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## Neighbor: Edgemont Resident MaryAnne Gilmartin, Executive Vice President of Commercial and Residential Development at Forest City Ratner Companies

**She's overseen some of the area's largest real-estate projects. But before MaryAnne Gilmartin could become a force among New York's developers, she had to build up something else from nearly nothing: herself.**

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**BY DEBORAH SKOLNIK**

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**T**here was a picture of Lady Gaga recently splashed all over the web, a dynamic tableau of her running across the Brooklyn Bridge. Against the sky, a striking structure looms: it's 8 Spruce Street, one of Manhattan's modern landmarks, designed by famed architect Frank Gehry. At 76 stories, it's the tallest residential building in the Western Hemisphere—panache to match Gaga herself.



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH LIPPMAN

If the woman in front of 8 Spruce Street is a household name, the woman behind it is less so, though remarkable in her own right: MaryAnne Gilmartin, executive vice president of commercial and residential development at Forest City Ratner Companies. Indeed, the Spruce tower is far from the only mark this innovative and tenacious builder has left on the skyline. The Edgemont mom of three made her first splash by winning the contract to build the *New York Times* building, an intricately designed tower that brought new life to Eighth Avenue. In Brooklyn, she's helping to shape Atlantic Yards, a complex of residential and commercial buildings that will also

be the new home of the New Jersey Nets. Right here in Yonkers, her handiwork can be seen at Ridge Hill, a cluster of stores, offices, and residences beckoning like Mecca off the Sprain Brook. "They're more than just buildings to me," Gilmartin says of her projects. "They sort of become like my children."

Problem children, some. Atlantic Yards has been a focal point of bitter controversy going on a decade, with certain locals protesting everything from the destruction of neighborhood character to use of eminent domain. Ridge Hill, too, inspired opposition and incited scandal. Smack in the middle of the Sturm und Drang, helping her company's visions go from point A (abstraction) to point B (built!) is Gilmartin, poised and proud. "We tend to take things on only when they're complicated," she declares.

And if you think her present life sounds complicated, wait till you hear about her past.

### **Born in and Escaped from Queens**

**S**eated across from me at posh Yonkers restaurant X2O on a warm September evening, Gilmartin looks lovely. With shiny, coiffed brunette hair, a metallic dress, and twinkling blue eyes, she looks more ready to sit for a John Singer Sargent portrait than an interview with a local writer. Yet just because she's got a silver frock on her back doesn't mean she was born with a silver spoon in her mouth—far from it.

Gilmartin, 47, spent her earliest years in a neighborhood characterized as "hectic" in other media. "I was, at two years old, abruptly," she says. Her c

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sis, a newborn. “Mom ought not to have married the most handsome fellow in the bar.” While their mother, Margaret, worked various jobs to support them, the Gilmartin girls spent many hours in the care of their grandmother—“a rough, hard Irishwoman who’d come over on a boat and snorted snuff,” Gilmartin says. “Not a lot of tenderness there. We were often walked home by her cat. He’d take us to our door, then go back to his house.”

Around the time Gilmartin started school, her mother relocated the family to Woodstock, New York, and married a river pilot. The laid-back rural town was an escape from the family’s history in Rockaway Beach, but if the setting was idyllic, mom’s second marriage wasn’t. “I *wanted* to love my stepfather a lot,” Gilmartin says. “He provided for us, but he was harsh. He didn’t build self-esteem.” (His nickname for her in her frizzy-haired adolescent years: Helmet Head.) His whims were disruptive and disconcerting, she adds. “He’d do things like pull us out of school for a month and take us camping.” By her teens, Gilmartin says, “I was aware my parents’ marriage was disintegrating. Books were an escape for me, so I was a good student. My mission was to get out and go to the college that would offer me the most money.”

