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A senior healthcare director who teaches home-bound octogenarians how to use Facebook so they can stay in touch with their family. A longtime educator who once crossed paths with — and inspired — a young Lin-Manuel Miranda. A hospital worker who teaches kids about the dangers of guns — by showing them corpses in the morgue of those killed by bullets.

Smart, proficient women like these are a dynamic Brooklyn resource, and Community News Group and Courier Life Publications feel so strongly about their influence that we've dedicated an entire publication to them — for the eighth consecutive year.

Our 2018 Women of Distinction magazine showcases 26 of our best and brightest female workers and volunteers, nominated by their peers and selected by an independent panel for distinguishing themselves in their chosen fields.

They represent women we see every day walking on our streets, shopping in our stores, and seated next to us on the bus or train.

All of them have demonstrated a commitment to work, attention to duty, and love of community that has inspired, educated, healed, and uplifted Brooklyn.

They are making today and tomorrow better than yesterday, for all of us.

We hope that you enjoy reading this publication as much as we did compiling it, and consider it a token of our gratitude and appreciation to our Women of Distinction, whose formidable contributions have placed Brooklyn on the map as a productive, resilient, friendly — and distinctive — place. — Jennifer Goodstein, President and Publisher, Community News Group

Letter from the Publisher
Fort Greene Council, Inc

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S. J. AVERY

Sloper instrumental in Fourth Avenue’s transformation

BY CAMILLE SPERRAZZA

When city and state agencies tell S.J. Avery “No,” she hears the words “Not yet.” Because she doesn’t take no for an answer.

The community activist volunteers as a trustee of the Park Slope Civic Council and she is co-chairwoman of its Forth on Fourth Avenue Committee. Her goals and the goals of the organization are to promote the health, vitality, and character of the neighborhood, advocating for the interests of residents and businesses there.

The Park Slope of today didn’t happen overnight. Those of who have lived in Brooklyn for decades remember a very different neighborhood. Avery, who has resided here for 45 years, has been instrumental in its transformation, working to make enhancements a reality.

Her nominator, Candace Woodward, has seen how Avery’s actions have affected busy Fourth Avenue.

“It has changed from an unattractive, dreary corridor that is intimidating to pedestrians, to a more pleasing roadway,” she says. Furthermore, Avery worked with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to improve the dark, dismal, and uninviting Fourth Avenue and Ninth Street transit hub, to get better lighting, signage, and street-level amenities to make this busy subway station more pedestrian- and commuter-friendly.”

Sure, trees grow in Brooklyn — especially when Avery takes action. She had 60 new arbors, with tree guards, planted along Fourth Avenue. She helped save the Pacific Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library from demolition, and helped secure the promise of a full-service supermarket in the area.

Such improvements benefit everyone, she says. “When we improve safety, work toward a greener, cleaner streetscape, and promote a more vibrant pedestrian experience along Fourth Avenue, we enhance that sense of place,” says the Woman of Distinction. “It’s hard to have a community without it.”

Fourth Avenue has changed so much that it is sometimes difficult to remember what it once looked like, says Avery, noting that “Not that long ago, it was primarily considered to be a boundary between neighborhoods.”

But as the development of Park Slope continued to explode, realtors eventually worked their way down to that avenue. The problem was that little thought was given to how these changes would impact those who were already living there. It sometimes seemed to her that developers were not really interested in the neighborhood; they just wanted to cash in on it. Dealing with the bureaucracy of New York City agencies has its challenges, but overall, she is happy to report that they “have been responsive to continued prodding.”

Avery (whose full name is Sarah Jean) is quick to point out that she didn’t achieve success alone. She credits the Park Slope Civic Council of volunteers with preserving, protecting, and nurturing the neighborhood. She has been fortunate to work with other organizations, too, including the Gowanus Canal Conservancy, The Boerum Hill Association, and the Fifth Avenue Committee. Together, they share common goals of bringing economic and environmental justice to these neighborhoods.

Those interested in becoming involved can go to the website: www.parkslopeciviccouncil.org.

RUCHAMA BISTRITZKY-CLAPMAN

A champion for mental health and addiction support

BY LAUREN GILL

Talking about drug abuse and mental health issues in Brooklyn’s Jewish community was a taboo subject — until Ruchama Bistritzky-Clapman came along.

As the founder of Mask, an acronym for “mothers and fathers saving kids,” she has worked for more than two decades to help find families the support they need to assist children suffering from addiction, abuse, and mental illnesses, taking away any shame that may have come with it.

“Our focus is prevention and working towards stigma-free and helping families learn to reach out and get the help they need for their loved ones,” she said.

The organization, based in Midwood, offers a helpline that gives parents referrals to appropriate treatments, runs an e-mail support group for them to discuss their experiences, and puts on seminars and symposiums to educate the Jewish community about the problems within their neighborhoods.

This Woman of Distinction said in the past, parents were not always so quick to pick up the phone for help, and problems were usually swept under the rug. But with her advocacy and outreach as she continued to put full-page ads in the local papers advertising her services, people slowly became more comfortable seeking assistance.

“It’s unbelievable from when I started 21 years ago when nobody spoke about it,” she said. “In the religious community today, it is widely accepted to speak openly about the misuse of drugs and alcohol, mental health issues, and all at-risk behaviors.”

All of the programs are facilitated by professionals, who help families learn new techniques on how to help their struggling loved ones.

“We like to teach the families that whatever they’re doing is not working, to try something different,” she said.

Along with her work with Mask, Bistritzky-Clapman hosts a radio show every Thursday night called “Family Matters,” in which she discusses mental health issues with guests including doctors and advocates.

Through all of her hard work, she has made a lasting change to the way addiction and mental health issues are viewed within traditionally conservative circles.

“She’s broken a lot of molds, sometimes working with people who are very religious and have a particular worldview in which it’s hard to sometimes face realities like substance abuse or alcoholism,” said Rabbi Simcha Feuerman, the president of Nefesh, a network of Orthodox mental health professionals of which Bistritzky-Clapman is a board member.

This Woman of Distinction is known as a champion for mental health and addiction support within the Jewish community that has gotten people to stop avoiding the subject and start talking.

“She’s a very dynamic and energetic person who has really worked tirelessly on behalf of the families,” Feuerman said. “She’s really opened up a lot of dialogue.”
F or the past 42 years, Harriet Bloomberg Blank has served as director of the OHEL Geriatric Services, ensuring optimum welfare for seniors and providing them and their families with peace of mind. She does it by connecting the entire community, from kids to teens to adults to elders.

“We look at healthy family relationships and maintaining the ability to communicate with each other, even when things are difficult,” said Blank, a licensed clinical social worker. “Isolation is as much a killer as disease, but everyone has something to share. We have tons of stories about isolated seniors who showed they were still able to learn and give, and that helps them and helps the children.”

The child of a hospital administrator, Blank remembers growing up working in hospice and healthcare, saying it was how her parents taught their kids responsibility while keeping an eye on them. After attending school for social work, she did acute care, nursing home work, and program development. She had four children, then went to work at OHEL, handling trauma in older adults.

“I’m here to help people in their losses, even as we look at their strengths,” said Blank. “I will be here for you, even if I can’t always fix everything.”

“Harriet Blank is the living embodiment of all the values, principles and ethics within clinical social work practice,” said Simcha Feuerman, a licensed clinical social worker in psychotherapy, and senior director of outpatient services at OHEL Children’s Home and Family Services. “She is compassionate, astute, and guided by an encyclopedic knowledge of gerontology. This is a well-deserved honor!”

This Woman of Distinction employs many different strategies to help connect the seniors in her care. She remembers visiting an extremely depressed woman who was otherwise cognitively intact. They showed her how to use Facebook to connect to her grandkids and family.

