

# DOWNTOWN nyc

Menu



## The Mayor of TriBeCa

by John Esposito | Jan 30, 2018



It was only by sheer coincidence that I met the man. While standing outside a crowded Starbucks in Lower Manhattan on a nondescript weekday afternoon this past May, I was about to become well acquainted with Mr. Theodore Elgin Johnson, aka Teddy, aka the *mayor of TriBeCa*, as the neighborhood residents and local shop owners are apt to fondly address him.

I had just left my son's new apartment on Greenwich Street, intent on taking the subway to Midtown. When I reached the iconic coffee store at the corner of West Broadway and Leonard Street in Tribeca, I asked a smartly dressed, financial-type, which train would be the fastest for getting me to the 5th Avenue Library. No sooner did the clean-shaven millennial reply with an uncertain shrug than we were approached by a bystander who had curiously overheard our conversation a few feet away. He appeared to be in his late sixties, about six feet tall, sporting a University of Virginia baseball cap, wearing an Adidas sweatshirt under an open zipper green jacket, work pants and black leather work shoes.

"I can get you there," he said. "Cross the street right here and take the 1 or 2 to 42nd Street and then transfer over to the 7. That will get you where you're going the quickest."

I thanked him, which he acknowledged with an obliging nod, but then went on speaking, supplying more options for my trek to Midtown. When he appeared to be finished, the amiable gent abruptly changed course and without solicitation or even as much as taking a breath, continued on at a faster clip, now providing me with a snapshot account of the historic TriBeCa district dating back some 50 years. A very interesting guy, I thought, a real wealth of information. Thanking him again, I introduced myself, shook hands, and asked his name.

"Ted ... Ted Johnson, but people mostly call me Teddy," he replied.

Formalities now dispensed, Mr. Johnson's rapid discourse moved forward, this time with a recital of stories and captivating insights about the who, what and where of the neighborhood, its current dynamics and most celebrated inhabitants. His explicit commentary became so engrossing that I was no longer in any hurry to leave.

From our street corner, Ted aimed the rolled-up orange construction flag in his right hand like a classroom pointer, identifying the expensive real estate that runs up and down West Broadway, then turning clockwise, he motioned further to the adjacent Hudson, Greenwich and Chamber Streets, and then the tributaries of Franklin, North Moore, Worth, Duane and Reade Streets. With his brain now operating like a computer directory in overdrive, he began rattling off fascinating nuggets: "Lots of television shows, "Law and Order", "New York Undercover", "NYPD Blue"...they were all filmed down here... and "Ghostbusters" was filmed in that firehouse," he said and pointed to Hook & Ladder No. 8, "on North Moore ... lots of these shows and movies were made a few blocks down the street..., and many entertainers live right in this neighborhood...lots of artists, movie and TV stars, athletes, musicians. I once saw Drew Barrymore and Tom Green hanging around here, seen Britney Spears too, and Tom Brady, Harvey Keitel, Taylor Swift, one of Bono's band members, Laurence Fishburne, Edie Falco ... saw Matthew McConaughey and two of his kids walking around ... and up there is Mariah Carey's penthouse, you can see her rooftop terrace with all the trees ... and **New York Law School** is across the street from here, I saw the new building go up... Judge Judy went there ... and I heard Meryl Streep once lived on Jay Street, now she's Uptown, but she returns to visit friends ... I've seen Denzel Washington here several times ... and not long ago Leonardo DiCaprio came to this Starbucks for coffee in the morning ... and years ago," he smiled, "I saw Robert De Niro pushing his twin sons in a baby carriage right here. A lot of

these people know me, they wave and stop to say hello when they're passing by and have some time."

The mayor was not reticent about providing an A-list of TriBeCa's popular dining spots:

"De Niro's got restaurants here, Tribeca Grill and Locanda Verde on Greenwich Street...there are a lot of great restaurants down here...Sarabeth's, The Palm, Scalini Fedeli on Duane Street, and The Odeon right here on West Broadway. It used to be a cafeteria, you know, and is now a great restaurant... many movies and TV shows were filmed inside The Odeon too."

And then there is Teddy's personal favorite place, The Square Diner, but more about that later.



*Photo by Donna Ferrato*

Teddy spoke glowingly about how most residents were pleased by the restoration of many historic cobblestone streets throughout TriBeCa, especially where he works on Leonard Street. This major reconstruction project was undertaken by the NYC Department of Design and Construction (DDC) and paid for mostly by city, utility, and federal post-9/11 emergency relief funds. He was also not remiss in pointing proudly to the most important symbol in all of Downtown, the Freedom Tower, standing tall and majestic, a mere seven-minute walk away.

More than 25 minutes had elapsed and we remained immersed in conversation on the same street corner where we met. I was receiving an education from teacher Ted about the goings-on in New York's most desirable enclave and expensive zip code [10013], as reported for the second quarter of 2017 by PropertyShark, the well-respected real estate website, which provides in-depth analysis to real estate professionals, investors, and home buyers.

