



Welcome to  
ARVERNE by the SEA

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**New York Times**

## **On the Beach, a Brand New Life**

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**MARISOL GUIVAS** met her husband-to-be one day in 1998 through an instant message. She lived in the Bronx, he in Brooklyn, and she asked his name. It was Angel, he said, and like his future wife, he had a keen interest in the heavenly figures that were his namesake. One of their first dates was to see the Internet love story "You've Got Mail." They seemed destined for each other.

Marisol and Angel were married in 2000. They lived in the \$32,000 one-bedroom co-op that Angel had bought as a bachelor in Sheepshead Bay. He had grown up there, the only Puerto Rican kid in a neighborhood of Italians, and now he and Marisol were starting their family there. Their son, Gabriel, was born in June 2002, and as he grew out of his crib and into his big-boy bed, the co-op began to feel too small.



They looked north, to new construction under way in Harlem, and east, to homes in Long Island. Then an item in the newspaper caught Marisol's eye. It mentioned a lottery for brand new seaside homes in a complex to be named Arverne-by-the-Sea, in Queens. It was a 20-block stretch in the distant Rockaways, the string-bean-shaped peninsula that juts into the ocean south of Kennedy Airport and Jamaica Bay. It was only 10 minutes from Angel's job at the post office in Howard Beach, and would become a vast development of homes, with stores, restaurants, a Y.M.C.A., a marina and a school. They signed up.

Last February, they got a call that they were in line for the very last house in the very first phase of Arverne-by-the-Sea, 32 homes labeled the Sands at Harbour Pointe. They went to the sales office and poked around the neighborhood, if it could have been called that. There were no food stores, save for a bodega. The subway station was a treacherous 15-minute trek away on the sidewalk-less Rockaway Freeway. Still, when two buyers in front of them bailed out, Marisol and Angel scraped together a 10 percent down payment on the \$395,000 price. Their new address was on Arverne Mews, a street that did not yet exist.

The land where the Guivases were about to put down new roots had been nothing but sand, weeds and trash for 40 years. It was as though a real estate curse had befallen it. More wild dogs than people on the streets. More trash than shells on the beach. The end of New York, literally and figuratively. It had been fallow, empty, abandoned, its beachside bungalows razed in the 1960's to make way for decades of schemes that never materialized. It was part of the 308-acre Arverne Urban Renewal Area, left over long after the idea of flattening a dense patch of residential land was rejected as an urban planning concept. The biggest vacant lot in the city.

But Arverne-by-the-Sea was to change all that. The free sand buckets and shovels from the sales office depicted people on the beach waving in front of a brilliant sunset. The ambitious master plan was to build 117 acres of residential subdivisions with names like Ocean Breeze, the Tides and the Dunes. The grand total of market-rate homes to be built by 2007 was 2,300. Marisol and Angel were taking a grand gamble on a place where no previous project had come to fruition in nearly half a century.

Land of 1,000 Schemes

To stroll on the shores of Arverne these days is to experience loneliness. Among the bare parcels that were once filled with houses and people, there is very nearly nothing. The only buildings are a closed bait-and-tackle outlet and a health clinic. A small "Comfort Station" sits on the boardwalk just off Beach 73rd Street; a weathered sign above the boarded-up restrooms says they are "temporarily closed."

The emptiness invites routine illegal dumping, and in 2001, two joggers, including a 74-year-old man, were attacked on the boardwalk by wild dogs. The skyline is composed of the elevated tracks of the A train and the towers of nearby housing projects. Manhattan, occasionally visible in the distance from Beach Channel Drive, seems impossibly far away, sunken into the sea.

Arverne was not always devastated. In the early 20th century, it was a well-to-do resort community containing one of the nation's largest hotels, the Arverne. Aristocrats gamboled in the sea spray.

"It was a vacation area with bungalows and houses and concessions along the boardwalk," said Jonathan Gaska, district manager for Community Board 14. "It really mirrored what the old Coney Island was."

