studies at The New School, said Gotham Greens could be poised to catch the food wave of the future in the city.

"Growing food in cities is going to become increasingly important," Cohen said, "and this is a great model of how we can use



Gotham Greens, a startup to grow produce hydroponically (inset), will not use fertilizer or pesticides, says managing director Viraj Puri, on the rooftop of 148-02 Archer Ave. in Jamaica. Photo (above) by Susana Bates

currently unused space to produce food."

Nelkin and the company's managing director, Viraj Puri, met while working at an engineering nonprofit known as New York Sun Works. There, they helped develop the Science Barge, a hydroponic greenhouse built atop a barge formerly moored on the Hudson River.

The Science Barge showed that a sprawling tract of land isn't necessary to have a productive farm, said Puri, 27.

"The biggest challenge that we are facing right now is not the technology — we know the technology," Nelkin said. "It's moving this technology into the city."

Nelkin and Puri, who hope to expand to multiple locations in the city, are joined by co-founder Eric Haley, who works for a boutique investment bank called Corporate Fuel Partners. Haley will handle the company's books.

The \$1.4 million project will be mainly powered by 2,000 square feet of solar panels arrayed on

the rooftop next door to the greenhouse. Both buildings are owned by the Greater Jamaica Development Corp.

Based on the project's energy-saving potential, it got a \$400,000 grant from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. The company will pay back the grant once it hits its stride.

Gotham Greens will also feature a massive system that captures rainwater for irrigation.

"We eliminate all fertilizer and pesticide runoff, which is one of the leading causes of global water pollution," Puri said.

The company will deliver its produce in a biodiesel van. That will allow it to offer competitive prices by cutting out middle men who charge farmers a markup of 10% to 15%, Puri said.

Nelkin, who has a master's degree in controlled environment agriculture, draws confidence from the fact she has worked in greenhouses in varied settings around the globe.

"I went from the Caribbean to the South Pole to a barge, so I think I can handle a rooftop," she said. "We'll see."

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