“She was no longer isolated because she embraced technology, even though she’s 89 years old,” Blank recalled.

Although Blank is devoted to helping her Jewish community, she is quick to note that OHEL serves every race, religion, and creed, and her staff speaks Chinese, Spanish, Creole, Russian, and more.

“I always got along with all people, whether Jewish, Italian, or Irish. Growing up in Staten Island, I learned how to clean scungilli with the best of them, even though I can’t eat it,” said Blank. “It’s about mutual respect, and giving back.”

“Harriet is extremely dedicated to her work, her clients, and her coworkers,” said Howard Lorch, chief financial officer at OHEL. “She is a fun person to be around, and makes the workplace a pleasant environment to be in.”
CASSANDRA J. BRENNAN
Assistant principal creates a loving place for Gravesend students

BY ILY GOYANES

Cassandra J. Brennan may have been born in Princeton, N.J., but since 2001 she has made New York — where she currently lives with husband Tom — her home. And it doesn’t look like she’ll be leaving the city anytime soon; she truly loves Brooklyn.

“Brooklyn Bridge Park brings together the best of old and new Brooklyn,” Brennan says as she speaks about her favorite place. “There is family fun, volleyball for single people, music, great food, and the best close-up view of the Brooklyn Bridge and lower Manhattan.”

“Brooklyn has been a cultural generator for all things creative since the turn of the last century,” she continues. “Food, music, and art from around the world make it a place that’s always satisfying. Add an honest, practical heart, and you’ll never find its match in the world.”

Brennan left the rat race that is the private sector and is now an assistant principal at PS 215 — and she couldn’t be happier.

“Cassandra’s love of life and learning is reflected in the enthusiasm she develops in her students. She is always seeking new ways to inspire them and to show there are many life lessons to be learned both in and out of the classroom,” says friend Regina Andriolo.

“I support the academic and socio-emotional development of a wonderful and diverse community in Gravesend,” says the Woman of Distinction. “There is an amazing faculty and staff who I support in their diligent efforts to provide a nurturing learning environment for these amazing children.”

She continues, “With the vision of principal Dr. Antonella Bove and the teamwork of my colleague, assistant principal Ellen Resnick, we create a loving place to learn at PS 215.”

It makes sense that someone who works for the New York City Department of Education would have quite the education herself.

“I have a Bachelor’s in Political Science from Virginia Commonwealth University, a Masters in Science in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages from Fordham University, and a Masters in Educational Leadership from New England College,” she says.

Helping children grow up to be the best version of themselves is Brennan’s main focus.

“The number of young people I have assisted in preparing for a bright future is what I am most proud of,” she said.

Of course, loving one’s job does not mean that there are no difficulties. She finds that “juggling everyone’s needs and still performing quality work” is no easy task.

“Always consider how your decisions impact those around you,” says Brennan, who notes that the required education and a “willingness to work hard” will set you up for success as an educator or administrator.

It seems that Brennan has much in common with her aunt, the woman she admires. “My aunt overcame the limitations of the time to become a published author, noted gerontologist, and named one of the top 200 scientists of the century,” she shares. It seems that strong, smart women run in the family.

JEWEL BROWN
Ensuring home care clients remain safe and well-cared for

BY ILY GOYANES

There are some careers that require continuing education. Being a compliance officer for a private home care organization is one such position.

“My job consists of ensuring that my employer and its employees are in compliance with all Federal, state, and local regulations and rules regarding home care,” Jewel Brown explains.

The most difficult part of her job is “keeping current with various rules and regulations” and “staying current with rules and regulation by the Department of Health.” But by committing herself and effort to stay on top of these regulations, Brown is ensuring that her organization’s clients remain safe and well-cared-for.

Although the position does have its difficulties, Brown finds it very fulfilling. Her favorite aspect of working as a compliance officer is “resolving conflicts and issues with home health aides and patients.”

This Woman of Distinction is very proud of the fact that she began her career as a home health-care worker and worked her way up to her current position.

Brown says that a bachelor’s degree is necessary for the position; she earned hers at Ashford University. The most important things to keep in mind, she notes, are learning “the basics and having a willing attitude.”

She credits her success to having a “highly-developed work ethic” and her “willingness to follow up on issues and constantly keeping abreast of developments in my area.”

Brown’s drive and confidence are infectious. When asked to describe herself in one sentence, she replies, “I am a generous, thoughtful, respectful person, and truly a jewel!”

As dedicated as she is to her work, she is just as dedicated to her 24-year-old son, Dylan. She’s also involved in community work as the secretary of her block association and the hospitality coordinator for a group called the Real Action Community Democrats Club.

She’s also passionate about Brooklyn, where one of her favorite spots is the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

“It is a romantic garden with beautiful flowers and I find it a very relaxing place to enjoy nature,” she says.

Brown may love the peaceful oasis that is the Botanic Garden, but she’s just as fervent about the people of Brooklyn, especially “The spirit of Brooklyn people... ‘Fuhgeddaboudit!’”

Speaking of spirit, Brown’s is strong, yet playful. She says that she admires Maya Angelou for “her height — 6 feet,” and how the late poetess “was received when she entered a room.”

But what Brown herself may lack in height, she makes up in stature. “I want people to remember that even though I was 5 feet tall, my heart and caring for others were 6 feet of pure unconditioned love and compassion for others,” she says.

Brooklyn’s Women of Distinction 2018 B9
Dr. Evelyn Castro

Providing a place for all kids to build upon unique talents

BY WINNIE MCCROY

Being raised in a family that values education highly, it’s no wonder that Dr. Evelyn Castro became an educator. After all, her mother attended Hampton University, where George Washington Carver was one of her teachers. Castro herself also attended a historically black university, Morgan State, receiving a master of science in early childhood elementary education, and a doctorate in education administration from Columbia University Teachers College.

“It was always my hope and dream to make schools good places for kids,” Castro says. “Whatever you go into, a teacher has to have had an influence on you.”

She now serves as vice president for student affairs, enrollment management services and educational initiatives at Medgar Evers College, a unit of the City University of New York.

Castro is at the top of her field, and reached numerous benchmarks on her way up.

She served as an associate dean for educational initiatives at Medgar Evers, working to increase enrollment and create partnerships with other colleges. She was also a quality reviewer for the city’s Department of Education; director of NYC Parent Academy; director of the Regional Bilingual Technical Assistance Center at Long Island University, and a member of LIU’s Adjunct Teaching Leadership Program.

“Dr. Castro is a community advocate for women’s rights, minorities, and the marginalized. She’s altruistic, compassionate, and committed to the success of both Medgar and high-school students,” said her colleague, Dr. Augustine Okereke.

“I’ll be in the ER, and a doctor will walk up and ask, ‘Dr. Castro, do you remember me?’ In traffic, police officers will stop me to say, ‘I was your student. Do you remember me?’ In the court buildings, lawyers will approach me and say, ‘Dr. Castro, do you remember teaching me?’ It’s so heartening to see these former students succeed in all different walks of life,” Castro said.

Many of Castro’s former students have gone on to achieve fame and success, but whether famous or not, her students have gone on to realize their hopes and dreams — sometimes with her intervention.

“One little boy I had when I was principal of Hunter College Campus School said to me, ‘I don’t think I’m as smart as the other kids.’ I said, ‘You are just as smart.’ And I asked him what he liked,” recalled Castro. “He said he liked history and music, especially being part of school performances. So I said, ‘Then do that.’ That kid’s name was Lin-Manuel Miranda, and he wrote ‘Hamilton.’”

Castro fights so all kids can get not only equity, but access to rigorous curricula. When students are exposed to a wide variety of career options, she says, they will learn to dream bigger, and achieve those dreams.

“We live 75 or 80 years, and we want to live it as productive citizens, to go out there and contribute something to the world,” said Castro. “You can’t do that without exposure and access to education. How do we know one of these kids sitting in front of us today won’t go on to find a cure to cancer or HIV?”

