

Jackson Heights: A Living Tapestry of Diversity, Strength, and Unity

By Michael Selkis, CEO 82nd Street Academics

In the heart of New York City, Jackson Heights stands as a **living testament** to the beauty and power of diversity. Walk its streets, and you will hear a **symphony of languages**, see a vibrant array of cultures, and feel the undeniable energy of a **community that thrives on inclusion, resilience, and unity**. This is not just a neighborhood—it is a **vision of what America can and should be**. A place where people from all backgrounds come together, not in fear, but in **curiosity and collaboration**.

At **82nd Street Academics**, we take immense pride in being a **hub for this extraordinary community**, ensuring that **education, opportunity, and hope remain accessible to all**. Our mission is not just about academics—it is about **shaping a future that fully embraces equity, inclusion, and belonging**.

We recognize that diversity is **not just a buzzword**—it is a fundamental driver of **cognitive growth, community strength, and societal progress**. **Brain research confirms** that diverse environments enhance **critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity**. When people from different backgrounds and perspectives interact, the brain engages in **deeper cognitive processing**, improving innovation and decision-making.

The power of diversity is real, and **Jackson Heights is proof of its impact**.

Lessons from History: The Great Empires Built on Diversity

History has repeatedly shown that the **greatest civilizations** thrived **not because of isolation** but because they **embraced difference**, adapted to change, and **wove diversity into the fabric of their societies**. Some of the most powerful and enduring empires in human history—those that shaped the modern world—were built on **the very principles that Jackson Heights embodies today**.

The Persian Empire, under Cyrus the Great, flourished by respecting and integrating the customs, languages, and religions of its many peoples. Rather than imposing a singular identity, Persia created a vast, multicultural society where **tolerance and cooperation fueled prosperity**. The famed **Cyrus Cylinder**, often considered the first charter of human rights, set the precedent for the idea that **diversity is a strength, not a threat**.

The Roman Empire rose to power by **absorbing the best aspects of the civilizations it encountered**. It granted citizenship to people from across its territories—Spaniards, Gauls, Greeks, Syrians, North Africans—creating a sense of **shared identity** that strengthened the empire.

The Ottoman Empire ruled for over 600 years by **embracing a policy of millet**, allowing different ethnic and religious groups to **govern themselves under their own laws**. This respect for autonomy and cultural richness made the Ottomans one of the most successful and enduring empires in history.

The Mughal Empire in India was a brilliant example of how **multiculturalism fuels greatness**. Leaders like **Akbar the Great** actively encouraged dialogue between Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Jains, blending architectural, artistic, and administrative practices from various traditions. This fusion led to some of the most breathtaking achievements in history, including the **Taj Mahal**.

The United States of America, though still a **work in progress**, was built on the promise of **pluralism**. Despite its struggles and contradictions, its greatest moments have come when it has **leaned into the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion**, rather than turning away from them. **From the innovation of immigrant scientists and entrepreneurs to the cultural contributions of countless communities, America's success has always been driven by those who dared to embrace difference.**

The lesson from history is clear: **Empires that embrace diversity thrive. Those that reject it fall.**

"Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor": The Promise of America

The **Statue of Liberty**, standing tall in New York Harbor, is a beacon of this very ideal. The poem inscribed at its base, "**The New Colossus**" by **Emma Lazarus**, captures the true spirit of what America was meant to be:

**"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"**

Though not a legal document, **this poem became a powerful symbol of America's identity as a nation of immigrants**, reinforcing the idea that the U.S. was meant to be a **place of refuge and opportunity**. **America's greatness is demonstrated when we lift our lamp beside the golden door; when we stand by the ideals of the Declaration of Independence**, which states that **"all people are created equal"** and that liberty is an **unalienable right** and when we collectively uphold the promise of **the U.S. Constitution**, which begins with **"We the People"**—a phrase that was never meant to exclude, but to **expand**.

Greatness is not found in exclusion. It is found in inclusion.

82nd Street Academics: A Beacon in Our Community

At **82nd Street Academics**, we do not just acknowledge diversity—we **celebrate** it, **nurture** it, and **protect** it.

We believe in **expanding access to education and opportunity for all**. Through strategic planning, community outreach, and meaningful alliances, we have transformed **82nd Street** into a **hub that serves all of Jackson Heights**. From early childhood education to summer programs, from multilingual support to college preparation, we ensure that **every child has the chance to dream, learn, and succeed**.

Our **March Newsletter** highlights the vibrant activities and events that bring our mission to life. From celebrating **Women's History Month** to engaging students in **academic and creative pursuits**, our goal is to build a community where **every child feels seen, valued, and empowered**.

We are resolute in our mission: **to create an urban hub that reorganizes its resources to provide everything the Jackson Heights community needs to thrive**.

A Call to Action: Building the Future Together

We are living in a time when **division and fear** often threaten to **pull us apart**. But **Jackson Heights stands firm** as a **reminder of what is possible** when we choose **unity over fear, curiosity over ignorance, and hope over despair**.

At **82nd Street Academics**, we **reject intolerance in all forms**. The only thing we do not accept is **hatred**. Instead, we choose:

- **Kindness**
- **Hard work**
- **Humility**

Because these are the values that will **win the day**.

I wake up every morning **proud and excited to serve this community**. The work we do here is **not just about education**; it is about **proving to the world—and to our own country—that a community that stands together can accomplish the impossible**.

We are not just another neighborhood.
We are a beacon of hope in dark times.

We are the **embodiment of a more sophisticated, nuanced way of thinking**—one that **embraces, rather than fears, difference**.

The Four Words That Will Shape Our Future

Diversity. Equity. Inclusion. Belonging.

These are not just ideals; **they are the foundation of our country and the only way forward.**

These four words will **always defeat social inertia and hate.**

They are our guiding principles at **82nd Street Academics**, and they are the **driving force** behind everything we do.

So, I invite you—**families, educators, neighbors, and friends**—to join us.

Help us **build an urban hub** that harnesses the power of **education, community, and strategic partnerships** to show the world **what a united neighborhood can achieve.**

Together, we will **continue to stand tall** as a **model of resilience, strength, and boundless possibility.**

Because here, at **82nd Street Academics**, we don't just believe in a better future.

We are building it.