Honoring women who have shaped the borough
When you have more of the best doctors in Brooklyn, you have the best hospital in Brooklyn.

That’s not us bragging. That’s the experts at HealthGrades doing their homework.

They recently notified us that we are one of the recipients of the 2011 Distinguished Hospital Award for Clinical Excellence. Of the nearly 5,000 hospitals in the country surveyed, only 268 were considered worthy of this recognition. In fact, Maimonides is one of only three New York City hospitals to receive this coveted award.

And while this bit of good news fills us with a great deal of pride, it is by no means a surprise.

After all, a hospital is only as good as its doctors. And in this important area, Maimonides is a winner as well. In the most recent Castle Connolly Top Doctors Guide, Maimonides has more doctors listed than any other hospital in Brooklyn.

In fact, our only quibble is that they didn’t list even more of our doctors. You see, we believe that our doctors are at the very top of their respective specialties.

At Maimonides, we’ve always felt we’re the best hospital in Brooklyn. Apparently, a lot of knowledgeable people agree with us.

Visit www.MaimonidesMed.org or call (888) MMC-DOCS (662-3627)
Drum roll, please.
The Community Newspaper Group and Courier-Life Publications have achieved yet another milestone with the publication of our first Women of Distinction magazine.
We take great pride in honoring 26 of the borough’s most notable women — we call them trailblazing powerhouses — who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to make a positive difference in their communities, and in some cases, across the borough, the city, the state, the nation and even the world.
The accomplishments and service of our Women of Distinction are not only a testament to their own hard and selfless work, but also a superb reflection of Brooklyn’s unmatched pool of female workers and grassroots activists, whose contributions have improved the health, wealth and happiness of countless people.
We recommend that you grab a cup of joe, sit back, and relax as we take you on a journey into the lives of these wonderful women, without whom Brooklyn would be much less distinctive.
Vince DiMiceli and Gersh Kuntzman, editors
We congratulate all of these extraordinary women!

Visit us at: NYAQUARIUM.COM
June 22, 2011

Dear Friends:

It is a great pleasure to welcome everyone to the Brooklyn Women of Distinction Gala hosted by Courier Life.

This event provides much-deserved recognition to talented women at the forefront of their fields and their community. The leadership exhibited by tonight’s honorees serves as a terrific example for all New Yorkers, and I would like to commend them for their commitment to improving the lives of all members of the Brooklyn community. Their extensive accomplishments, service, and commitment are creating a brighter future for us all, and I commend all the women being honored here tonight.

On behalf of the City of New York, please accept my best wishes for a terrific evening and much continued success.

Sincerely,

Michael R. Bloomberg
Mayor
Nancy Venturine...
Congratulations!
You are Our
Inspiration

Always,
Marie Murphy,
Connie Tompkins,
Donna Caraleo &
Jeanne Eisenhardt

Jimmy Sanz and Family
would like to CONGRATULATE
this Year’s Honorees for making
the Borough of Brooklyn
a better Place to be.

Be Better.

We Salute
Brooklyn’s Women of Distinction
And Congratulate all the Honorees,
Including our Partner
Ngozi Moses, Executive Director, Brooklyn Perinatal Network
May 19, 2011

Les Goodstein  
Courier Life Publications  
CNG Community Newspaper Group  
1 Metro Tech North  
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Dear Friends,

Brooklyn has a long and illustrious tradition in journalism and the arts and offers a rich array of exhibitions, musical venues, museums, restaurants and galleries for the enjoyment of its visitors and residents. I extend my greetings and congratulations to CEO Les Goodstein, Publisher Cliff Luster, Courier Life Publications and the CNG team as you are joined by staff, supporters and special guests as you host the First Annual Brooklyn’s Women of Distinction.

Brooklyn is a borough of minorities. The only real majority is the women of Brooklyn. It is not a stretch to say that all of Brooklyn benefits from those special women who have given us life, or who inspire us to great heights by their extraordinary example. Courier Life Publications pays tribute to twenty-six amazing women whose commitment, dedication and excellence in their fields has earned them our respect and gratitude. It is with great pleasure that I join with those who honor these twenty-six dynamic, compassionate and selfless women who epitomize what Brooklyn is all about.

On behalf of all 2.6 million Brooklynnites, I salute and commend Courier Life Publications and the CNG team for working so hard to make this extraordinary evening possible. I congratulate all of the honorees and wish them continued success in all of their endeavors. And I them for all that they do to make Brooklyn a better place to live, work and raise a family.