Congratualtions!

HARRIET BLANK

OHHEL Director of Geriatric Services

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CHILDREN'S HOME & FAMILY SERVICES

To My Precious Daughter Jewel,

Congratulations!

May your life continue to be one of service and sharing God's unconditional love.

Love, Mom
**ELADIA CAUSIL-RODRIGUEZ**

Mother of four and day care owner cares for Brooklyn’s kids

**BY WINNIE MCCROY**

For the past 35 years, Eladia Causil-Rodriguez has served Brooklyn by providing infant care and early childhood education at her day care, Eladia’s Kids. The mother of four came to the city from Colombia in 1969, and was impressed even then to “find that Brooklyn was a diverse community of people of all different styles.”

Causil-Rodriguez was a very protective mother to her four children, but took issue with those who felt kids couldn’t understand much of the world around them, and shouldn’t be trusted to make their own decisions. In 1980, she started an informal playgroup in her home. Before long, that blossomed into Eladia’s Kids, a public day care on Flatbush Avenue.

Eladia’s Kids believes that kids are full human beings with the responsibility to make good choices, with teachers there to guide, not punish, them. Causil-Rodriguez said she knew from raising her own children that they soaked up everything about their environment from the moment they were born. They could learn from their mistakes what to do next in a situation, if only they were provided a safe environment, without harsh reprimands.

“My major commitment was to the children; I wanted them to be the center of the universe, to give them what they needed in the absence of their parents,” said Causil-Rodriguez. “When they were with me, they were happy, safe, and secure. This is not just about day care; we have to keep these little people happy so they feel comfortable and free to be themselves.”

After her children grew up and graduated from college, some returned to help Causil-Rodriguez with the business. Today, her family operation boasts four Brooklyn locations — with a new branch planned in Dumbo — offering day care and preschool for kids 3 months to 5 years old.

“Eladia’s success story is an inspiring one for women, mothers, and immigrants. She built a growing business out of her passion for children and their well-being, and took a hands-on approach in order to overcome the challenges of expanding her facilities across Brooklyn,” said Brooklyn Chamber President and CEO Andrew Hoan. “My wife and I trusted her with our own son, Theo, because she truly cares for each and every one of her students and staff as if they were her own family. Eladia’s way is the Brooklyn way.”

Although this Woman of Distinction could easily retire and spend her days traveling, she continues to work, saying, “When I visit my schools and see those little faces, I know I’m helping create great kids and good human beings. Now, my own kids are running things and tell me exactly what’s happening, but I’m still completely in control of the company. I love what I do, and what I’ve created.”

“Eladia is a truly great New York immigrant success story — rising up from humble beginnings to found one of the highest-rated day care centers in Brooklyn,” said Carlo A. Scissura, Esq., President and CEO, New York Building Congress. “She embodies the American dream and deserves all the success she has achieved. Here’s to another 100 years for ‘La Reina’ of Brooklyn!”

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**LUCINA CLARKE**

Providing services for parents of kids with special needs

**BY LAUREN GILL**

Lucina Clarke wants to make sure that parents of children with autism never feel like they don’t have anyone to turn to. Along with her husband, she is the co-founder of My Time Inc., a support center in Canarsie that specializes in uplifting parents who are raising kids with developmental disabilities.

“Most parents feel that they are alone,” she said. “What My Time Inc. provides is a special place for that parent to say ‘You know what, I’m not alone, I can be empowered and educated and I can be a great advocate for my child.’”

Growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of support services for parents of children with disabilities, Clarke quit her job as an in-home therapist in 2007 and drew up the papers for My Time Inc. after receiving what she described as a “sign from god.” She started hosting support groups in her basement, attracting people from all walks of life, and eventually was able to open a center at Flatlands Avenue. There, she began offering several programs for parents to learn about their child’s disabilities and connect with one another to share their experiences.

“We focus on building up the parent,” Clarke said. “The children are entitled to services, the parents should be entitled, too.”

Since opening, My Time Inc. has been lauded for its unique and important programs, bringing in parents from across the city. In 2009, Clarke took home the prestigious Brooke Russell Astor Award from the New York Public Library for her contributions to the community.

Along with My Time Inc., Clarke is an active member of her community, shuttling from meeting to meeting with a smile on her face. She is a member of Community Board 18, the secretary for the 69th Precinct Community Council, a member of the Lions Club and National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women’s Club, and regularly volunteers at a Canarsie food pantry for the homeless.

Her passion only try to keep up, acknowledging that this Woman of Distinction’s determination constantly motivates them to work harder.

“Her sense of community is contagious. When you speak to her she makes you want to do more and she brings out the best in people,” said Tonya Ores, who has worked with Clarke as executive director of Neighborhood Housing Services of Brooklyn.

She is also beloved by Community Board 18, whose leader praised her sense of duty to her community. “Lucina Clarke demonstrates a deep sense of loyalty and commitment to the maintenance of the quality of life for everyone. We are fortunate to have Lucina as an active member of Community Board 18,” said Dottie Turano, the advisory panel’s district manager. “She proves that someone who cares does make a difference.”

And Clarke says she is thankful she gets to wake up each day and serve. As for how she tackles it all, she follows her own formula.

“I will be tough when I have to be tough, but there are ways of being tough and still being kind,” she said.
BROOKLYN-native Nicole Favours wants to change the way the borough’s kids think about guns.

As the executive assistant at Brownsville's Brookdale Hospital and Medical Center, Favours has overseen the introduction of "It Starts Here," a program that shows middle-schoolers and high-schoolers the effects of gun violence. This Woman of Distinction has firsthand experience with the issue and wants to ensure that others won’t have to live through it themselves.

“I was raised in this area and I saw a lot of my friends get caught up in that life who are no longer here,” she said. “They were still young and their lives are gone. If there’s anything I can do to help change the lives of someone else, I feel like that’s my duty.”

Favours, a Bedford-Stuyvesant resident, started working at Brookdale in 2014, performing tasks such as setting calendars and making appointments. Four years later, she is in charge of marketing, creates partnerships with outside organizations, works on the website, and organized It Starts Here.

Under the program, local schools visit the hospital for a day, listening to a presentation that includes talks from doctors in the trauma department and pictures of gun violence victims. Then, groups of kids are taken to the morgue, where they are shown bodies of people who have died from gunshot wounds.

“It gives them the reality of this is what can happen, that this is not a game,” Favours said.

The program got underway in 2016, when an average of 255 people suffering from gunshot wounds were admitted to the hospital’s emergency room each year, according to Khari Edwards, who is the vice president for external affairs and Favours’s boss.

“She’s the boss behind the boss,” Edwards said. “She’s the heart and soul of this place.’

Favours embarked on an unlikely journey to the hospital — she had been working for a financial corporation in Manhattan for 20 years and one day decided that she wasn’t passionate about the job and wanted to try something else.

After praying for a job in which she could put her skills to work, she received a call from Brookdale offering her a position at the hospital.

Growing up in the area, she said Brookdale was frequently referred to by some not-so-polite terms. But now that she experienced the hospital herself each day, she said that the nicknames were unjustified.

“In working here I’ve seen a completely different place than what’s been described as a kid,” she said. “There’s passionate people who work here and want to change things. We go into the community and let them know this is who we are and can bring them in and show them. The little things will make a larger impact at some point.”
MICHELLE R. GALL

Opening doors to new career fields for girls and inner-city youth

BY CAMILLE SPERRAZZA

When Michelle Gall was growing up in Clinton Hill, she was a straight-A student in math and science — but she says she was never taught how to apply those skills to earn a living.

