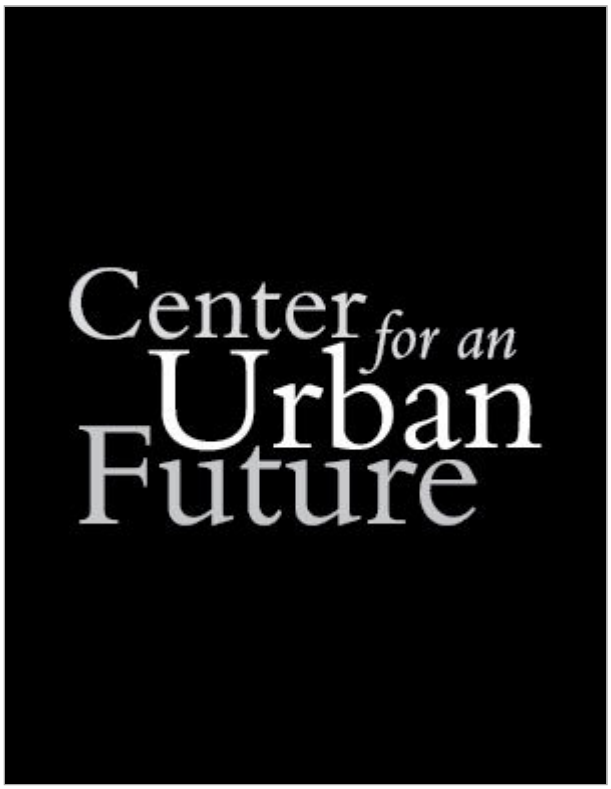



Commentary/Op-Ed - August 2006

# Q&A with Coney Island entrepreneur Dianna Carlin

In the Center's latest Q&A with business leaders and policy experts from around the five boroughs, CUF director Jonathan Bowles interviews Dianna Carlin, founder of Lola Staar, an eclectic boutique with locations on Coney Island's boardwalk and in the base of the Cyclone roller coaster. Read what Carlin has to say about the changes proposed for Coney Island and some of the surprising obstacles she's faced as an entrepreneur in the neighborhood.

by Jonathan Bowles

**Update**: In 2006, CUF's Jonathan Bowles interviewed Dianna Carlin, founder of Lola Staar, an eclectic boutique with locations on Coney Island's boardwalk and in the base of the Cyclone roller coaster. When we spoke with Carlin, she told us about her longtime dream to open a roller rink on the boardwalk. Her bold plan recently became reality, with the launch of Lola Staar's Dreamland, a roller rink currently housed in the historic Child's Restaurant building.

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*Coney Island has seen much better days, yet it remains one of the most unique spots in the five boroughs, home of world-famous freak shows, the Mermaid Parade and the 79-year old Cyclone roller coaster. And after decades of declining fortunes, the neighborhood has recently shown signs of a comeback. Things are likely to change even more significantly in the coming years. Developers have bought up a number of sites that have been vacant for years and are proposing projects that range from an indoor water park to hotels and condos, while a city-sponsored development corporation has been creating a master plan for the neighborhood's future growth. Amidst this backdrop, the Center for an Urban Future took the Q train to Stillwell Avenue to speak with Dianna Carlin, a fashion designer who owns the eclectic Lola Staar boutique on Coney Island's boardwalk, to get her thoughts about the neighborhood, all the plans for its redevelopment and being an entrepreneur in New York.*

**Jonathan Bowles: Where 'does the name Lola Staar come from?**

Dianna Carlin: Lola Staar began when I was seven, when I was in my parents'basement, roller skating around in my grandmother's fringed flapper dress, listening to Barry Manilow's Copa Cabana." My family used to make fun of me, because I'd be down there for hours, practicing my roller skating tricks and playing that one song over and over, and they'd say: 'what are you doing down there, Lola?' When I started to design t-shirts, I liked the idea that t-shirts would be this empowering thing; when you'd wear them, you'd feel this sense of empowerment, much like that fringed flapper dress that I would wear

when I would skate.

**JB: How did you become a designer and an entrepreneur?**

DC: I started designing shirts when I was fifteen, and selling them to stores. When I was eighteen and graduated from high school, I sort of naively decided to open up my own store. At the time, I was doing screen printing in my parents' basement and tie-dying t-shirts. I went to college for painting and after I graduated I briefly tried to be a painter. But that didn't last very long, because I think I got frustrated by how limited the scope of painting was, whereas t-shirts is this accessible medium.

**JB: How did the store in Coney Island come about?**

DC: I just loved Coney Island and just wanted to be here. I had been doing wholesale for a while and I was doing trade shows. I was selling to about 200 stores in the United States and internationally, a lot in England and Germany. And I'd done the Union Square Market [as a vendor], and that was tremendously successful. I really enjoyed it too. I liked having that interaction with the customer, rather than just packing the box, sending it away and getting the check. Plus, I was always coming to Coney Island and wishing that I could get a cute Coney Island t-shirt. When I first had the idea, of course everybody thought I was crazy and nobody thought that I could find a space on the boardwalk. But then it just so happened that there was this perfect tiny little spot that was available.

