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2 Gas Stations, and a Family's Resolve, Confront Columbia Expansion Plan

By **TIMOTHY WILLIAMS**

The two gas stations sit at the western end of 125th Street in Manhattan, anonymous amid rows of vacant factories and lines of cars edging toward the highway.

Even for service stations, they are modest: One has peeling green paint; the second, chipped red paint and an attached car wash. Each has only a few pumps.

But for Gurnam Singh, the businesses represent a quarter-century of hard work.

The state, however, is poised to seize the stations to make way for a [Columbia University](#) expansion using eminent domain — a concept that Mr. Singh, a 47-year-old Indian immigrant, was barely familiar with until a few years ago.

“This is everything I have,” Mr. Singh said, standing in front of one of the gas stations.

Columbia [plans](#) to build a new \$6.3 billion campus in the industrial neighborhood of Manhattanville over 25 years, tearing down all but two of the existing buildings in a 17-acre area and replacing them with glass-walled high rises for the university's cramped science, arts and business schools.

For the past several years, the university has bought land from dozens of property owners and helped them find alternate sites for their businesses. Mr. Singh and Nicholas Sprayregen — who owns four buildings in the area as part of his Tuck-It-Away moving and storage business — are the final holdouts. There have been intermittent negotiations between Columbia and the two property owners.

In July, the Empire State Development Corporation declared the area blighted, a step toward forcing property owners to sell their land as part of eminent domain proceedings. A ruling by the development corporation's board could come as soon as December.

The land battle is one of many struggles playing out across Harlem, an area changing fast as new businesses move in and prices rise, threatening to push out some of the longtime residents.

While Mr. Sprayregen has been the [public face](#) of the opposition to Columbia — holding press conferences and pledging to take the case to the [United States Supreme Court](#) — Mr. Singh has not previously spoken publicly.

But Mr. Singh and his family agreed to an interview this month, saying they had become angered by the university's tactics. They said Columbia had relentlessly pressured them to sell their property and that university representatives had threatened them.

Mr. Singh said the realization that he might lose his gas stations had prompted him to go to the hospital in January for exhaustion. In the end, he stayed for 18 days, the family said. And one morning a few months ago, Mr. Singh's wife, Parminder Kaur, 38, who handles the couple's business affairs, discovered blisters on her face and scalp. A doctor told her she had stress-related shingles.

Ms. Kaur said the service stations were as dear to her as loved ones. "I don't want to sell them

for any amount of money," she said. "This business is like part of my family. Money is not everything. You don't sell your children."

While the university will not say how much money it has offered Mr. Singh to move, the family said that years of negotiations have left them frustrated and embittered.

They said that one of Columbia's proposals was to pay them more than \$1 million and to find them a site in Jamaica, Queens. The family says that the figure is far too low, however, and that the location is not busy enough.

"These properties are the bread and butter for our family," said Amar Kaur, 16, Ms. Kaur's daughter. "If we lose this, it would be equivalent to losing everything we have in our lives. My parents have put blood, sweat, tears and time for the past 25-plus years to be where we are at in society today."

The family said that one Columbia official in particular, Philip Silverman, the university's vice president for real estate, had been "disrespectful" toward them. They said Mr. Silverman told them the state would simply take their property if they refused to sell.

"He's treating me like, 'This is an Indian family — we don't know anything,'" Mr. Singh said.

Columbia denied the allegation, and Mr. Silverman did not return a call seeking comment.

"We reject completely the characterizations of our negotiations, and to be even clearer, though we normally do not discuss our negotiations in any form, we have, in fact, offered a range of specific sites including a site in the immediate vicinity of the current gas stations," La-Verna J. Fountain, the university's associate vice president for construction, business services and

communications, said in a statement.

That site, however, would only give Mr. Singh an option to lease the new property instead of buying it, because the land would eventually be used for the second phase of Columbia's expansion.

Ms. Fountain said the university had dealt fairly with each of the businesses it had had discussions with in Manhattanville during the past several years.

“Columbia University has successfully negotiated the acquisition of over three dozen properties in five years within the old Manhattanville manufacturing area,” Ms. Fountain said. “Many of those who sold their properties to Columbia have testified at public hearings about Columbia's fairness and ongoing commitment to resolutions supportive of sellers' continuing business and employment interests in New York. Columbia has a longstanding policy of not commenting on negotiations, though it is worth noting that the remaining two business owners are being officially represented by legal counsel in their discussions with the university.”

Mr. Singh came to New York from Punjab in northwestern India in 1981, following his older brother, Puranjit Singh. He washed dishes in a Queens restaurant before the two pooled their money, buying a gas station in Queens and two others in Manhattanville. He worked days; his brother worked nights.

At the time, crime in the area was high, and many drivers took their chances with an empty tank rather than stop at the Singhs' stations, which were robbed at gunpoint with regularity, Mr. Singh said.

“Everybody was scared to come here,” he said. “There were many, many holdups. What can I

do? I risk my life all the time.”

In the early 1990s, his brother was fatally shot during an armed robbery at the Queens gas station.

Mr. Singh continued the business, and married Ms. Kaur, who was his brother's wife. They sold the Queens service station.

As the Manhattanville neighborhood improved, Mr. Singh and Ms. Kaur managed to make a good living from the service stations, located in an old, industrial stretch near where drivers enter and exit the Henry Hudson Parkway. The family has bought a home in Astoria, Queens, and plans to send Amar, Mr. Singh's stepdaughter, to medical school.

The family, however, said Columbia's expansion plans had stalled plans to upgrade the stations, because banks are unwilling to offer loans to businesses that might be seized via eminent domain.

“They are a prime example of the American dream,” said Mr. Sprayregen, who owns a storage building that abuts one of the service stations. “It would be a terrible signal to other immigrants who look at America as a golden beacon if someone could lose everything they've worked for because someone more powerful covets their property.”

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