Instead, the Woman of Distinction remembers that men were encouraged to become doctors and lawyers, while women were encouraged to become nurses or teachers. It seemed like these mentioned career paths had little to do with the actual skills or interests of the individuals.

She realized this way of thinking needed to change, so in 2014, she founded Digital Girl, Inc. to encourage inner-city youth, especially girls, to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and math — the so-called “stem” subjects. The United States does not produce many stem professionals, Gall says, especially when it comes to women and people of color. Her organization strives to change that by providing schools with curriculum programs that offer exposure, hands-on training, and mentorship for those seeking careers in these fields. It’s all offered to schools at no cost.

Digital Girl Inc. is based in Bedford-Stuyvesant, where more than half the population is female; less than 38 percent have high school educations; and only 8.6 percent are in stem occupations, she says.

“It's all driven by for innovation and change, and occupations in these fields are projected to grow by 9 million by 2022.”

Yet, inner-city youth, specifically public school students, do not receive the same exposure, resources, or education that their white counterparts receive, she says.

“Children today are born into a technologically advanced society, yet, in underserved communities, still receive the same education as students during the Second Industrial Revolution received.”

Through Digital Girl Inc., Gall brings awareness to students, parents, educators, and lawmakers about this achievement gap. She notes that the company does not spread the message that stem is the only path towards a successful socioeconomic future.

She credits Oprah Winfrey with offering inspiration. She attended Oprah’s “The Life You Want Weekend,” in Newark, and was motivated by words she heard there. She recalls that it went something like this: “You know what you're supposed to be doing. You always knew what you were supposed to be doing since you were young. Stop thinking about how you are going to do it, and just do it. Once you make the decision to fulfill your purpose, the universe opens up to you and provides what you need.”

Since then, she has never looked back.

“Brooklyn has always been a hub for creative thinkers and entrepreneurs and is now experiencing a Tech Boom,” she says. “It is empowering to be among like-minded people on a daily basis, and feed off of that constant energy.”

CNG’s Jennifer Stern, who nominated Gall for this award, says, “These young girls and boys are blessed to have a role model like Ms. Gall.”

LESLEY GREEN

Making young girls’ prom night dreams come true

BY LAUREN GILL

Leslie Green was born in Kings County Hospital and hasn't stopped giving back to Kings County ever since.

The single mother of three runs her own theater company, puts on a prom dress giveaway, gives young men etiquette lessons, and writes children's books. Green — who has lived all over the borough, planting her seeds in Crown Heights, Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and now Canarsie — knows she's taken on a lot, but wouldn't have it any other way.

“If I can provide a service and a need, I think that's what I'm here to do,” she said. “I want to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.”

Green, who recently retired after 30 years as an occupational therapy assistant, is the founder of Potpourri of Color, a performing arts company through which she's written, produced, and directed 16 plays since 2004. She has put on productions with kids as young as 4 and partners with Canarsie adult day care center Golden Age, directing its performances of skits and holiday shows throughout the year. Green said she goes all out for the shows — and her performers take notice.

“Whenever they know that she is doing one, they look forward to it,” said Janet Vellon, who works at Golden Age and has partnered with Green on the productions for three years. “They look forward to that.”

And when she isn’t taking the stage, the Woman of Distinction is hard at work on many other projects, including her “Treat Her Like A Lady” prom dress giveaway she puts on each spring.

“I call it that because I feel like our young ladies don’t know how they should be treated,” she said.

She puts out a call for donations and buys the glitzy gowns for those who can’t afford their own. Teens from across the city flock to the giveaway to try on the dress of their dreams. And serving the young ladies are boys who Green has given lessons in the art of being a gentleman. It may seem like a lot of work to some, but Green said it’s all worth it come prom night.

“It’s definitely been rewarding, especially when the young ladies send me a picture the day of prom and they look so pretty,” she said.

And those who work with Green on the annual event said she’s determined to make sure each girl’s prom night dream comes true.

“She just wants to see these young girls in the community have a decent dress,” said Kimberly Gaffney, who has volunteered since the giveaway’s inception four years ago. “She’s an awesome being.”

To round out her resume, Green has authored several children’s books, including one titled “I Can Only Be Me,” about embracing uniqueness.

She also boasts an impressive list of civic contributions, such as serving on three community boards. But no one needs to applaud her for her work, she says — she’s the one who should be thankful.

“I feel truly blessed and grateful,” Green said.
LINDA HALSEY

Uses personal tragedy to prevent it from happening to others

BY CAMILLE SPERRAZZA

A fter her daughter died at age 34, Linda Halsey created the Caleb’s Feet Foundation in the hopes that others would be spared her pain.

The organization has nothing to do with feet — it strives to increase awareness of cervical cancer. It bears that name because Halsey’s daughter, Cheryl Janee Parris, owned and operated a performing arts organization called Caleb’s Feet.

Today, the foundation sponsors the Cheryl Janee Parris Performing Arts Scholarship, granting an annual partial scholarship so a student can attend a local community dance school.

It was only when cervical cancer touched her family’s life that Halsey learned about this horrible disease.

“There’s a lot of information about other types of cancer,” she says, but not this one. It’s been Halsey’s mission to change that by bringing the disease out in the open through speaking engagements, community events, and with the distribution of literature.

Halsey speaks extensively about the vaccine for human papillomavirus (HPV), a vaccine that did not exist when her daughter was a teenager — but is available now for both girls and boys.

“Parents, caregivers, grandparents, aunts, and uncles should be informed of the cancer-saving vaccine that can impact our children’s lives,” she says.

“Brooklyn has a 36 percent vaccination rate for HPV, which is the fourth lowest of the five boroughs, according to the NYC Community Health Profiles 2015.”

This statistic is based on girls, ages 13 to 17, she said.

“Many think that it is all about the girls, but this is all inclusive, both male and females should be vaccinated.”

The World of Diaries now pushes back against the reluctance of some parents who refuse to vaccinate by bringing her 16-year-old grandson to speaking engagements.

“He can provide his firsthand account because he was vaccinated at the age of 13,” she says.

Yet, there is often disinterest from those in the community, Halsey says. Perhaps it is a topic parents don’t want to face.

“I have been told, ‘My child is going to remain a virgin until she marries’ as a reason for not having her vaccinated,” she says. “The reality to that statement is that we can’t speak for the person they may be marrying. Protection is the key.”

She encourages all women to be tested for cervical cancer.

Halsey earned a Master’s Degree in Public Administration and Certification in Nonprofit Management in May 2012, but says, “I had no idea that, less than two years later, I would be heading a nonprofit organization.”

She grew up Virginia, and moved to Brooklyn in 1976. She lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant for 35 years, before relocating to Canarsie to become her daughter’s caregiver. She still lives in Canarsie today, where she raises her grandson.

Serving on Caleb’s Feet Foundation is Dr. Constantine Gorelick, a renowned member of New York Methodist Hospital’s gynecologic oncology team who met Halsey after her daughter was diagnosed with inoperable cervical cancer.

“This tragedy touched her family, took her only child, and left her grandmother motherless, but it did not stop her from thinking about sharing her story with others,” he says.

MITZIE HOLSTEIN

Teacher encourages others to reach their potential

BY WINNIE MCCROY

Te acher, poet, and spiritual leader Mitzie Holstein is all about positivity.

As a first-grade teacher at The Louis Marshall School in Canarsie, she finds that when kids feel good about themselves, they also strive to do better. And when she prays with her group as Women’s Ministries Leader at the New Dimension Seventh-day Adventist Church on Winthrop Street, she encourages women to increase their potential to help the mission of the church.

“This started as work, but wound up as my calling. Sometimes other people see your gift before you do,” said Holstein, who said that although she was raised religious and always attended church, it wasn’t until March 2015 when, while praying and seeking, she “got up, lifted my head from my pillow, and heard the glory of the Lord.”