By the 1940's, Arverne had become a bustling neighborhood. Yet the prosperity that bolstered other parts of the country in the 50's did not seep into that part of the Rockaways. Stores, theaters and restaurants fled, and Arverne declined to the point where the city razed its crumbling homes and labeled it an "urban renewal area" in 1964. But nothing was ever renewed.

This is not to say people haven't tried. In the years before Angel and Marisol Guivas set foot in Arverne, developers and community leaders brought forth a cavalcade of ideas, some more preposterous than others. Few of them took into account the wishes of the surrounding community.

In the late 1980's, the developer Bruce Ratner proposed 10,000 units of residential housing in Arverne. Opponents knocked the number of units to 7,500. But then the New York real estate market imploded and Mr. Ratner's company pulled out.

A few years later, the Reichmanns, a Canadian family that built the Canary Wharf development in London, submitted a proposal to build upon the sands of Arverne a futuristic pleasure palace, Destination Technodome. It was to be staggering in scale and include an indoor ski slope. There would also be theaters, an Olympic-size pool, skating rinks, a hotel and new jobs projected in the thousands. But the costs the family asked the city and state to assume, as much as \$1 billion, proved too much, and the project collapsed.

Highly frustrated, the community asked a team of consultants to sketch out a plan that would actually work. A proposal was submitted to the Giuliani administration in 2000 that included the community's desires: attractive housing, a school, a recreation center and a large amount of retail, specifically a major supermarket, chain stores and restaurants.

Along with several other builders, two Long Island developers, the Beechwood Organization and the Benjamin Companies, assembled a bid for the project. Shortly after a devastating plane crash in the Belle Harbor section of the Rockaways in November 2001 that killed 265 people, the Giuliani administration designated Benjamin-Beechwood as the winning team.

"Within a week or two of that plane crash, we got the call," said Les Lerner, a principal of the Beechwood Organization. "Perhaps they needed to show something positive happening in the Rockaways."

### A Grand Gamble

It was perhaps a cruel twist that Angel and Marisol Guivas had redone their kitchen in Sheepshead Bay before getting the call about the house in Arverne. They had put in new cabinets and appliances and bought a big new refrigerator, but in just a few weeks, they would have to shuffle their belongings across the Gil Hodges Memorial Bridge and onto the Rockaway peninsula.

It was a pleasant evening in November 2004, and furniture, clothing, empty juice boxes, catalogs and Gabriel's toys were scattered about in a pre-move jumble. An enormous sense of expectation permeated the household. "I'm psyched! You know what I'm saying?" said Angel, 35, his strong voice booming and his cropped black hair not moving an inch. Enthusiastic as ever, he clapped his hands together, loud. "I want to get to work, guys!"

Marisol, a petite, dark-haired 33-year-old with warmth and energy to spare, laughed. "It's very 'beach house,'" she said about their new home, her face glowing. She was pregnant with another baby, due in March. If the Guivases had not won their lottery spot in Phase 1A of Arverne, they probably would have had to begin raising the baby in a place that was not even big enough for the three of them.

To give Gabriel his own space in their Sheepshead Bay home, they had put his bed in a narrow room just off the main entrance that resembled a walk-in closet. Angel painted the ceiling sky blue and added white cloud puffs. But they knew their 2-year-old needed more space to run around.

Angel and Marisol, who can't seem to stop talking effusively about their new home, have never had serious doubts about choosing Arverne. But their final confirmation came from an entrepreneur with slightly more experience. They attended a real estate expo at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center last fall, and one of the events was a question-and-answer session with Donald Trump.

"What happened was a girl told him, 'I'm about to go under contract with Arverne-by-the-Sea,' " Marisol said. "And Trump was like, 'Arverne? Can I have your contract?' "

"We high-fived," Angel said. "It was great! We were so happy. Another person said, 'I have \$20,000 in equity, what can I do with that money?' And Trump said, 'Arverne.' That's exactly how we took Arverne, as an opportunity."

