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My co-op board interview: The tables were turned because I had an exit strategy



*The board was disorganized, but that didn't discourage one buyer from her plans to buy a co-op near the eastern entrance to Prospect Park.
Douglas Elliman via StreetEasy*

A board interview is the final step to approval when buying a co-op unit in New York City. In this series, New Yorkers tell Brick Underground about their experience with the interview process, what worked and what didn't—and what you can learn. Have a story to share? Drop us an email. We respect all requests for anonymity.

This week, Faith Edwards, a pseudonym, shares her experience buying a one-bedroom co-op east of Prospect Park in Brooklyn. Edwards recently moved back to NYC after a decade of working abroad in international disaster relief. Initially, she was rejected by the co-op board, but then got an email saying her interview would take place within three days. In a unique twist, her lawyer negotiated a rider to the contract that said Edwards could get out of the deal after the interview if she chose to, which turned the tables on the co-op board interview.

How did your co-op search go?

I put in an offer on the apartment and had it accepted by the seller the same day. I had to move out of my apartment at the end of August and at that point, my broker, Jennifer Corcoran at CORE, said once you have been cleared by their financial review, [closing is] no more than a couple of weeks away. My landlord was completely inflexible so I put my things in storage and went to stay with friends. After I'd been out of my apartment for a couple of weeks, I got a notification that I had been rejected by the co-op board.

What were your thoughts at that point?

I was really disappointed and did a lot of speculating about the possible reasons. It was really frustrating not to know. Acknowledging that it takes ages to close even when you do find the perfect place, I started looking at rentals again. A month later I was signed up to look at a bunch of rentals on a Friday and the day before the viewings [the board] unrejected me. They just sent an email saying: "The board will interview Faith on Monday at this time."

So you had to make a quick decision?

Right! So I canceled the rental viewings because I didn't want to put down deposits and I had a little bit of a breakdown with my broker. I didn't know why I was initially rejected. All the reasons we could brainstorm were complete speculation. The first theory was that they wanted to maintain the demographics of the building and I don't represent the demographics of the building—I get the sense the majority of residents are African American and older, I am Caucasian and younger.

Another detail was that a month or so before me, they had rejected another buyer, so we thought maybe there was something going on between the seller and the board, but again it was pure speculation. Our last theory was that maybe they mixed me up with the previous offer and thought they had already reviewed the offer and it was just a clerical error.

How did that make you feel going into the interview?

I really hesitated to take the interview, to be honest, because I thought, when I go to sell the unit in the future, I don't want to be in the same position of having offers rejected. I spend a lot of time working overseas and if I want to sublet (which the building allows after two years of residency), I don't want them to not approve a qualified renter.

I foresaw a lot of heartache and financial strain so I really had second thoughts about even taking the interview and the seller was aware of that via my broker. My broker arranged for a rider on the contract saying if I went to the interview and didn't feel comfortable at the end of it, I could back out of the deal.

That's a pretty unique arrangement, did that make you more comfortable?

I probably would not have gone ahead with the interview without that assurance. Both parties signed it over the weekend and I ended up being interviewed on the Wednesday.

So in a strange twist, you were the one assessing the board?

Yes, in my mind the interview was risk-free and more than anything I was really curious so I went ahead with the interview. When I arrived [the board members] used a name that wasn't mine, so I said, 'Actually, I'm Faith,' and they said they were expecting someone else. I thought, 'Oh man, these guys really are disorganized.'

They disappeared and came back 15 minutes later and said, 'OK, now we are ready for you.' I sat down and based on some of the questions they asked, I got the sense they had not seen my application before. They asked why my income was only a certain amount in the past year and I explained that was three years ago when I took a sabbatical. They truly looked like they were viewing [the application] for the first time.

What were some of the other questions you were asked?

At least with two of the board members, I was able to make a personal connection; talking about my work, the places I'd lived, getting a few laughs and smiles. The questions they asked were about how I felt about living in the community and whether that appealed to me. At the end of the day, it does and I want to know my neighbors and I moved back from overseas to be closer to family and have a bit more of a predictable schedule and a more stable community.

They asked whether I was familiar with the rules of the building. Did I know that you can't have plants on the fire escape, confirming that work had to be approved through the management company? I thought they might be trying to get a sense of my personality and interests but it was more about what I was getting myself into. It lasted just eight minutes so it was pretty quick.

What happened after that?

There was a lot of pressure to make a decision and I was still feeling a little unsure. One of the push factors was that I had started looking at rentals and saw how much rents had gone up in the neighborhood and that was really disheartening. So there were economic factors pushing me to buy but I accepted too that it's always going to be a risk and maybe a lot of my nervousness is just from that. So I thought I'll go out on a limb here and take a risk.

I gave myself a few days to think about it and we confirmed [the deal] by the end of the week. I was specifically looking in Crown Heights, Prospect Lefferts Gardens, and Flatbush, and I wanted to be within a mile of Prospect Park because I'm a runner. The building itself wasn't the draw but I liked the unit, I liked the neighborhood, and it fit my budget. It was a bit of a leap of faith but it's the one I decided to take.

So why do you think you had the initial rejection?

I think it was probably the third theory that it was just a mix-up. That's my current theory but I've accepted I have to be OK with the uncertainty of never knowing. When I've been going in and out of the building, everyone has been super friendly, and really nice.

What advice do you have for others going into the process?

Be patient and expect some curve-balls.