She graduated near the top of her Catholic high school’s class in 1982, just as her stepfather landed in prison for tax evasion. “I got awarded a big aid package to Fordham, but they almost took it back—I found out from my scholarship officer that I owned two motorcycles and three cars,” she says. “They were my stepdad’s. To avoid having the Feds take them, in a burst of selfishness, he’d transferred them into my name without telling me, and almost blew my financial aid.” Fortunately, the matter was cleared up. She packed her bags, moved out, and began the rest of her life.

### A Foundation for Success

**F**reed from the volatile pilot who’d nearly marooned her, it was time for Gilmartin to steer her own ship. Despite a double major in politics and Spanish, a rigorous work-study program, and late-night jobs waiting tables, she was a standout at Fordham. “Sleeping through classes wasn’t an option.” She graduated Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude in 1986. “I was awarded an Urban Fellowship to do research and work for a year at any New York City government agency I chose,” she says. She opted for the Public



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Corporation (which has since evolved into the New York City Economic Development Corporation). “It was summer and they had air conditioning,” she says, laughing. “But once I started in economic development, I got it in my veins.” She remained through 1993, helping to develop Manhattan’s West Side and southern tip, and negotiating corporate deals that saved thousands of city jobs.

**building, designed by Renzo Piano, soars over Times Square**

## MaryAnne’s Musings

**The most valid criticisms about me:** I talk fast and I’m intense.

**The most baseless criticism about me:** That I don’t really know Brooklyn, so I’m not qualified to develop a project there. I lived in Brooklyn from 1988 to 1993.

**My finest work:** It isn’t any of my buildings. It’s my children.

**My nagging regret:** Would I like to have gone to a better school? Yes. My partner went to Yale.

**My favorite vacation:** I’m an adventurer—I’ve gone whitewater rafting, ridden on a glider, and gone on a moose expedition.

**What you might not guess about me:** I love to dance. I’m on the board of the New York City Ballet. And I used to be an aerobics instructor—I’d teach the 6 am classes that no one else wanted.

It was then, while hammering out a deal to keep brokerage Bear Stearns in Manhattan, that she first met Bruce Ratner, head of Forest City Ratner’s New York business operation, Forest City Enterprises, and the man who’d vault her career to the next level. “MaryAnne had that rare combination of qualities you look for,” Ratner recalls. “She’s not only smart, she’s likeable. She can be tough, but in a nice way. In negotiations she’d get what she needed, but everyone would come away feeling they’d been treated fairly.” Within a year, he had wooed her to his Brooklyn-based team.

In 1999, Gilmartin approached Ratner with a pie-in-the-sky plan. FCR had been invited to submit a proposal for developing the New York Times’s new headquarters, and she wanted to toss their hat into the ring. The competition: some of the best-known Manhattan-based players. It was a long shot at best. Ratner told her to go for it. “Every time MaryAnne takes on a new role, you always wonder how she’ll do, then she winds up doing it,” he says. “She su  
Gilmartin pitched was for a 52-story to  
to be designed by famed architect Renz

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FCR walked off with the deal. The victory was widely regarded as a stunner, but perhaps not so much to Mary Ann Tighe, a CEO of the firm that had invited Gilmartin's bid, CB Richard Ellis. Tighe had met Gilmartin several years before, and had been mightily impressed. "MaryAnne arrived on the scene fully formed," Tighe says. "She's an extraordinary blend of great intelligence, boundless energy, and immense charm—that whole package was there."

Soon, Gilmartin was on the map just as prominently as her buildings were: *Crain's* included her in its "40 Under 40" roundup of rising stars in 2003. By 2007, the *Times* building was finished—"and finished magnificently," Tighe emphasizes. "Before it was even completed, all 1.6 million square feet were leased. To do that, and bring it in on budget, was a pretty dazzling performance." That year, *Crain's* crowned Gilmartin one of the 100 Most Powerful Women in New York for the first time.