Sincerely,

Marty Markowitz

MM/dh
Women are heart and soul of life

Brighton Beach Business Improvement District congratulates all honorees!

We, an organization, which unites more than three hundred business, are very proud to salute our great friend Ms. Raisa Chernina.

Seth Rubinsten, President
Yelena Makhnin, Executive Director

Are you the next... "Famous Amos?... "Aunt Millie?"... "Mrs. Fields?" You could be!

Now’s the time! Become your own Boss!

Attend a 90-minute seminar on Saturday, May 21, 2011 from 2 - 3:30 PM or on Tuesday, May 24, 2011 from 7 - 8:30 PM at Kingsborough Community College.

Offered by The Kitchen Innovations Enterprise Zone at Kingsborough Community College, and through the Office of Continuing Education, this seminar can help you launch your food product to market much faster.

We will guide you on all the requirements of starting a food manufacturing business including licensing, legal issues, labeling, health codes and financing.

The Kitchen Innovations Enterprise Zone gives you an opportunity to use our New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets inspected professional kitchens to develop your product. A tour of the kitchen is included in the seminar.

Register now!
(718) 368-5050
Domestic violence protestors gathered in Bay Ridge last spring to honor the memory of Khadija Mahel, a Moroccan immigrant whose boyfriend fatally strangled her two weeks earlier and dumped her body outside a cemetery.

They carried signs reading, “Break the silence, save a life,” to spotlight a potential killer, responsible for 249,440 incidents of domestic violence in the city last year — or more than 680 a day — according to the Mayor’s Office to Combat Domestic Violence.

Spousal and child abuse affects everyone, everywhere, equally, states Lena Alhusseini, executive director of the Arab-American Family Support Center in Cobble Hill, which coordinated the rally.

The tragedy was amplified because Mahel tried to contact one of Alhusseini’s caseworkers on the morning of her death, but hung up before leaving a phone number. Afterwards, the group helped place her children in a home until they could be reunited with relatives overseas.

“When women are being abused, children are also being abused,” says the 46-year-old grassroots leader, who has worked with some of the top advocacy agencies around to raise awareness about child protection, abduction, child trafficking and domestic violence issues — including the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and the United Nations — plus connected with federal, state, city and borough agencies to direct immigrants to vital services.

Benadette Boulos secured her healthcare through the center — in between surviving two heart attacks.

“I would be lost and bankrupt by now because there is no way I could have afforded it otherwise,” says the relieved woman.

One domestic abuse victim sought Alhusseini’s help after her children began acting up in school. She was provided with wraparound services to cope with her situation.

“I see a big improvement in my children now, and my son even got an award for perfect attendance,” she shares.

Alhusseini’s humanitarian work might have gone by the wayside if not for a chance encounter in the late 1980s: A vacation in Thailand turned her from a corporate analyst into a globe-trotting social worker after she saw young children soliciting johns outside a brothel.

“I was sick for three days,” says Alhusseini, who contacted the United Nations Children’s Fund upon returning to Jordan where she lived at the time, and where her work with a global management consulting firm suddenly seemed unimportant.

She became part of an elite U.N. team, helping to ratify an international treaty recognizing the civil rights of minors, and lobbying authorities in the Middle East to create an infrastructure of safety and assistance for at-risk women and children.

“The idea was new to them,” states the Palestinian-American from Jerusalem, who was familiar with the region’s cultural difficulties.

One high-ranking cabinet member in Jordan scoffed at her motives.

“He said, ‘Why are you doing this, ultimately, the woman and children will go back to the man?’” she says.

Alhusseini’s reasons were rooted in stark images of battered children lying in hospital — or of pregnant teens whose husbands were old enough to be their grandparents.

“At the time, this was all completely legal,” says the woman, who helped design a national protection policy in Jordan, which became the first Arab state to address the forbidden topic of domestic abuse.

If you think Alhusseini is a meek Arab woman, think again: In 2007, she skewered Saudi judges for their ruling on a rape case.

“Explain to me how it is just to punish a 19-year-old woman, who was gang raped by seven men, with 200 lashes and six months in prison?” she thundered in a Nov. 19 article on Arabisto.com, adding, “It is an insult to me that they call themselves Islamic judges.”

Taboo subjects are golden opportunities to her.

Alhusseini instituted a highly charged program last September to deal with sexual assault and teen dating violence in Arab-Muslim society, crimes that go largely unreported because of shame, fear and tradition.

“We offer people the power to understand that their dignity has not been touched,” she explains. “But we still have a long way to go.”