Her work at the church puts her in contact with young women who need a mentor, and those who are hurting, either physically or spiritually. This fits right into the wheelhouse for Holstein, who admits, “I have a tendency to take up for the underdog, to take a protective role for those who can’t speak for themselves.”

Holstein brings this sensitivity to her role as an New York City public elementary school teacher, about which retired educator Dr. Cedra Lewis Baird said, “Holstein] takes keen interest in fostering the educational progress and all-around development of her students. Her ability to communicate with parents is highly commendable.”

She’s been teaching since 2001, after being inspired by a college friend, Merle Warren, who started in nursing, but wound up getting a job as a teaching professional.

“She was also very kind from the start,” said Warren. “If I was running late, by the time I got to class she had a desk secured for me. One time, my mom was in the hospital and she came to sit with her so I could go to class. Mitzie is the type of friend you can call at the last minute to help.”

Originally from Jamaica, this Woman of Distinction now calls Brooklyn home, and enjoys the solitude she finds walking the inner paths of Prospect Park, wending through the trees and hidden waterfalls. But her poems — like “The City at Night” and “America Post 9-11” — are largely set in New York City. Others are tributes to Michael Jackson, and actor Robin Williams, who committed suicide.

“Most of my poems are inspired by observation, and I write them everywhere: on trains, at airports, in my living room, any time I get the idea to write,” said Holstein.

Holstein now has several published collections, including “Creative Streams: A Poet’s Musings,” available at Barnes & Noble, and “Heart and Soul in the City: Poems of Mitzie Holstein.” Her friends say her compassionate nature radiates through her poetry.

“Mitzie is beautiful, both inside and out,” said Warren. “She is a wise, compassionate person, who is very dedicated to what she does. If you call Mitzie, she will always be there for you.”
ARLENE KING

As long as someone is in need, she’s there to help

BY CAMILLE SPERRAZZA

Arlene King says she was born to help people.
She has done so as a teacher, spiritual leader, social worker, counselor, and mentor.

“Whenever I see a need, I step in,” she says, especially when it comes to women and children. “I want them to reach their full potential.”

King was a teacher at Bethlehem Baptist Academy in East New York for 14 years. She loved teaching, but felt restricted by the system, so in 2005 she started Kings Group Day Care, which she still operates today. With her own business, she is able to do things for people that she couldn’t do while working elsewhere. For example, there have been times when single mothers had compelling circumstances which prevented them from making day care payments, but that didn’t stop King from caring for their children. As a result, these mothers could continue their educations or get to their workplaces. The day care opens at 5:30 am — earlier than many other facilities, she says — to accommodate parents who don’t work traditional 9-to-5 hours. She allows college students to fulfill internships at the day care center, too.

Encouraged by changing so many lives for the better — and wanting to do more — King started a nonprofit organization called Knowing God International Ministries. She is a deeply religious woman, an ordained missionary, who made a commitment to the East New York community by graduating from the New York City Citizen Police Academy. This means she looks out for the safety of her neighbors. They are aware of this, so they feel comfortable sharing concerns with her. As King also has a degree in social work and family counseling, she speaks easily with community members, and is knowledgeable when it comes to getting things done. She has advocated in court for women who have come to her regarding child support and marital issues. She assists with immigration problems. And as a missionary, she offers comfort to those who come to her crying, because they find themselves in overwhelming circumstances.

Presently, King is hosting a dressmaking class, teaching women how to make their own clothing.

“They could use this training to start a small business for themselves, if they desire,” she says. “As long as someone is in need, I feel it is my responsibility to help in whatever way possible.”

This includes mentoring people so they can obtain their G.E.D.s. Perhaps it is King’s upbringing that serves as inspiration. She knows what it’s like to struggle. King was born in Guyana, South America, and says she was “an underprivileged child brought up in a dysfunctional home.” She dropped out of junior high school and would become a teenage unwed mother. But that was a long time ago. King is 62 years old, and immigrated to the United States in 1981. Today, she is happily married, the mother of five daughters. She has nine grandchilren.

She remains in touch with her former supervisor at Bethlehem Baptist Academy, Ava Hazel Bradshaw, who says, “Arlene’s efforts were always exemplary.”

INNA LUKYANENKO

Councilman office staffer meets — and helps — all types of people

BY ILY GOYANES

Inna Lukyanenko, born in the city of Mohyliv-Podilskyi Raion of the Vinnytsia Oblast, Ukraine, made her way to New York in 1994. For someone who professes public speaking to have been her biggest obstacle professionally, she is also quite the people person — a fact she does acknowledge.

As just how did she tackle the obstacle?

“I got better at it with the time,” Lukyanenko says. “Practice makes perfect.”

In her day-to-day work as a housing specialist and office administrator for Councilman Mark Treyger, she meets and helps all types of people, which, people person that she is, fulfills her gregarious nature.

“The favorite part of my job is being able to help someone. Seeing that someone happy and full of hope,” says Lukyanenko. Consequently, the least favorite part of her job is “not being able to help someone. Seeing their hopeless facial expression breaks my heart.”

In addition to helping “everyday New Yorkers find solutions to their problems,” she also gives back to the community.

“For the past few years,” says Lukyanenko, “I volunteered at the Be Proud Foundation at events such as Toys for Tots, NYPD National Night Out, Your Highness Grandmother contest. Before Passover I assisted with preparing packages for needy people, World War II veterans, and Holocaust survivors.”

“Inna cares about people and is incredibly successful at solving problems,” says practicing attorney Igor Vaysberg, Lukyanenko’s former supervisor. “Her position with Councilman Treyger allows her to handle important issues and Inna uses her position to improve the quality of life of all Brooklynites.”

It is obvious why she is a Woman of Distinction, especially when reading her highly impressive educational background. She completed the Citizens Police Academy, is a certified paralegal, earned a certification in Family Development Leadership, earned a certification from Cornell University in Family Development Credential, and — believe it or not — that is only about half of the list. Lukyanenko places a very high value on education, saying: “A college degree is not necessary for my position but it is always good to have one.”

She offers the following advice to anyone considering a similar career:

“Think positive before negative. People come to you for help. Sometimes they can be rude, but think that there is a reason behind it. They are scared, tired, and need help. Having any kind of interaction with this Woman of Distinction, one can easily say that she will be remembered the way she wants to be remembered: ‘Respectful, caring ... and always willing to help.’”
During her more than four decades at Fort Greene Council Inc., Claudette Macey has redefined what it means to be a senior in Brooklyn.

As the executive director for the last 13 years, she has overseen programs that go far beyond the typical mundane offerings — such as sewing and bingo — including the country’s first senior steel drum band and classes on using cellphones and computers.

“I firmly believe that the senior center is not to be called a senior center where people get old and sit and knit and rock in a rocking chair,” she said. “We are very innovative now and all of our centers are innovative. It’s more like a club for people over 60.”

Under her reign, Fort Greene Council Inc. has expanded dramatically, boasting programs for people over 60 years old in 13 senior centers across the borough. When her oldsters aren’t busy learning how to use Facebook or conversing with each other over brunch, some play in Blenman Steel Sounds — a rocking steel drum ensemble that plays jazz and calypso, which Macey started with a skeptical instructor from Trinidad.

“He had never taught seniors before,” she said. “I remember him laughing at me and saying seniors can never learn to play steel drums.”

Macey, a Crown Heights resident, said she’s determined to help seniors who may have given up their golden years to help their families, even organizing cruise trips for her charges.

And her hard work has caught the attention of colleagues, who testified that this Woman of Distinction has dedicated her life to help others.

“She’s always thinking of the seniors first, thinks of the ways we can help seniors become the best they can be and improve their quality of life,” said Jacqueline Saddler, who works with Macey at Fort Greene Council Inc. “She really has changed the lives of many individuals.”

