

The New York Times

SUNDAY, MARCH 16, 2008

THE HUNT



Small

The rooms were boxy in a co-op on Gramatan Avenue in Mount Vernon.



Too Secluded

Kimberly Gardens, a Midland Avenue co-op, seemed far from shopping.



Good Location

The Quincy Park Avenue building in Mount Vernon is near a train stop.



Fresh Start

Mary Ellen Forte likes the sense of community in her new building.

Let the Healing Begin

By JOYCE COHEN

BY last summer, it was clear that Mary Ellen and Earl Forte needed to move to a more accessible place.

For 20 years they had rented the ground-floor apartment in a huge Victorian house on North Fulton Avenue in Mount Vernon, N.Y. There were four steps to the wraparound porch. Ill with diabetes, Mr. Forte relied on a walker after the amputation of all of his toes on one foot. His vision and heart were failing, too.

"He was having difficulty getting up those four steps, and would stop and sit on the porch before he would walk into our apartment," Mrs. Forte said. "I didn't realize why he was sitting on the porch in a way he hadn't before. He was trying to breathe."

So she walked into Vern-Mount Realty Services and said to the owner, Zaman Roy Wilson: "You have to help me. I need an apartment building that is accessible, that doesn't have steps or a big long lobby."

Though Mrs. Forte said she religiously read the newspaper ads, "I didn't think I would be able to find an apartment by myself. I felt that maybe if I got help from a real estate agent, that would at least ease the circumstances for me." She was also reluctant to leave her husband alone for long.

The Fortes had been married 42 years at the time. They met as students in high school, when she was Mary Ellen Thomas. She went to Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, which was later absorbed into Miami University. Mr. Forte

joined the Marines.

They married after she finished a master's degree in teaching at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, moving first to an apartment and then to a house in New Rochelle. Later, they moved to the Victorian house. In 2000, Mrs. Forte retired after teaching English for 38 years at her alma mater, New Rochelle High School.

She told Mr. Wilson that she wanted a rental, but he noted the tax benefits of buying. In her budget range — \$200,000 or less — her monthly outlay would be the same as if she rented, he said.

Mrs. Forte thought about a retirement or senior citizens' building for its safety features, but Mr. Wilson suggested she hunt for a regular building. "He said, 'Maybe you don't want to sequester yourself in that fashion,'" Mrs. Forte said.

He initially took her to see a one-bedroom co-op with a balcony, for around \$160,000, at 415 Gramatan Avenue. "A taxi could pull right up to the curb," Mr. Wilson said. But the rooms seemed small and boxy to Mrs. Forte, especially because the Victorian house had high ceilings, much appreciated because Mr. Forte was 6-foot-3.

At 1111 Midland Avenue, near the Cross County Shopping Center, a nice one-bedroom co-op for around \$145,000 was being vacated by a young couple buying a house. Mrs. Forte loved the landscaped grounds but not the long walk to the building's entryway. She feared it wasn't manageable for someone using a walker, especially in winter.

Another co-op building on Midland Avenue, Kimberly Gardens, had a one-bedroom for \$168,000. The building seemed too secluded and far from shopping areas, especially because the Fortes had no car. (If they needed one, they rented it.)

Mrs. Forte asked herself what was important,

besides accessibility. "I came up with some generalities," she said. "I wanted beauty, I wanted peace and I wanted joy. I wanted people to feel these qualities when they walk into the apartment."

Her interest was piqued by an ad for the Quincy Park Avenue. "It is a building I have walked hundreds of times," she said.

The building, originally a rental and later a co-op, is being renovated by the Cheshire Group, which bought the 101 remaining unsold co-ops in

Moving, despite a husband's death, to a spacious home.

the 136-unit complex, according to the sales manager, Karen Mendez.

"I think a lot of people are attracted to buildings by what's outside," Mrs. Forte said. "I was attracted to this because of the inside."

She saw several apartments of different sizes, and fell for an 1,100-square-foot two-bedroom for around \$200,000, with a monthly maintenance of \$900. She especially liked the closet space. "As soon as you walk in, you can hang the coats," she said, "and that is a luxury."

There's a linen closet, too. "I know people don't buy an apartment for a linen closet," but in the Fortes' old parlor-floor apartment she had been using a trunk to store linens and bedding.

There was also a walk-in bedroom closet. She told her husband, "You've always been cheated — you had a small closet because I took over, and this

time you are going to have the master bedroom closet."

Unlike the Victorian, "this apartment has so much light that when you walk into it, you feel the apartment is smiling at you," Mrs. Forte said.

Because the units were being renovated as they were sold, she could choose certain features, so she had safety bars added to the two bathrooms.

Mr. Forte never saw the apartment. He told his wife to make the decision. "He didn't have the energy to get here," Mrs. Forte said. "He wanted to come, but he just couldn't."

At the end, he deteriorated quickly. He died in November, just days before the closing date. Mrs. Forte only briefly considered backing out of the deal. Her three sisters encouraged her to move, saying she needed to start fresh, without the memories in their old home.

She delayed her move until January. "I am beginning to heal," she said. "I feel Earl would want me to be here."

Her new home, centrally located near Metro-North Railroad's Mount Vernon East stop, is just a few blocks from her old one, so she can easily walk to her usual places, including Grace Baptist Church. Everywhere in town, she runs into people she knows. Her former students "stop at traffic lights and hail me," she said.

She likes the building's sense of community. "Sometimes we don't think of density as being a positive, but it can be," she said. The apartment and the neighborhood "ended up being about as ideal as I could hope for. Of course, I really miss Earl's not being able to share it, but in the long run it is affording me a new beginning and also providing me with a level of stability because I'm around a community that I've known for a while."