

Monday, June 22, 2009
THE BIG SHIFT

Harlem wants residents to go shopping

Harlem residents are used to leaving the community if they want to shop, but a "shop local" campaign is trying to bring revenue to the neighborhood's stores. Kate Ellis explores why the recently-thriving Harlem is struggling now.

TEXT OF STORY

BILL RADKE: You know how bad things have been on Wall Street. Well, they are singing the blues uptown, too. The problems of New York City's financial district are affecting one of America's legendary black communities -- a community that only recently got on its feet. Kate Ellis of American RadioWorks has that.



A clothing store in Harlem, New York
(Mario Tama/Getty Image)

PRINCESS JENKINS: So what can I show you today, my dear, as you're rushing about?

KATE ELLIS: Princess Jenkins woos a customer browsing her collection of designer clothes. She's run this shop, the Brownstone, for 11 years. Lately, foot traffic to her store is slower than usual. And it's never been easy convincing people who live in Harlem to shop in Harlem:

JENKINS: Most people who lived in Harlem over the past 30 years are used to leaving their community to go to shop, because guess what? There was nothing here. So you're breaking molds when you ask people, "Hey, stay in a community when you shop." Because they haven't been shopping here.

With the recession mowing down businesses, the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce is running a "shop local" campaign. But it might not be enough. The Chamber predicts that by the end of June, one-third of Harlem's small businesses will go under. That could be a crushing blow to a community whose prosperity is already fragile.

Over the past decade, the strong economy and Wall Street boom were a big boost for Harlem. Higher tax revenues and new investment flowed into a community that has long battled poverty and blight. Abandoned housing got renovated and new stores opened up.

Jenny Shuetz is an urban policy expert at New York University:

JENNY SHUETZ: We particularly worry about these neighborhoods in transition because it takes a long economic expansion for them to get on the upswing, and things just start looking good and then the recession hits.

Dr. Leon Merrick is familiar with that. He's had a solid dental practice here for nearly 20 years. Nowadays, his patients, when they come, often bring a daily dose of bad news.

LEON MERRICK: They'll come into the office and they'll look fine, until they sit in the chair. And then the gleam in the eye and the twinkle in their voice is no longer there. And then they'll say, "I lost my job," and they're just sad. They're sad.

Merrick says it's like a syndrome. And with the economy still struggling, he says, there's no telling how long that syndrome will last.

In Harlem, this is Kate Ellis for Marketplace.