

Standing outside of The Distillery Gallery & Artspace, I don't feel a tension that I would normally feel walking around Palisade Avenue in Jersey City. I grew up feeling that I should be wary of this street, that some bad things could happen in this area of the city. One of my best friends grew up around here, leading a shortened childhood and sometimes getting into trouble, I learned that the strip shouldn't be traversed without a defensive state of mind. Despite all this, that lingering, dreadful atmosphere wasn't present. Maybe it was a sign of change.

In a few minutes, a familiar man waved to me; it was Gabriel Pacheco, chair and one of the founding members of the Distillery. Tall, bald, sporting a cleft goatee, and simple shirt and shorts with an aesthetic set of bracers on his right arm, Pacheco walked me over to his home, which was just a block away from the gallery. Upon entering his first-floor loft, I realize that I've left the environment I grew up around, suspicious of what every corner would bring, and stepped into a world engulfed in creativity. Artwork adorned every part of Pacheco's home. A very different visual in the Jersey City Heights.

Sitting in the living room, which Pacheco's daughter, Sade, politely cleared for us, we began discussing the gallery. The Distillery was established in March 2010 by Irene Borngraeber, Carl Posey, Bhavin Patel, and Pacheco, who were, more often than not, based in the local Heights community. The contemporary gallery and artspace produces curated art shows, innovative programming and installation, and it invites artists from all career levels and bases. The Distillery jump-started the transformation of the Heights into an arts district. Pacheco detailed that this movement began in the 1980s, but was ultimately halted.

In operation while the Jersey City Museum was still active, The Distillery held gallery exhibits which yielded receptions drawing over 400 people hailing, not only from Jersey City, but Washington, D.C., Brooklyn, and other parts of the country. Pacheco describes the closing of the Jersey City Museum as a tragic event in the community. He goes on to say that a museum, no matter where it is based or what it features, is the center, and driving force of the community. Therefore, The Distillery isn't exclusively a "gallery" in the traditional sense, but also a space to unite. Pacheco details the recent involvement of yoga classes in the artspace, in addition to Abundant Joy Community Church on Sunday mornings, as well as Saturday morning art classes that introduces students to the neighborhood through art. He describes the classes as a great way to teach children the language of art and establish a relationship with them and the immediate environment. "Most of these kids have never been to these places, and they're right under their noses," Pacheco says.

The Distillery often surprises many people of different stripes. During opening receptions, for example, organized by Pacheco and his wife, Dr. Janette Yarwood, October 2010's "Mapping Race," which was exhibited the various interpretations of race, visitors from downtown Jersey City were amazed at the gallery's size and professional presentation. Finding the gallery isn't rocket-science either. Essentially located between the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, minutes away from the lightrail system, and in the vicinity of major bus routes, there's no excuse in avoiding the Distillery. Or the Jersey City Heights.

When we concluded the interview, Pacheco gave me a tour of his loft and his studio in the basement. I never thought these kinds of living spaces existed in the heights. The place I grew up in really could become an artists' district if the right people got involved. Kids wouldn't have to grow up looking over their shoulders. All it takes is the right people working together. Maybe those people don't have to originate from Jersey City either. Pacheco, originally from Brooklyn, stated that "people who take the chance moving [to Jersey City] are going to benefit the most." The evidence is almost universal in Jersey City. Never without an event or attraction, Jersey City is a hidden gem in the East Coast Art Scene. Just as The Distillery is a hidden gem in Jersey City.