**JB: And things have worked out well for you here?**

DC: I love having a store here. Two-year-old Puerto Rican kids are running around wearing my t-shirts and 90-year-old Russian women, and everybody in between. And business is really good. Here I have a niche market. There's nobody else who is even vaguely competing. In Coney Island, there's only one place to buy a Coney Island postcard. As unbelievable as that seems, you can only buy a Coney Island postcard at my store.

**JB: You're kidding.**

DC: No.

**JB: You're one of a very small number of businesses to open up here in recent years. Is it a difficult place to succeed as an entrepreneur?**

DC: I don't even know how my business has survived through six years, because there are tremendous obstacles here. I know firsthand from my experience here that there are some really corrupt, crazy things going on here. And those just have to be moved out in order for any small business like myself, for anything positive to open up here. I've had tremendous problems. Every year, there's somebody threatening me, trying to extort money out of me, people putting glue in my locks. Every year, there's something. And it's because people here feel threatened by me, because I'm new and I'm a woman and I'm not from Coney Island.

**JB: Could you elaborate more about the harassment.**

DC: The people that own businesses here don't want to see anything new. They see this newness and this change as something that's going to threaten their businesses, which have sold the same products, as charming as they are. I mean, I love Coney Island and I love what's here, despite everything. Coney Island has always had that dichotomy between the bright, circus lights and the dark, seedy underside. There's been corruption—Sodom by the Sea has been its name since the beginning. There's always been that element here. And that's part of what attracted me to it. But I know for sure that if new businesses are going to open up here, there are many things that need to change.

**JB: Can you give me an example of some of the specific obstacles or encounters that you've had?**

DC: Well, when I first came to Coney Island, there was an arcade next door to me. This guy who owned the arcade was a source of much of the problems, where he would just try to be like, ‘okay, you owe me $5,000 because blah, blah, blah,’ and he'd make up some thing. I'd be like: ‘Oh, we signed this lease and this is what it says.’ He would threaten me. For years I had tremendous problems with him or the people who worked at his Pokemon water racing game or the Dunk the Creep game. When they're sitting there in the dunk tank and they’re shouting insults at people on the microphone and they're bored, they just start shouting insults at you or shouting racial slurs at your customers, yelling for people not to go into the store. (Earlier this year, a new business moved into the space formerly occupied by the arcade.)

**JB: Wow. I talk to a lot of entrepreneurs around the city and I'm used to hearing about things like high real estate costs and taxes as the greatest obstacles they face, not harassment and extortion.**

DC: I know. That's always my frustration, because I do have normal obstacles, which should be the focus of my energy. But instead I’m battling the guy from the Pokemon water racing game, and he's coming over and threatening to kill me. These are things that I just shouldn't have to deal with.

**JB: What else has kept Coney Island from moving forward?**

DC: I guess part of it might have to do with some of the people that own the land in Coney Island and their bitterness about things that happened in the past with the city. That's caused them to let their properties just sort of stand with nothing new developed, and they wouldn't sell [the sites]. Another problem is that Coney Island has this really rough reputation, and it's true in a lot of ways. It's getting better, but it is really rough here. I've had a lot of obstacles in that respect, with shoplifting and problems not just from fellow business people but from customers.

**JB: It's increasingly looking like major changes are afoot. Developer Joseph Sitt has bought up a number of sites near the boardwalk and has ambitious plans for redeveloping the area. What are your thoughts?**

DC: I love Coney Island the way it is now, but I do want something to change. I definitely think that the Coney Island of today is not Coney Island. It's not what it should be. I mean, you look at the photos of Luna Park and Steeple Chase. There needs to be so much more. Constantly, customers are coming into my store and they’re like: ‘Okay, we went on the Cyclone and the Wonder Wheel, we went to the aquarium and the sideshow, now what should we do?’

**JB: Is Joseph Sitt the answer?**

DC: It took me a long time to get to the point where I could say this, but I do think that [Sitt] has genuine, good intentions for Coney Island. Obviously, he's a businessman and he wants to make money, and it's not just his love for Coney Island that's bringing him out here. But I do think that he has a good energy, he's an enthusiastic guy and he seems to want to do something positive. He seems like one of those crazy sort of like business people, like I read about in Charlie Denson's book, “Coney Island Lost and Found,” who back in the day in Coney Island just had these ideas, maybe kind of crazy, to try to do something big in Coney Island. So, I don't know. Hopefully it will be good. I think the other good thing is the Coney Island Development Corporation is fantastic. When I went into their presentation, I was set to be like: ‘what do these people know about Coney Island?’ But they really did a fantastic job on their plan for Coney Island. It would be everything that I could hope for. The fact that the developers have to work with the CIDC is a good thing.

