

New Bedford's resurgence starts with a click

By Craig DeMelo

In the 1850s Herman Melville wrote endearingly about the beauty and opulence of a quaint port town in Massachusetts. It was in a small chapel where he was inspired to pen the classic novel that would make him a household name. The chapel was the Seaman's Bethel. The novel was Moby Dick. The place was New Bedford.

The affluence of historical New Bedford is well documented. Twice this fishing village has been a pinnacle of wealth and prosperity, once for its legendary whaling industry and once for textiles. Images of the former pervade the small city in the form of statues, murals, harpoon-decked logos, and mascots. The latter's colossal factories – many now apartments – loom large over the harbor. The majesty and grandiosity of this 30 square-mile sliver were captured eloquently in the early chapters of Melville's epic. For centuries New Bedford was much more than an obscure location in the Northeast.

Today, its fame has changed to infamy, its principle commodities of oil and cloth have metamorphosed into the nefarious trifecta of drugs, crime, and violence. The past few decades have seen New Bedford appear on more than a few ignominious lists, with staggering per capita numbers of criminals, addicts, and diseases. The days of resting on 18th and 19th century laurels are over.

Despite this fall from grace, the Whaling City does still possess a certain richness that is unheralded. The art scene here is robust with the prodigious efforts of painters, graffiti artists, singers, songwriters, amateur filmmakers, and photographers. The downtown area is a wellspring of

creativity, a place where food for the eyes and ears and mind can be found around seemingly every corner. There are local art galleries and shows featuring the refulgence of the city's finest budding artisans. The circuit of unique restaurants and bars feature a slate of bands and musicians that can only be referred to collectively as an embarrassment of riches. Hang around New Bedford long enough and you're likely to hear or see something you will never forget.

The city does its best to shed light on this assemblage of innovation; there are a bevy of festivals and functions throughout the year, featuring this mass of talent. Unfortunately, however, outside of the scant few privy to this local renaissance, the vast majority of New Bedford's population appears to be oblivious. Most people choose instead to focus on the aforementioned dirt that defames this city. The stories and links that get the most shares, posts, and comments are rarely the tales of the aspiring geniuses. Unlike moths, it appears that many people are drawn to the darkest things this city has to offer.

It is undoubtedly important to know what's going on in your city, and that includes the bad news. But one way to stop the decay, to clean up the mess, to shift the narrative is to discuss the awful, but to take to the rooftops and holler about the wonderful. Next time you read the paper and think that New Bedford is rough, just remember there are diamonds here, too, if you know where to find them.
