

DAILY NEWS

50¢

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

news.com

BE OUR GUEST By MICHAEL GECAN & the REV. JOHNNY RAY YOUNGBLOOD

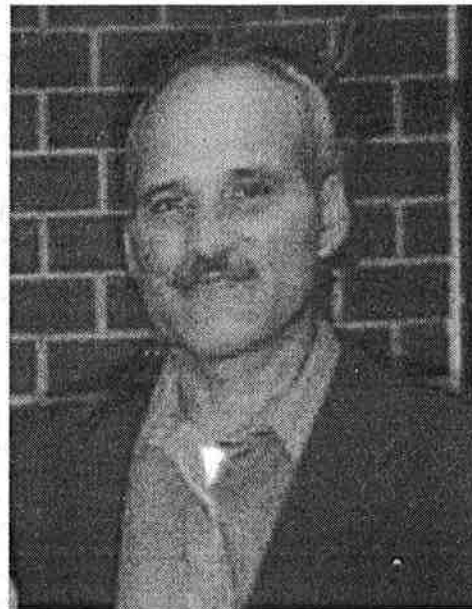
How one regular guy helped lead a city in trouble

If you didn't know Irving Domenech well, or didn't listen closely, you might not see that he was one of the best and brightest citizens of his city. Domenech, who died last week after a long bout with cancer, looked and talked like a regular guy — Parks Department jacket, van filled with household goods, his conversation filled with joy and concern for his wife and sons.

One of the first buyers of a Nehemiah home, he was proud to be a workingman, a participant in his community. He and his wife, who taught in the public school system, raised two sons in his townhome on Watkins St. The morning he put his key into that home was the start of his career as a major, although anonymous, leader in New York.

He became one of the first presidents of the Brownsville Nehemiah Homeowners Association. He negotiated with three mayors — Ed Koch, David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani — in East Brooklyn Congregations' efforts to expand Nehemiah from the original 1,100 homes in Brownsville to another 1,100 homes in East New York, to 700 more homes in the New Lots area, and, now, in just a few weeks, an additional 800 units in Spring Creek. Irving didn't believe in NIMBY. His motto was IMBY: he fought for more in his backyard. When East Brooklyn Congregations was approached by Common Ground, the foremost provider of housing for the homeless and those at risk, Irving spearheaded an effort to secure a site.

When he saw a site remain vacant near his home, he nudged East Brooklyn Congregations to partner with the Community Preservation Corp. to propose building



Irving Domenech — he made things happen.

100 new apartments.

He could be a forceful speaker. One of his greatest speeches was captured in a PBS special. Domenech — Puerto Rican, Catholic, a survivor of the lower East Side's meanest streets — stood in the pulpit of East New York's St. Paul Community Baptist Church and exhorted 1,500 Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians and others to stay in the struggle. He asked them, "Do you believe in the resurrection?" He was talking about a dying community, a left-for-dead city, rising again. They rose to their feet and responded. Then-Mayor Giuliani committed more land and subsidy for housing that day.

One of his colleagues remembers a night 10 years ago when our leaders were debating a living wage law. Irving came to the meeting and sat quietly for a while. When he spoke, he described how he had stopped at the library on the way to the meeting and read

through the speeches of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt about the importance of a living wage. He tied the immediate challenges to a deeper stream of thought and action in the country.

He felt at ease at City Hall. He knew how to negotiate for hundreds of millions of dollars of housing improvements. He felt he had an ownership stake in New York.

New York's comeback is often attributed to those whose names are household words in New York. But this city's rebirth, block by block, building by building, is the legacy of Irving Domenech, too.

Youngblood is chairman of East Brooklyn Congregations and Metro Industrial Areas Foundation. Gecan is the senior organizer for Metro IAF.