But Macey said showing up to work each day stopped being just a job a long time ago, and is instead another chance to help others.

“It gives us joy, it gives me strength to know that I can help serve the needs of the community,” she said. “I’ve been in this profession so long that I don’t consider this a job for me.”

A senior herself, Macey is looking forward to one day enjoying her own programs, explaining that part of her drive to carve out a special part of senior living comes from motivation to give her peers opportunities to experience things that she would also want to experience.

“When my time comes and I’m ready to stop working and visit the centers, I want the center staff to look at me as a person and an individual,” she said. “I want to experience all of the positive things they have to offer for my age group.”
KIM MAIER

Park Sloper unites neighbors through borough’s storied history

BY LAUREN GILL

She can be found leading tours about the Revolutionary War, corralling costumed children during the Halloween Parade, or throwing together a last-minute event — but no matter where this Woman of Distinction may be, Kim Maier is a cherished fixture in Park Slope.

As the executive director of The Old Stone House, Maier has been key in transforming the reconstructed Vechte-Courteny House into a space where Brooklynites and out-of-towners alike can learn about the community’s role in the Battle of Brooklyn during the Revolutionary War. She still remembers receiving a call 14 years ago from administrators asking her to help drive its educational programming, a role which then blossomed into her position as head of the house.

“It was a great opportunity for me to work here in the neighborhood and to be part of a project that would really help highlight Brooklyn’s long and interesting history,” she said.

Since then, she has helped revamp the house into a museum commemorating the historic battle, community meeting space, and event space. It hosts hundreds of events each year, along with its permanent exhibition opened in August 2016 exploring the Revolution in Brooklyn.

Maier aimed to create a place for people to come and talk with one another face-to-face, an unlikely means of interaction in the digital age.

“It’s a very thriving public space in a time where a lot of people are disinherited from their neighbors,” she said.

Maier — a Park Slope resident for 35 years — is also a trustee on the Park Slope Civic Council, serving as the chair of the annual Halloween Parade, a beloved neighborhood tradition in which costume-clad residents march down Seventh Avenue. Once again, this Woman of Distinction won’t stop working to unite her neighbors.

“I love the Halloween Parade,” she said. “It’s part and parcel of a larger perspective of what it means to live in the community and to be kind of engaged in bringing people together so they have a sense of where they live and who their neighbors are.”

It’s these same neighbors who heap praise unto Maier and are forever appreciative of the last contributions she has made to the community.

“Kim is a person anybody would want to have on their team,” said Joe Rydell, the vice president of the Park Slope Civic Council. “She’s very down to earth, lovely, and just a really likeable person.” Maier is also known for her can-do attitude, approaching tasks such as fund-raisers, vigils, or clothing drives with a determination to get them done, no matter the time frame.

“If there’s anything I would say, it’s that ‘Sure, let’s make it happen’ is one of her mottos,” said Susan Fox, the founder of community group Park Slope Parents. “She’s no muss, no fuss.”

ANNA MALKINA-SHUMAEVA

Senior volunteer is one her community can count on

BY WINNIE MCCROY

She’s more than 80 years old, but Anna Malkina-Shumaeva doesn’t let that stop her from volunteering in the community she loves. She recently took time from making Passover packages for World War II veterans to share her thoughts about volunteering.

“When I came to the U.S., I decided to be a volunteer and help this country, and people who were less fortunate than me,” said Malkina-Shumaeva. “I volunteer at the Jewish Association Serving the Aging in Brighton Beach. Right now, we are putting together 600 Passover packages for needy people in Brooklyn.”

Malkina-Shumaeva also volunteers with the Be Proud Foundation, a group that aims to unite the Russian-speaking community to improve mutual respect and understanding between neighbors, to build bridges between different communities, and to send a message of peace and acceptance to people of all ages, backgrounds, and religions.

The Woman of Distinction’s friends say that while she’s not a youngster, she is certainly young at heart, serving as the “captain” for her team of 10 volunteers. Her friends sometimes scold her, telling her she is working too hard and should stop. She says she can’t.

“I’m happy when people around me are happy and smiling,” said Malkina-Shumaeva. “It’s not a matter of money, it’s a matter of what they have inside them. I don’t think I’m rich, but in my heart, I’m richer than a lot of people.”

Raisa Chernina, founder of the Be Proud Foundation, said that it’s because “in her heart, she is pure gold.”

“I think she has to change her middle name to ‘Giving,’” said Chernina. “I like to help people too, but when I see them not appreciate it, I will get upset. But she doesn’t. There’s an expression in Russian, ‘If you give too much, go far away or they won’t appreciate you.’ When Passover comes and we give away packages, everyone comes running like horses. Some people ask ‘What’s in the package?’ I think to myself, people who are really needy never ask; they just say ‘Thank you.’ But Anna never cares. She stays down to earth and just gives it to them.”

Chernina said that every fall in Sheepshead Bay, her organization holds the Annual Your Highness Grandmother Pageant. Sometimes Malkina-Shumaeva wins, sometimes she loses, but either way, she will perform a song on her violin. She has been playing for 25 years, said Chernina, and is talented despite her lack of formal musical training.

“If she decides to perform, then she’s a winner,” said Chernina. “At our 15th anniversary we did a Friendship Brunch, and she performed the song from ‘The Golden Girls.’”

Said Theresa Scavo, Chair of Community Board 15, “She’s good for the community and she’s always available to step up and help volunteer at any functions throughout the district. Anna is always one you can count on.”
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ince quitting her day job and founding her own brewing company in 2015, Katarina Martinez has emerged as one of the most watched women on New York’s beer scene.
As the only female brewery owner and head brewer in Brooklyn, Martinez hopes she can help inspire women to put down the martini glass and pick up a pint.
“I want women to feel comfortable ordering beer because there’s such a stigma of ordering beer instead of a cocktail, where beer is a man’s drink, which is not true at all,” Martinez said. “I think if women see more women in beer and they have opportunities to learn about it, it’ll open the door.”
Martinez runs Lineup Brewing, opening its first taproom in Sunset Park’s Industry City in 2017. Over the last year, the demand for her craft beers has grown so immensely that she is planning to open a new space — including a brewery with a 15-barrel system, an outdoor area, and a bar.
But before Martinez made a name for herself on the city’s beer scene, she worked in product engineering for various tech companies. She had been a home brewer for years, but grew so fond of it while becoming disen-chanted by the tech industry that she eventually decided to quit her job and launch her own business.
“I was just like ‘I want to start my own company, I don’t want to work for ‘The Man’ anymore,’” she remembered. “It was that moment when it clicked that I could do my hobby and my passion as a real-life career.”
Martinez started churning out popular beers such as Under Pressure, a David Bowie-inspired pale ale, and Bieryoncé, a popular German-style pilsner that went out of production after the entertainer Beyoncé ordered the brewery to stop using her name.
Whether or not Martinez has a connection to Queen Bey, this Woman of Distinction is lauded as a trailblazer who makes a damn good beer.
“She’s seen as a pioneer,” said John LaPolla, the owner of Bitter and Esters home brew shop in Prospect Heights, where Martinez shopped for her early recipes. “Her beers are excellent, she makes really good quality and well-crafted beers. She’s doing well because she has a good product and at the end of the day that’s the most important part of any business.”
Her female peers agree — Martinez is seen as a positive role model for women both inside the industry and out at the bar.
“I think there’s sort of a misconception that women aren’t as into beer or beer isn’t for women, and to see someone with Kat’s enthusiasm, knowledge, passion, and excitement is a really great thing,” said Lindsey Storm, a co-founder of Brooklyn Cider House, who struck up a friendship with Martinez through industry events.
Although Martinez has achieved success pursuing her passion, she won’t ever forget the hard work that comes with being a woman taking a risk.
“It’s the most scary thing I’ve ever done because you leave behind a lot of security and you depend on yourself to actually make everything happen,” she said. “It’s definitely hard. I have a newfound respect for female small business owners. Females already have it harder, it’s crazy; it’s a big leap of faith, honestly.”
When speaking to Gabrielle Puglia’s peers, friends, and relatives, the word “passion” comes up over and over again. Born and bred in Brooklyn, Puglia’s mission in life is to help those in need.

