

## COMMUNITY PROFILE

# Belmont Cragin area grounded in simplicity

By Jeffrey Steele

Special to the Tribune

If a contest were ever held to name the quintessential Chicago neighborhood, voters would be hard pressed to choose a more worthy candidate than Belmont Cragin.

Family-oriented and middle-class, this Northwest Side community boasts a work ethic as unshakeable as the brick bungalows lining its residential streets, and a character as well grounded and unpretentious as the rail yards abutting its southern border.

Belmont Cragin has always been a place where nouvelle cuisine would stand no chance against a meat-and-potatoes eatery, and where people would rather place their faith in tried-and-true values than hot trends. That's still the case today, even if first-generation Polish and second-generation Hispanics have replaced the Greeks, Italians and Germans of earlier decades.

Poland native Gene Luszczyk has greeted residents at Gene's Sausage Shop for 36 years, the last 22 of them at its present location, 5330 W. Belmont Ave. While serving imported sausage, pierogis and candies, Luszczyk has had plenty of opportunity to size up the clientele.

"It's still a solid neighborhood," he said. "They're good, hard-working people. They go to work, they keep up their property, they take care of the neighborhood. They're regular people."

Bordered on the north by Belmont, the east by Cicero Avenue, the south by Grand Avenue and the west by the railroad tracks west of Narragansett Avenue, Belmont Cragin is perhaps best known for the Belmont-Central shopping district at its northern perimeter.

For decades a vibrant commercial area, Belmont Central was once a place where small merchants like Gene's Sausage Shop and Jack Robbins Clothes of Distinction coexisted alongside huge retailers like Polk Brothers and Goldblatt's. But in the late 1970s, the area absorbed a body blow with the unveiling of the Brickyard Shopping Center, an enclosed mall 2 miles southwest at Diversey and Narragansett Avenues. Since then, the Belmont-Central Chamber of Commerce has endeavored to revital-

ize the strip, and to some extent has succeeded. A Central Avenue parking structure built in the 1980s as the city's only free parking garage helped. And an ambitious streetscape improvement program was completed in late 1999.

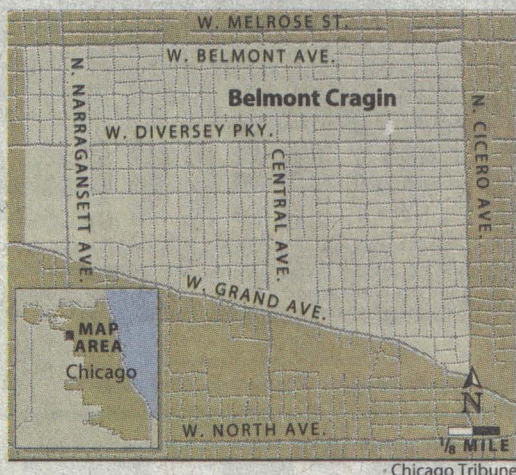
Along with new trees and planters, trash receptacles and benches came the addition of 80 diagonal parking spaces on the first half blocks of side streets off Belmont and Central.

"People can pull right in at sidewalk level, and not farther than a block away from a place they might want to go to," said Bob Suty, executive director of the Belmont-Central Chamber of Commerce, which has approximately 100 members.

That convenience, along with revived public interest in shopping older urban commercial areas, has partially reawakened the retail strip. Said Suty: "For 10, 20 years, there was a rise in shopping centers and shopping malls. But I think things are improving in most [urban] shopping strips, because residents are finding the importance of supporting their local shopping areas."

Still, the district could use more retailers, said Mitch Dayan, president of the chamber and owner of the 45-year-old Dayan's Department Store at 5546 W. Belmont. "If three retail stores go out, one comes back as retail and the other two come back as something else," he said. "You have some services — a physician, an insurance office, an eatery or a club."

What the area lacks in the diversity of home styles, it makes up in solid construction and value. Chicago-style straight-front and octagonal bungalows from the 1920s dominate the residential streets, while a number of Queen Annes are found in the neighborhood west of Central and Fullerton Avenues, said Larry Lynch, broker/manager of Century 21 Beaulieu Real Estate.



The area is also notable for an abundance of small apartment buildings, with two-flats mid-block and four-, six- and eight-flats on corners.

The bungalows are priced

from \$200,000 to \$250,000, depending on whether they offer three or four bedrooms and finished basements, Lynch said. The Queen Annes fall into the upper end of that range, and the two-flats go for about \$300,000 to \$350,000.

Most of the folks selling in recent years have been older residents, and

many haven't wanted to leave the community they've come to love. In response, a number of housing options have opened up for seniors in Belmont Cragin, among them the Belmont Place



Photo for the Tribune by Erik Unger

Derek Luszczyk waits on a customer at Gene's Sausage Shop in Chicago's Belmont Cragin neighborhood. His father, Gene, owns the deli that has been at this location for 22 years.

Apartments, for people 55 and older, at 4645 W. Belmont.

On the other end of the age spectrum, good quality schools, notably Steinmetz High School, St. Patrick High School for Boys

and Notre Dame High School for Girls, continue to convince young parents to plant their roots in this city community rather than the suburbs.

"It's a family-oriented residen-

tial neighborhood," Suty said. "People who live here don't feel they have to move out when they start having kids. Or they very often move here with the idea of having families."

Perfection,  
perfection,  
perfection.

Location alone does not define superiority in a residence.

## Belmont Cragin

Belmont Cragin  
Population 2000: 78,101, up 37.6% from 1990

Demographics:

White — 28%

Black — 2.6%

Hispanic — 65.1%

Asian — 2.5%

Median household income:

\$43,159 (Chicago area: \$51,680)

Average commute: 37 minutes