### Controversy by the Yard

By 2007, Gilmartin was Ratner's No. 3 in the company, and his No. 1 choice to take over stewardship of its massive Atlantic Yards development project, a \$4 billion complex consisting of residential and commercial buildings, as well as an arena, all situated over an active rail yard. "It's a run-down and decrepit area where the LIRR used to park and service trains," Gilmartin says. "It's been a labor of love for more than seven years. Of the six thousand housing units, more than two thousand will be affordable housing. It's bringing in construction jobs and jobs for locals. And by relocating the Nets here, we'll be bringing pro sports back to the borough that's never recovered from the loss of the Dodgers."

Then why all the fuss? Atlantic Yards has been the subject of several lawsuits and numerous protests. A journalist, Norman Oder, maintains a blog, atlanticyardsreport.com, that chronicles Forest City Ratner's every move on the project. Another blog run by the anti-Yards group Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn (dddb.net) is highly critical. There's even a movie, *Battle for Brooklyn*, about locals taking a stand. "The issue for many of these people is the way that some of the land was assembled through eminent domain," Gilmartin says. "Some other people think it will make the area's population too dense. And others don't want a stadium in their backyard. I won't speak in detail for the opposition can speak for itself. "For the acquisition of public subsidies," Nor

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related to major spending on lobbying, and substantial political and charitable contributions, as well as hardball tactics.” Oder also points out how initial grand promises for the Yard have been scaled back (architect Frank Gehry is no longer involved) and how many of the promised union construction jobs didn’t pan out. He cries foul on slick money-saving moves he feels Ratner made, such as convincing authorities to condemn certain land parcels in stages rather than at once.

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## The year the *New York Times* building was completed, *Crain’s* crowned Gilmartin one of the 100 Most Powerful Women in New York.

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Gilmartin doesn’t escape personal criticism either. “Look, I’ll be honest. I don’t like her,” says Daniel Goldstein, the last person to cede his apartment to the Yards project (for a reported \$3 million) and the founder of DDDB. When Gilmartin first approached him to discuss a buyout, he says, she requested confidentiality, then breached it. “A friend’s child goes to the same school as her kids, and told his mom Gilmartin came to talk to the class about the Yards and gave them Nets swag,” he says. “Apparently she told them that they were building houses for poor people and bringing in a basketball team, but that a mean man named Daniel Goldstein wouldn’t leave. I wasn’t there, obviously. Who knows, maybe she said I was standing up for my beliefs. But to discuss me at all with a bunch of third graders? That’s warped.” He also feels Gilmartin portrayed his settlement to the media as “having been all about money, when the big holdup was, they wanted me to accept a gag order and I kept refusing.”

Oder is no Gilmartin fan either. “She commutes by chauffeured car to Brooklyn and strikes me as comfortable among real estate peers, but chilly at the few—and heavily managed—opportunities she has to interact with Brooklynites with qualms about Atlantic Yards,” he says. He once put an aerial image of Gilmartin’s home (as well as other homes owned by those managing readers whether she seemed well suited in a more densely populated area such

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have a large development, the opposition focuses on all individuals, because it's effective."

Gilmartin admits she won't be buying a ticket to *Battle for Brooklyn* anytime soon. "It's always a little dicey to do what I do so close to home," she says.

### An Up 'Hill' Climb



PHOTO BY ZUM, LLC

**Yonkers's Ridge Hill was not built without controversy.**

**Y**et this didn't deter her from aiming even closer to home by developing the Ridge Hill complex in Yonkers. If you haven't been there yet, you'll be astonished to find a near-city unto itself, with food stores, upscale retailers (1.2 million square feet of them, in fact), offices, apartments, eateries, a WestMed Medical Group outpost, and even a movie theater, all open or opening soon.