Since my chance encounter with the mayor on that spring afternoon four months ago, I have made a number of business and pleasure trips to Manhattan from my home in northern New Jersey. Each time I would always find the enthusiastic, 74-year old TriBeCa booster at his designated post near the corner of the 24 Leonard Street building and West Broadway, where

Ted is employed as a parking attendant for PF Parking Corp. Despite several changes in building ownership over the years, including previously operating as both an automobile dealership that sold and repaired vintage vehicles, and a public parking garage, he has remained a mainstay at this same address for 31 years. Extensive renovations to the entire building and garage are now currently underway. The existing structure is being converted into seven luxury condominium apartment lofts on nine floors and includes a new underground parking garage for both its residents and the general public. When the renovations have been completed in late 2017/early 2018 and there is occupancy, Teddy will return to his usual responsibilities as an attendant. In the interim, he has been serving as a day watchman of sorts, working six and seven-day weeks, responsible for keeping the Leonard Street construction site area free from traffic and off-limits to pedestrians, when delivery trucks and construction vehicles are entering and exiting the job site.

On one such trip to TriBeCa, Teddy and I went for lunch at his favorite eatery, **The Square Diner**, at 33 Leonard Street, which is located diagonally opposite from the 24 Leonard building.

"They serve the best hamburgers and french fries here," he said as we settled in. I wasn't about to disagree with the mayor, but opted for a veggie burger from the extensive menu of Greek and American fare, which was quite good.

During the meal, Ted introduced me to another Ted. It was Ted Karounos, the affable proprietor, who has owned the popular, vintage train-car diner for 16 years, taking over the business from his father-in-law. Karounos estimates there have been approximately five owners since its inception of "Serving TriBeCa over 100 Years," and proudly validated by the official Square Diner T-shirts, which are available to purchase. Teddy didn't miss a beat, relating the time that famed television writer, producer and director, Norman Lear, was interviewed at the Square Diner several years ago.

Theodore Johnson was born in Petersburg, Virginia and raised in Ellenville, New York, near the Catskills, where he moved at the age of two with his family. Many years later he moved to Manhattan, renting an apartment on 155th Street in Harlem, near the old Polo Grounds. He eventually moved to his present home in East Orange, New Jersey in 1974. Along the way Teddy married, had children and many grandchildren, who he is proud to say all became successful in their own right. He divorced, and held a number of jobs, including working for the Ford Motor Company in Mahwah New Jersey, before commencing his employment as a parking attendant on Leonard Street in 1986.

On another occasion when I came in specifically to see Ted, we took an unhurried walking tour through the neighborhood, stopping at many of the locales he had only spoken about when we first met in May. Along the way, he recognized a young family walking towards us on Leonard Street. He crouched down and said hello to a delightful and giggling, blonde-haired little girl of no more than three or four, approaching with her mom and dad. It was clearly evident by the enthusiastic welcome Teddy received, that he was quite taken with the little miss.

"There are now many more young people moving to TriBeCa," he remarked soon after the child and her parents passed us. "TriBeCa is more family oriented today... more kids are being

born here... and many more baby carriages," he laughed, "lots of nannies...a lot of dog walking."

A short time later, Teddy was greeted by a middle-aged married couple; the husband, an architect and his wife, an analyst, who have an apartment on Franklin Street. They spoke like old friends for several minutes.

The woman eventually turned to me and said, "I see you've already met the mayor. Teddy knows a great deal about our neighborhood. He's a really great guy!"

It was becoming increasingly obvious that when the mayor holds court, everyone listens.



*Photo by Donna Ferrato*

Like a big kid, Teddy was now intent on taking me to a one-of-a-kind boutique, the **Balloon Saloon** on West Broadway. He introduced me to Tiffany, who along with her mom, Sharon Hershkowitz, are co-owners. Once we stepped inside, I saw why this family favorite is not simply a balloon store that sells birthday and party balloons. Far from it. This TriBeCa institution has been operating since 1981. The shop's vast inventory includes singing balloons, custom-printed balloons, balloon sculptures and bouquets that have graced the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, Broadway plays, Madison Square Garden, music videos, and have been immortalized in the Richard Gere and Diane Lane movie, "Unfaithful."

Tiffany extended a friendly greeting and within seconds spoke the familiar words that I was now hearing again and again: "You should be aware that Teddy is our mayor." Sharon echoed her daughter's sentiments completely. Teddy stood among us near the register counter, self-consciously basking with pride over the honorary title, but unsuccessful in shielding his mile-wide grin. Meanwhile, Sharon jokingly forgave me for being from New Jersey, but not so much my fellow Jersey drivers, who apparently motor with abandon through the city.

Teddy was insistent that someday he wanted to introduce me to a special resident he has known for many years:

"You've got to meet Donna Ferrato. She's an award-winning photographer who lives here... been in The New York Times and Time, lots of places...she published a terrific book about TriBeCa with lots of great photos...a very nice person too. I'll introduce you one day."

True to his word, that day came in August.

"Everything you have observed about Teddy is the gospel," the acclaimed photojournalist and activist told me. Ms. Ferrato's work has also appeared in Life, People and Mother Jones, and in solo exhibitions in museums and galleries. Her photography documenting the spirit of TriBeCa, including several photos taken exclusively of Teddy, qualifies her as an authority on the evolution of this neighborhood and an eyewitness to the indelible stamp the mayor has left on many in the community.

