



When job opportunities began to vanish in Upstate cities, the middle-class dream started to dissipate in places like Knaul Street in Syracuse, where neighbors say instability and a loss of hope are the new norms. (Mike Greenleaf / mgreenleaf@syracuse.com)

# WHEN CORPORATIONS MOVE, JOBS AND HOPE FOLLOW

By Sean Kirst  
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It may seem like a long way from corporate choices by such Upstate giants as Bausch & Lomb to the intimate struggles of wounded city neighborhoods across the region.

Then again, as many readers understand, it's all part of the same grinding circle.

The headquarters of Bausch & Lomb, a landmark Rochester industry, will soon leave New York. Valeant Pharmaceuticals, the Canadian giant that bought B&L, announced it will take the corporate offices to New Jersey while cutting 10 percent to 15 percent of the workforce.

J. Michael Pearson, Valeant's top executive, spoke of how the company "takes pride in our frugality," words that could be tattooed on the Upstate soul after decades of similar loss.

I've spent an adult lifetime in the metropolitan areas of the largest Upstate cities: Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. What set Rochester apart was the cluster of major companies with headquarters there: You once had Kodak, Xerox, B&L, Gannett and several other heavy-

weights. The result was a city that initially dodged the economic downturn that was pounding other big Upstate towns. Inevitably, those hard times came to

Rochester. The greatest symbol is Kodak, with more than 50,000 jobs reduced to 3,000 and change. Economists in Monroe County say the gift from those hometown companies, even as they leave or dwindle, is a seeding of bright minds and innovators who run startups or small companies.

Still, I remember how my drive to work in Rochester used to take me past the old Bausch & Lomb works on St. Paul Street, not far from downtown. Close by was a string of impressive old brick homes. They'd once been owned by the Bausch family, including company founder John Jacob Bausch, who could walk out his door and keep an eye on his plant.

Imagine. That recalls an era when company leaders equated their own success with the vitality of their cities, a time when Bausch himself took pride in something far beyond "frugality."

The newest reminder of industrial loss left me thinking of reader reaction to last week's column about Knaul Street in Syracuse, where two chilling homicides occurred within a five-day period in July. In the column, I focused on the history of two small houses — at 107 and 109 Knaul — close to where the killings took place.

At the Onondaga Historical Association, I learned Knaul Street had been thriving and peaceful into relatively recent memory. Records showed two quiet families had lived side-by-side in those houses for more than 40 years, until the owners grew old, moved away or died ...

Even as the street slid toward the heartbreak that engulfs it today.

I tracked down grieving members of both families, still in greater Syracuse. They told me they sometimes take nostalgic drives to Knaul, where they grow dismayed by the pain of a once-beautiful street. Their reflections struck a deep chord with readers, many of whom used to live in similar areas, and I received a flood of notes and letters built around a simple question:

How could things in these old neighborhoods go so wrong?

The answer is complex, but swings heavily on jobs, the availability of cars and the suffocating nature of poverty.

Sixty years ago, the big Upstate cities were hearing the end of a cycle of growth that had lasted for more than a century. Industries employed thousands upon thousands of workers. Families living in vibrant city neighborhoods typically had one vehicle, at most.

"Back in the day," as one reader noted on my blog at [Syracuse.com/kirst](http://www.syracuse.com/kirst), "... there were more good paying factory jobs in Syracuse and folks could make a good living with just a high school

education."

That changed, fast. Once working couples could afford a couple of cars, they were able to consider life beyond the city. Thousands of families left. Many were eager for more space. Others retreated based on cultural change or racial fear. As they departed, there was no longer a rising middle class to take their place. Big employers were getting out, cutting back or shutting down — be it General Electric in Syracuse, or Kodak in Rochester, or Bethlehem Steel in Buffalo.

Lacking those jobs, city populations plunged. With no demand for homes, landlords — some who merited the title "slumlords" — began carving houses into apartments. Neighborhood stability was undermined, and the way generations of Americans pulled themselves into the middle class — through industrial work that demanded little schooling — lost much of its power, at least here.

A 17-year-old who blew out of high school could no longer dream about a good-paying factory job, but had to settle for minimum wage — or for a more destructive income, on the corner. With employers increasingly demanding college-level skills, even as city high schools were graduating only half their seniors, the landscape we have now seemed preordained:

Across Upstate, you'll find thousands of Knaul Streets.

Solutions are easy to preach, much harder to enact: We need deep academic and family support for children traumatized by struggle. We need a better way to teach the trades to young people who don't embrace academics. We need a lasting means of encouraging more home ownership, and thus community, in wounded neighborhoods.

That's a hard road, but it's the only road we've got, unless some savior comes to town with a boatload of new jobs — a fantasy we ought to know by now won't happen. The decision by Bausch & Lomb, a regional icon, reinforces that truth. Instead of dreaming about corporate patriarchs, the new Upstate will rise or fall based on what we do ourselves.

Yet as readers passionately reminded me last week, it's only human to think about what used to be in city neighborhoods ...

And to appreciate, more than ever, why it matters.

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