Here too, though, there was opposition. "We were sued by some of the small towns along the 287 corridors who felt Ridge Hill would have a negative impact on them," Gilmartin says. "We made a financial contribution to their local budgets and created a back road through the Sprain," she adds with a shrug. Less easy to shrug off is the bribery scandal that tainted the project last year. Former Yonkers City Councilwoman Sandy Annabi was indicted for taking a bribe to change her vote on Ridge Hill's development from no to yes in 2006, effectively greenlighting it. (Her cousin was promised a \$60,000 consulting job by Ratner reps, it's been widely reported.) Though FCR was never named nor found at fault, "Do you really think they didn't know about it at the time? Seems unlikely," says attorney Peter Porcino, a current candidate for Ardsley mayor who once led a car caravan to protest Ridge Hill's potential traffic impact. Porcino still feels the project lacks merit. "The development principles don't make sense," he insists. "It's mainly retail, so it won't be adding much more than minimum-wage jobs, and I don't know that the county can support it. It may just pull business from Cross County and White Plains. If I were a Yonkers city planner, I wouldn't be too happy. They have that Getty Square development there, with lovely housing and a library. And now there's a mega project competing with it."

Greenburgh Town Supervisor Paul Feiner agrees with these assessments. "Ridge Hill could be very harmful to both the Cross Avenue," he says. "I think it won't be a good shift shopping patterns." Nor does he fi

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experience: “I found when I visited that... a Woodbury Commons, a place where you could spend a whole day walking around. It’ll be harder for people, especially older people, to go from one shopping area to the next there, and you’re paying for the parking if you’re going to the movies or to Whole foods.” Moreover, he’s not convinced the traffic impact issues have been resolved. “The access to Greenburgh is not great,” he says. “They approved it and built it and now everyone has to worry about whether it will cause backups on Jackson Avenue.”

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## It’s always a little dicey to do what I do so close to home.

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To Gilmartin, though, Ridge Hill represents the fulfillment of community needs. “I ran focus groups as we were planning it—I held them in my living room, asking people what kind of stores should be there, and learned a lot.” She poured herself into the project on a personal level, she adds. “I concentrated on the art and parks. There’s a great outdoor play space for kids to enjoy while their parents shop. There’s a children’s slide made by an artist, and a Main Street setup with a patch of grass in the center. Those are the areas where I focused a lot of my energy.”

### The Comfort Zone

**W**here, then, does Gilmartin choose not to focus her energies? Even a go-go real-estate player must have a finite amount, after all. She smiles. She’s not pursuing a whirlwind social life, for one thing: “I’m regularly invited to book groups and girls’ nights out, but I just don’t have the time.” (Though she does make time for rigorous Lotte Burke exercise classes in the early mornings. “A friend of mine in town bought a book of classes, because she saw me going but she found it so hard, she pretended to move to Boston to get a refund!”) Gilmartin also doesn’t sweat the small stuff—or a lot of the big stuff, either, for that matter. “In my business, you need to be comfortable with chaos, with star the pieces should come together.”

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Certainly, her family of origin helped th... the pieces have come together over the years. “Mom’s healthy and lives here in town, close to me,” she says. “In the end, she’s been my inspiration—she’s a survivor and a passionate person.” Her two sisters are highly successful businesswomen in their own right. As for her stepfather, he died years ago of brain cancer, but not before trying to mend some fences. “He summoned me to his bedside toward the end and gave me a music box he’d made. On it, it said, ‘I’ve always loved you, Dad.’” She pauses. “If I wanted to get bound up in knots about my past, I’d be a miserable person. The fact is, I came out just fine.”

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She’s taken care to craft a stable family life for herself in her adult life. Her husband, James, a retired police detective and attorney, stays home with their three children, Devin, 14, Aidan, 12, and Tess, 7. “It’s great for the kids to have daddy around while I go slay the dragon,” she says. “I married a good man who I love.” Another great love: Showing her kids what Mommy does. “Tess used to ask why I have to go to work every day”—Gilmartin used more than just words to explain it. “I took the kids to the top of every building I’ve built,” she says. “To stand at the top, and realize all my toil has been for this—I feel so fortunate.”

*Deborah Skolnik has written numerous profiles of real people and celebrities for Westchester Magazine and other leading magazines.*

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