During his three-plus decades working in TriBeCa, Teddy has held a ringside seat to several dramatic transformations within the district. The area's mercantile base as a commercial center of the dry goods and textile trade eventually evaporated and gave way to abandoned warehouses which were occupied by artists, and subsequently were converted into pricey residential apartment buildings and multi-million dollar lofts where actors, models, athletes, entrepreneurs, Wall Street professionals and their families now call their home.

"TriBeCa was never a quiet neighborhood, even in the old days," he said.

"We always had plenty of visitors and tourists from all over the world ... from Italy, Sweden, Norway, they all came here because of the Financial District and Greenwich Village. There used to be many city agencies down here, like the Human Resources Administration (HRA), The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), The Credit Union, New York City Employees Retirement System (NYCERS), and the Teachers' Retirement System (TRS). A lot of them eventually moved out to Queens and Brooklyn...the HRA and TRS moved to Water Street. In those days, some of us went for lunch and after work to Dennis' Restaurant, right down the block on Franklin Street. It closed some time ago. Policemen from the First Precinct would go there, and some city agency workers, too. Most of those people are now retired. I got to know a lot of them. Some actually thought I worked for the city. We had some nice times."

Another good memory suddenly surfaced for Teddy. He remembered when the NYPD's Mounted Squad were in action throughout Tribeca.

"The horse stables were down here on Varick Street [for 99 years] until 2011. Now they moved them to Midtown. People would come just to look at the horses. Many years ago, I saw a man who looked very familiar come here to see the horses. Then I realized it was the actor, Richard Widmark ..., and Jacqueline Kennedy always loved horses. Her son John Jr. and his wife Carolyn were living nearby on North Moore Street, in the apartment where she previously lived. Jacqueline would come by to look at the horses. Many people were sorry to see the horses go."

The most newsworthy events that came to Ted's mind while working here were unfortunately not always pleasant ones. The most tragic event, of course, occurred on what began as a beautiful, clear, blue-sky morning on September 11, 2001, and culminated in utter devastation. Ted left for work that fateful day from his home in East Orange, New Jersey, as

he always had, taking mass transit from Newark and then the Path train to World Trade Center, arriving in the city approximately one hour before the first Tower fell. He would be one of the thousands of eyewitnesses to the horror that transpired.

He told me the smoke that ensued following the mass destruction fortunately did not permeate the approximate ten blocks north into TriBeCa, but the lingering smell and soot emitted by the fumes of ruin were evident to everyone in the neighborhood. Teddy said that he witnessed first-hand the resiliency of the entire community, who refused to be deterred by the tragic events that beset so many of their neighbors. New Yorkers demonstrated to everyone what they do best. They dusted themselves off, got up the next day and went back to work and school, refusing to be intimidated by the murderous and cowardly acts of ruthless barbarians. On that day and in the weeks and months that followed, New Yorkers showed their strength and unshakeable resolve to the rest of the nation and the entire world, that they are a unified people and would not be undone.

An even closer to home disaster took place in the early morning hours of February 5, 2016, when a massive crane collapsed adjacent to the New York Law School building and Leonard Street. The huge boom crashed down smashing the roofs of parked cars and landed across the intersection of West Broadway, stretching across two city blocks at Worth and Church Streets. One passerby died and two others were seriously injured. Teddy's account of New York's worst crane accident in years was reported in an interview with the New York Times.



*Photo by Donna Ferrato*

What is the incentive that drives this larger than life septuagenarian to continue the daily commute to TriBeCa each morning from his New Jersey home, as he has done for more than three decades?

"I enjoy coming to work each day because there is always something different going on here... a lot of energy down here... a lot to see," answered Teddy with his usual candor.

“TriBeCa is the hottest thing in Manhattan right now, hotter than the Upper East Side. Real estate has taken off here. But it’s all about the people...there are a lot of very interesting people that I get to meet every single day. There’s a vitality to living and working here... plus all those baby carriages and dog walkers keep this place hopping.”

Another afternoon spent with the mayor was about to end. I had another appointment to keep, and Teddy left to inform an approaching delivery driver, hauling construction materials, where best to park his truck at the entrance site. He then placed traffic cones in the roadway to close the street off from pedestrians during the unloading. All in a day’s work.

“Good seeing you. Come around again when you have some time,” Teddy called out, waving the orange construction flag and flashing his unmistakable grin, the same welcoming smile that has brightened the spirits of so many of his neighbors for so long. A local treasure in this town, Theodore Elgin Johnson is indeed, the rightful mayor for all seasons. Thirty-one years and counting, to be precise!

*About the author:*

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*About the photographer:*

*Donna Ferrato is a freelance photojournalist and activist. Her work has appeared in national and international publications, including Life, Time, People, and The New York Times. Her photographs have won various awards and have appeared in solo exhibitions in museums and galleries. She maintains a website, [Donna Ferrato Photography](#). Ferrato lives in TriBeCa, New York City.*

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