“I would describe myself as an empathetic, kind, modern-day hippie just trying to leave the world better than I found it,” she explains.

One of her passions is Wreaths Across America, an organization that honors fallen American soldiers on national Wreaths Across America Day. The organization visits Cypress Hills National Cemetery and performs a Ceremony of Remembrance followed by the laying of Remembrance Wreaths.

“Gabrielle Puglia deserves the honor of being a Woman of Distinction because she embodies all of the qualities which exemplify the award,” says her friend, Heather Cuccio.

Cuccio continues, “She reminds and educates our community on how they can honor those soldiers whom preserve our freedom. She motivates others to put their best efforts into everything they do.”

In addition to Wreaths Across America, Puglia is involved in numerous philanthropy projects that focus on our military. One of those projects is the Hero’s Benefit, which she founded.

“I have watched the Hero’s Benefit grow from a small successful benefit to a huge, thriving benefit with quite a following,” says the Woman of Distinction about her efforts to improve the lives of U.S. soldiers. She adds, “I keep my charity work alive in the interim by spearheading initiatives to send care packages to troops throughout the year.”

Puglia feels that same passion when she speaks about her hometown.

“I think Brooklyn has a character and notoriety unique to its borough. When you tell someone you’re from Brooklyn, everyone immediately envisions the Brooklyn Bridge, and every musician they know from the area. It has an history and culture all of its own,” she says.

She graduated from Manhattan College with a Bachelor of Arts with honors, majoring in communications with a minor in Spanish. She is currently working towards an Masters of Science in speech-language pathology from Long Island University Brooklyn.

Working hard her entire life, Puglia has accomplished quite a lot. “I believe I have been successful in my life because I am extremely passionate and put my best efforts into everything I do,” she says.

It’s possible that Puglia inherited the spirit of giving from her role model — her mother — who was the head nurse of the emergency room at a hospital in Brooklyn.

“I watched her save lives, manage an emotionally and physically demanding job, and then come home and take care of my brother and myself, making the juggle seem effortless,” says Puglia.

“He really exemplifies what it means to be a strong, independent, and empowering woman.”

Puglia is as modest as she is passionate, saying: “I want people to remember that I am just a girl from Brooklyn trying to make a difference.”

But like many mothers, her mom isn’t shy about how proud she is of her daughter.

“Gabrielle is the kindest, most loving, and most unselfish person I have ever met,” says her mother, Elena Vaccarino. She is truly the most caring, strong, brave, and inspiring human being I have ever met.

Motto: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” — Gandhi
LISETTE SOSA-DICKSON
Voice of the Spanish-speaking elderly community

BY CAMILLE SPERRAZZA

Lismette Sosa-Dickson is the voice of the Spanish-speaking elderly community.
As the Executive Director of Raices (which means “roots” in Spanish), she oversees the programming, financial operations, and administration of seven senior centers, a case assistance division, and a licensed outpatient mental health clinic.

Growing up, her mother, Catalina Sosa, taught young Lisette that she could do anything she set her mind to. When Sosa-Dickson was appointed executive director in 2013, she became the first female executive in the organization’s history. This powerful message of reaching for the stars is something she now shares with her own children, ages 8 and 7. It’s why she sometimes brings them to her workplace.

“When I am sitting in the lobby,” she says, “I remember that my father was a police officer who didn’t always make it home. I see my children run by and I say, ‘Imagine what you can do if you work hard.’”

It’s important for our children to see women in leadership roles as part of the norm,” she says. “It’s great for my daughter to witness firsthand how you can be a mom, wife, and a CEO.”

The Sunset Park native, who now lives in Brooklyn Heights, says she has always had a passion for improving the lives of those within the community. The seven senior centers under her charge do that by offering daily meals, socialization, and case assistance services that sort through the red tape so often associated with applying for any type of benefits.

One of her key accomplishments was the development of a one-stop shop service modality. “This model is a valuable benefit to all clients because they can receive their nutritional, educational, recreational, case assistance, psychological and psychiatric needs under one roof,” says the Woman of Distinction. “This approach added a layer of accessibility and service expediency not provided by larger non-community based providers.”

Sosa-Dickson’s interest in working with older adults began when she served as program director for Meals on Wheels in East New York. From there, she moved on to social work. It can be a rewarding experience to help transform someone’s life, and Sosa-Dickson remembers meeting one older woman at the workplace some 14 years ago who suffered from depression so severe, she was suicidal. Sosa-Dickson insisted on bringing her to a senior center, and introduced her to other participants. Gradually, the woman began to socialize with others, participating in games and group events. Sosa-Dickson chuckles when she recalls that the woman blossomed so much. “She became the mayor of the center!”

Among the recognition Sosa-Dickson has received includes the “Community Partner Award” from Visions, a service for the blind and visually impaired; and a citation from the office of the Brooklyn Borough President for her outstanding contributions as a senior service provider. She earned a Master’s Degree in Social Work from Hunter College, with a concentration in geriatrics, and completed the Hispanic Leadership Institute Emerging Leaders Program at Baruch College.

Her colleague, Raquel Ortiz-Terlizzi, who has given me permission to use her name, adds, “She is the embodiment of a strong, wise, loving, supportive, hilarious, resilient woman, wife, mom, and grandmother. She has always stood by my side as my biggest cheerleader.”

MOTTO: “Lead with vision. Where there is no vision, the people perish.” – Proverbs 29:18.

ROLANDA TELESFORD
Rose over adversity to help young women in need of help

BY CAMILLE SPERRAZZA

Rolanda Telesford is a survivor — she was a teenage mom, and was once homeless — but today she is director of Outreach and External Relations for the YWCA.

As such, she doesn’t spend time dwelling on the “haters.” That’s because, she believes, “Haters make you greater.” It is her past that shaped her to become the empathetic person she is today, able to help the many young women who seek assistance from the YWCA because they, too, find themselves in overwhelming circumstances.

“I know what their needs are,” she says, and she credits growing up in different Crown Heights with preparing her to work with people of every race, age, and ethnicity.

Telesford believes what doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger. She has seen it in her life, and in the lives of those she comes in contact with.

“Providing safety and empowerment is critical to all human beings,” she says. “Once you have those two things working together it levels the playing field for anyone’s success.”

Survivor’s guilt is yet another trauma that obstructed the Woman of Distinction’s path for a while. She was employed at the World Trade Center when the planes hit on 9-11. But she wasn’t inside the building, like her colleagues were. As fate would have it, she had taken a rare vacation week, and was home, watching it happen on the news, knowing that the people she worked with every day would not survive.

“So there was some guilt associated with living,” she says. To compound the issue, if she had been at work that day, she would have had the responsibility of securing people, as she was the company’s fire marshal.

After that horrible event, “I had self-worth to find,” she says. “I had to gain answers to questions like, ‘Why am I here?’ and ‘What is my purpose?’ ‘Why not me?’” Eventually, she did; and once again rose over adversity.

“It was then that I knew there was a greater purpose for me. It’s what led me to this work of community engagement, youth and adult empowerment, development and advocacy.”

It runs in the family. Telesford’s father is Dr. Roy Hastick, named Brooklyn Ambassador by Borough President Adams. As ambassador, he is a presence in the community, attending meetings and events on behalf of the Borough President. Her sisters and brother are all also involved in serving the community. “We are a dynasty working together,” she says.

