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BIG CITY

Where 30 Is Ancient, Youthful at 80

By [SUSAN DOMINUS](#)

Anyone hazarding a guess about the demographics of Manhattan might name the East Village the youth capital of the island. It's a place where anyone over 30 starts to notice that her standard fashion go-to's are suddenly has-beens and that everyone else in the environs has preternaturally dewy skin. One friend decamped from the neighborhood when she turned 32 and decided that that was too young to be the oldest person in her building — too young, in fact, to be the oldest person anywhere, other than the prom, maybe.

But the East Village, like every neighborhood in New York, has an elderly population, people who have seen more in their time than a bustling coffee shop's worth of twentysomething stylists. The older crowd is not always seen; the elderly may be too frail to get out, or when they are out, they fade into the background, mentally Photoshopped out. In Community District 3, which encompasses the East Village, the Lower East Side and Chinatown, 31 percent of people who are 65 or older are living at or below poverty level, the second-highest rate for the elderly in New York City, according to the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. And poverty tends to render their ranks even less visible.

In an oversize room on East 12th Street this week, a group of 100 or so people, many of them over 80, demanded the visual attention of anyone in the vicinity. There was no ignoring the blinking lights on a woman's visor or the glittery cat-eye sunglasses on another woman. The Statue of Liberty graced the crowd with her presence, as did Charlie Chaplin, in the form of an 82-year-old woman, originally from Shanghai, with a fake mustache and a black sequined top. It was noted to one tiny woman, 86, that she had a stuffed puppy lodged in the brim of her silver hat.

"I know," she said. "I put it there." She was going for a look inspired by Dorothy.

They were all attending the [Halloween](#) party of the Educational Alliance's [Sirovich Senior Center](#), which offers social services, free classes and meals for a pittance. Leave it to young people to dress up as ghosts, ghouls and other forms of the unliving; this crowd was injecting pure flash into their regalia. "Who am I?" said Ricarda Torrez, 72, dressed like a movie star at the spa, with a pink towel wrapped turban-style around her head. "I'm me!"

The center, everyone volunteering there seems to think, has a particular vibrancy, which is probably what volunteers at similar centers around the city would also say, or else they'd find another place to pass out juice and hear people's stories. The center did not reek in any obvious way of its East Village location — there were no aging punk rockers or transsexuals with canes.

But the director, Terry Gregory, will occasionally let it slip that he is a former playwright — he said his work

was performed in experimental theaters in the neighborhood in the '70s — and his sensibility infects the place. A few years back, he had members perform a dance piece, set to bolero music, that depicted a day in the life of the Sirovich Center. Glenn Miller plays at some dance classes, but also a mix tape that the instructor, Kerry Ann King, calls “English People and Their Problems” — Coldplay and the Verve. “And they love it,” Ms. King said.

At the Halloween party, 35 or so contestants in a costume contest shimmied their shoulders, first to “Monster Mash” and then, just as easily, to Missy Elliott’s “Get Ur Freak On.” Mr. Gregory was thrilled to see so many of the center’s Asian members in costume; he had worked hard to make that happen. And why was it so important that Asian immigrants in their 80s dress up like comic legends or Lady Liberty? “I want them to see the possibilities of life,” Mr. Gregory said.

At the contest, Chaplin lost to the Queen of England, otherwise known as Norma Fernandez, 60, in a gold dress, who had covered the cane she uses every day with gold lamé. A year ago, Ms. Fernandez had been having a hard time emotionally, and was not a likely contestant, much less a winner. Now she accepted a \$50 check with poise, bowed like royalty, and then, arthritis or no, jumped up and down with glee. Later, she said, she thought she would leave the lamé on her cane permanently.

Maybe people will even notice.

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