Less than a year after Angel and Marisol bought the house on Arverne Mews for \$395,000, similar units in the newer phases of the development are selling at prices starting at close to \$500,000. In the next section to be completed, 80 percent of the 121 houses have already been sold. In the section after that, the waiting list is 500 families long. People like the Guivases, who bought one of the first houses in the first development, sowed the seed.

"Pioneers is a good word," said Mr. Lerner of the Beechwood Organization. "At the time they committed to buy these houses, all that was going on in Arverne was these 32 houses. Now they really see that the dream they gambled on has come to fruition."

Yet in the surrounding community, there is still very little in terms of amenities. The only store for more than 10 blocks is a bodega on Rockaway Beach Boulevard, which shares space in a tiny strip mall with the Dragon Garden Chinese takeout and an empty storefront that was formerly home to "Forbidden Tattoos."

Transportation is another issue. The nearest subway station is the Beach 67th Street stop on the A train, and getting there requires traipsing through wide puddles along the Rockaway Freeway, an unlighted street with fast-moving traffic. The ride into Manhattan, which takes commuters across Queens and Brooklyn, usually exceeds an hour.

"It's really an hour and ten or an hour and twenty," said Mr. Gaska of Community Board 14. But when more people move to Arverne, he said, the community will lobby the Metropolitan Transportation Authority for express trains to Manhattan. "They don't have to build new tracks; they don't have to do anything," he said.

As for groceries, Mr. Lerner said he and his partners were on the cusp of announcing a deal with a "major brand-name supermarket" to install a store in Arverne-by-the-Sea. But for the time being, residents like the Guivases shuttle over to Brooklyn or out to Long Island for their basic needs.

### Bright House, Big Future

Upon his first entry to the house on Arverne Mews, the Guivases' son announced that it was "Gabriel's house."

"Ooooh, beautiful," he told his parents. They were not aware he knew what that word meant, but they accepted his assessment. He now rides his Li'l Rascal tricycle around in the empty living room, his Lion King sneakers lighting up the carpet.

The new house is two stories of gleaming white and gray siding with a white picket fence. There is a backyard with enough room to barbecue and listen to the waves. There is a one-bedroom rental unit on the second floor that already has a tenant.

In the living room of their part of the house, Angel is painting the walls in shades of green like "Celery Ice" that get progressively darker as they approach the back window, which lets in glowing bright ocean light. There is no direct view of the water, but the beach is right around the corner.

"It's like a Florida in New York," Marisol said from the kitchen, where another new fridge waited to be installed.

"No, no," Angel corrected her, "it's California in New York. That's the way I see it. You see guys in wetsuits out there," he said, pointing to the ocean, which attracts its own legion of surfers.

Until all the furniture arrives, Angel, Marisol and Gabriel are staying in the first-floor bedroom, where they have installed an enormous inflatable mattress. The garage is full of boxes and shopping bags from Ikea, and the kitchen counter is scattered with papers and brochures advertising the model for their unit, "The Britannia."

Neighbors have already stopped by. Back in Sheepshead Bay, Angel said, "half the people, they don't really want to talk to you." But in Arverne-by-the-Sea, he said, "People are like, 'Heyyyy! How you doin'?' "

"We all got here almost in the same week," Marisol added of her neighbors. "We're building relationships together."

To Angel and Marisol, there is no end to what Arverne-by-the-Sea will bring. They have talked about investing in other properties in the area, or maybe even opening a franchise like Starbucks. ("Iced coffee at the beach!" Marisol said.) Outside, Angel pointed at the wide expanse of dirt that will become his new community, the expanse where so many others have seen defeat.

"You see that lot right there?" he asked. "That's prime real estate. That's untouched. That's empty. This is what I see that a lot of people don't see. You just have to have the courage to jump in. It's unbelievable. It's gonna be great!"