**JB: What worries you about the plans being talked about for Coney Island?**

DC: All of it worries me. It all has potential to just be bad and to ruin the whole thing. I don't want it to turn out like Atlantic City. I don't want the character and the charm of Coney Island to be taken away. I want the people who hang out at Ruby's [a longstanding bar on the boardwalk] to still be here. I want it to be the kind of place that will attract crazy old-timers like them and it to have this crazy element to it. And, I think there's definitely a lot of potential for it to not work. But, I think that it can.

**JB: How do you preserve Coney Island's uniqueness in a major new redevelopment?**

DC: I think that even the developers are trying to find tenants that are not just your standard Planet Hollywood and HardRock Café. They've been asking me: 'who else can we contact?' It's hard, and I don't really know what to tell them. How do you get the small businesses? I guess they'd have to build storefronts that are small enough and make rents so that smaller businesses could afford it, so it has more of a unique character. Ultimately, they need unique, creative energy here. That's what Coney Island thrives on and always has. You mentioned earlier that people get the sense that Coney Island isn't receptive to small businesses, that it has this reputation of not being welcoming. And I guess right now that's true. But historically, Coney Island has been a place where you can come with just, like, three balls and a target and you're in business. Look at Shoot the Freak. He came with a paintball gun and a freak, and opened up a business that's just this thriving, really successful thing. So, I mean, that kind of character should remain.

**JB: Do you fear that as big developers come in, rents are going to rise and the area's unique enterprises are going to be pushed to the side?**

DC: Everybody keeps talking about how the developers are going to raise everybody's rent, and they've raised my rent considerably. But, if they succeed and make Coney Island a place that more people are coming to, and it is a destination, then everybody can afford these rents. If they put the money into Coney Island and they make it this fabulous place that everybody wants to come to, then, hopefully, small and big businesses will be able to thrive and will do better business than they're doing now. Whether all that falls into place, I don't know.

**JB: That's a good point, yet in a report the Center for an Urban Future recently issued, titled "Creative New York," we found that rising rents were a real threat to a number of artists and creative businesses around the five boroughs.**

DC: There needs to be a place for young people to be able to live and have their business. Much of New York used to be affordable. Now, of course, it isn't, and it's getting so difficult for young people. If I came to New York now, where would I be able to afford to live? Also, there do seem to be a lot fewer small, unique businesses than there were. It just seems like the Home Depots are putting out of business the hardware stores and the Starbucks are putting out of business the cute little cafés. It's the people making their contributions here that make it this incredible city, and if we have the same things you can find in any other city, that would definitely take away from the uniqueness of New York.

**JB: What things do you think the city should be doing to support creative entrepreneurs like yourself?**

DC: Definitely more could be done. There's a tremendous amount of obstacles. For instance, I've had some problems here with the Parks Department. It's just needless, stupid things, where it's making it difficult for you.

**JB: Like what?**

DC: It's tremendously time-consuming [dealing with city agencies] and there are things that don't need to be so difficult. But there are ways that the city is doing things to help creative people and small businesses. I've been a part of this amazing program the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce had called Brooklyn Goes Global, where they helped a lot of small businesses doing trade shows, people who were designing their own merchandise and really doing cool, creative things. It was a great program that really helped us a lot. Maybe there should be more programs like that.

**JB: What was it about Brooklyn Goes Global that was so helpful to you?**

DC: They paid for us to have this business consulting. That was sort of a turning point in my business where, for many reasons, I just didn't have a clue what I was doing, and I was getting a tremendous amount of orders and production and running the whole thing all wrong and losing lots of money. It was a mess. So I did go to see this woman for a while, and it really helped me to get my business together.

**JB: Shifting gears a bit, we just issued a study about how street fairs in the city are too generic and dominated by a handful of the same bland vendors. Can you tell me about your experience as a vendor at the Union Square holiday market? It seems like those markets have a much more diverse mix of vendors and are far more interesting than the street fairs. Why do you think that is?**

DC: Well, the markets are juried. You have to apply to get in. And you have to show them what products you're going to sell, so they can make sure there's a variety of products and that the quality is up there. They also really encourage you to set up your booths in a really nice way. And the market is run really professionally and just attracts more professional businesses. Also, maybe the price: It is expensive [to have a booth]. So if you're going to do it, you have to be serious about it and you have to really make it happen. You can't just come in with your tube socks or whatever. You have to really have something going on in order to pay that rent.

**JB: It sounds like you do really good business at the holiday market.**

DC: It is extremely expensive and that deters a lot of people from doing it. But when I first did the market, I shared a booth with somebody. I was able to test out the waters and realize that this is a good thing. I mean, you have a little space inside one of the busiest intersections in New York City at one of the busiest times of the year, and you don't have to sit through the January and February humdrum of no business. It's just the best time of year. And now the market has been around long enough that people go there to do their Christmas shopping. It is a destination. I know from having that booth at the market in Union Square that for what I pay for that teeny, tiny booth for a month, it's insane. You can't even possibly imagine selling that many t-shirts in a month, but it's fantastic business.

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