Telesford was nominated to be a Woman of Distinction by Nicole Rosinson-Etienne, who earned the same honor in 2013.

“Rolanda is the Beyoncé of girl empowerment in Brooklyn,” Rosinson-Etienne says, adding that Telesford serves as a behind-the-scenes stage manager and director, ensuring that the young women have all the resources they need to rock out on the stage called life.

“The work she has done with teens and young women at the YWCA is worthy of applause.”

NEIGHBORHOOD: Flatbush.

OCCUPATION: Director of Outreach and External Relations for the YWCA, Brooklyn.

COMPANY: YWCA.

CLAIM TO FAME: She was the first project manager to create community festivals at Tillary Park and Thomas Boyland Park.

FAVORITE BROOKLYN PLACE AND WHY: Any beach in Brooklyn. I love walking on the sand. I get comfort looking at the water.

WOMAN YOU ADMIRE AND WHY: My spiritual mother, Diana Motes, who has given me guidance and wisdom, dealing with a lot of issues that women have to deal with.

MOTTO: Together we achieve more.

BROOKLYN’S WOMEN OF DISTINCTION 2018
Monique Waterman wasn’t familiar with the term “conflict resolution” when she was 11 years old, but that’s when she began practicing it. It was her brother, Herbert, who taught her the importance of “talking things out,” rather than getting involved in so much of the negativity that surrounded her when she was growing up in what she calls the “challenging” neighborhood of East Flatbush.

“He protected me,” says Waterman, and so did her single mom — who worked three jobs — and her grandparents. Waterman learned early on that, “It takes a village,” and that’s why she founded East Flatbush Village. The not-for-profit is committed to providing support and information to the neighborhood. Today, it is Waterman who teaches others how to deal with conflict and adversity. She’s been in the same community for 36 years, raising four children with her husband, Eric, whom she met when they both attended sixth grade at Meyer Levin Junior High School. Her mom, brother, and other family members went to that same school, and today, the Woman of Distinction brings some of her programs to its doors.

East Flatbush Village seeks to combat violence by offering recreational activities and educational tools. It enriches the community with after-school programs, arts and cultural happenings, sports, yoga and meditation classes, and the mandatory involvement of parents. Resources are provided to the entire family, because this is what is needed to repair the community, Waterman says. When she works with young people, the goal is to train them to become leaders, as they are the ones who will eventually take over the foundation, and keep it going. It’s already happening. Waterman mentions one student who came to the program and now serves on its board. That, she says, is a source of pride.

“When I am out and about in the community, it gives me great pleasure to see the youth that came through my programs,” says Waterman. “They are very respectful, and often reflect on the memories we shared. I am always humbled by their respect and appreciation.”

She is grateful that her family is very supportive of this endeavor. “My husband is the reason why I can balance my everyday life,” she says. “He is my confidant, best friend, and support.”

Her mother and her father-in-law are also there to help with the children. Her biggest obstacle these days is the foundation’s limited funding. There is always more to do to customize the needs of the neighborhood.

Waterman began her civic engagement by creating a scholarship fund in 2003. She has served as president of the E. 29th Block Association, and coordinated block clean-up programs. Awards she has earned include “40 under 40” from Caribbean Life, and the Shirley Chisholm Women of Distinction Award from Council Member Jumaane Williams’s office.

She was nominated for this award by Nicole Robinson Etienne, who serves on the board of East Flatbush Village. She calls Waterman “an entrepreneur with a community focus, and a super mom and role model to young girls and boys in Central Brooklyn.”

Together, they work to enrich the lives of children and families.
L. JOY WILLIAMS

Works tirelessly for equality and freedom

BY LAUREN GILL

S he may be just 39, but L. Joy Williams has already made a lasting impact on Brooklyn, the city, and the country.

Williams, a Bedford-Stuyvesant resident, is the founder of consulting firm LJV Strategies, president of the Brooklyn branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, produces a civic education podcast, and is the founding chairman of Higher Heights For America, an organization that works to empower black women leaders.

“There needs to be a permanent push against government, against society to not accept the status quo, and live up to the founding principles of equality and freedom,” she said.

Williams — who comes from a family of Brooklyn pastors — has been serving as the president of the Brooklyn N.A.A.C.P. branch since 2012, becoming its youngest adult branch leader in the United States when she took the post. And like her predecessors, who include prominent black political leader and state legislator Tom Fortune and Lucille

Rose, the first woman to become deputy mayor, Williams is serious about creating change.

“L. Joy has come with the same kind of excitement and advocacy work for the branch,” said Hazel Dukes, president of the New York state N.A.A.C.P., noting that membership has increased since Williams became president. “I think she is really becoming just not a leader for the Brooklyn branch, but for the city of New York and indeed the state,” she said.

Outside of her role as the organization’s president, Williams has become a prominent name on the national political scene, appearing on news programs to talk politics and social justice.

As the founder of LJV Strategies, Williams is a consultant and advisor to elected officials across the country who are working on a social justice agenda. In 2013, Williams worked on Letitia James’s campaign for New York City’s Public Advocate, helping her become the first black woman to hold an elected citywide position.

This Woman of Distinction has many passions, but she lists voting rights, gun reform, school equality, healthcare disparities, and police brutality as issues that are close to her heart.

She doesn’t just talk about them, though — through her tireless work with Higher Heights for America, she is on a mission to make sure that black voices are heard.

“Joy continues not only to provide the leadership on the board but also rolls up her sleeves,” said Glynda Carr, who is the co-founder of the organization, of which Williams is the founding chair.

“She is really and truly not only a thought partner but an implementer of the work.”

TERESA C. YOUNGER

Women’s advocate challenges the narrative around difficult issues

BY WINNIE MCCROY

O teted speaker and women’s advocate Teresa C. Younger has served as president and chief executive officer of the Ms. Foundation for Women since 2014. Under her leadership, the Foundation launched many projects, including #MyFeminismIs, a multimedia campaign that sparked a national conversation about feminism.

“When I started at the Ms. Foundation, they said ‘we need a new word for feminism,’ because people were not aligned with it,” said Younger. “So I traveled 56,000 miles to engage people in conversations about feminism and gender equity for all.”

Younger has worked hard to challenge the narrative around difficult issues, including the #WeWontGoBack campaign for reproductive freedom, and raising awareness around domestic violence and sexual assault in the National Football League. She is proud of the 65 U.S. granting partners the organization has, and its participation in Prosperity Together, uniting public women’s foundations to invest more than $100 million over five years in programs that create pathways to economic security for low-income women and their families.

Ana L. Oliveira, president and chief executive officer of The New York Women’s Foundation, sent her heartfelt congratulations to Younger on being named a 2018 Woman of Distinction, noting that, “She is a national leader, and we are particularly proud to work with her and the Ms. Foundation on Prosperity Together ... to break down barriers to women’s economic security across the United States.”

“Social justice has always been a part of who and what I am. I can proudly say I was a Girl Scout, which promotes the idea that you individually can make a difference in this world,” said Younger, who currently serves on the national board of the Girl Scouts.

“It is hard to describe the impact that Teresa has on us all. She is a ‘brightness,’ a beacon of all that is right, possible, and attainable,” said Mary Barneby, chief executive officer of Girl Scouts of Connecticut.

During her time in Connecticut, Younger served for three years as the first African-American and first woman president of ACLU Connecticut. The social justice work she did 17 years ago led to her decision to come to the Ms. Foundation, to tackle issues at the intersection of race, gender, and class.

“I consider myself a pretty ordinary woman who’s just trying to do some good every day,” said Younger. “I am always honored and taken aback by the fact that I can do something to move the world toward equality. I’m a pretty simple girl from North Dakota who knew more about farming than feminism, who always thought ‘GS’ stood for Girl Scouts, not Gloria Steinem.”
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