Lena Alhusseini’s road to justice for abuse victims is gaining speed as she expands her center, whose client list has increased from 1,000 to 5,000 people since she took charge in 2006, she says.

She credits her staff — her “greatest asset” — for the transformation.

“We don’t cower from controversial subjects,” says the woman who has taken her show on the road to expose a potential killer, and power victims’ suffering into a vehicle for change. “We tackle them.”
Elaine J. Avery

Thousands of cats owe their lives to her

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

Orlorn felines have a lioness of a friend in Canarsie legend Elaine Avery.

The spry senior rescues luckless tabbies off the hard-scrabbled streets of southern Brooklyn and gives them a new lease on life by placing them in foster care while she finds them “forever homes.”

“The difference between me and a crazy cat lady is that I’m organized,” boasts Avery, the ebullient 71-year-young president of Kings Highway Cat Rescue, a no-kill cat shelter she operates from her daughter’s Midwood law office with volunteers and donations provided by cat lovers.

Avery has helped rescue nearly 3,000 cats in 16 years, and solicited food from pet companies and animal organizations with the tenacity of a schmoozing pitbull who is not above writing “beg letters” on behalf of her plaintive pals.

The retired waitress cruises for her prey at night in her Toyota, prowling the concrete jungles of Canarsie, Midwood and Flatbush, acting mostly on tips. Then, assisted by a volunteer, she makes her move — sometimes spending hours observing, baiting and trapping the critters in a pet cage before transporting them to her basement.

The next day she takes them to the vet for a check-up, vaccinations and spay or neuter surgeries, followed by a trip to the home of a foster parent — usually one of four volunteers who keep upwards of 15 cats at a time.

Last summer, Avery rescued 64 cats from a trailer after their owner, an ex-cop who had fallen on hard times, could no longer care for them. After an expensive trip to the vet (Avery says she paid the five-figure bill herself), she contacted her friend, Lee Kendrick, president of the Animal Rescue Force on Long Island. Within weeks, 20 diseased cats were headed for a hospice, others hunkered down happily in pet cottages on Kendrick’s property, and the rest were found loving homes. The silver-tongued woman even persuaded a company to donate thousands of cans of cat food.

Avery’s veterinarian, Dr. Yakov Sheynberg at the Sheepshead Bay Veterinary Group, agrees. He was having a hard time finding a home for a dog doomed to the crematorium when Avery stepped in.

“She found a place for him, and now he sleeps in his own bed and eats omelettes for breakfast,” he says.

Word about the Kings Highway Cat Rescue has even spread to the Far East. The Tokyo Broadcasting System contacted Avery because it wanted to air a segment about her.

“Elaine will be there at one in the morning on a Sunday to do what she has to do,” says Kendrick. “She’s very compassionate and very good at what she does.”

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Word about the Kings Highway Cat Rescue has even spread to the Far East. The Tokyo Broadcasting System contacted Avery because it wanted to air a segment about her.

“They were surprised at how compassionate Americans were towards their animals,” says the woman who received a $1,000 donation from the Japanese television company.

Her work has also won awards: NY1 proclaimed her “New Yorker of the Week” in 1998, and, a year earlier, she received the “Unsung Heroes Award” at the International Cat Show at Madison Square Garden for a rescue involving an ex-prizefighter, whose sister contacted Avery after the man was discovered walking naked along Coney Island beach “babbling about his cat.” Avery sleuthed out the woebegone tabby, where the man lived, and found it a loving home.

Cat rescues can be a dog’s life, and Avery has been cursed at, chased away with brooms and hospitalized for her trouble.

Still, her proudest moment occurred when she brought a cat named Nicky to the Samuel and Bertha Schulman Rehabilitation Institute in Canarsie to befriend patients. Nicky had been given to her by a dying woman who wanted him placed where “he would get love.”

That good deed changed the heart of staffers who abandoned their plans to exterminate the wild cats in their therapy garden, and had them fixed instead.

“We were able to fulfill the wishes of a dying woman, make people happy and raise cat consciousness,” says Avery — a grassroots lioness when it comes to giving forlorn felines a shot at happiness.

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

Elaine J. Avery

Thousands of cats owe their lives to her

NEIGHBORHOOD: Canarsie

OCUPATION: Legal clerk and animal rescuer

COMPANY: Kings Highway Cat Rescue

CLAIM TO FAME: “Rescuing close to 3,000 stray and abandoned cats who might have otherwise died.”

FAVORITE BROOKLYN PLACE: Canarsie Pier

WOMAN I ADMIRE: “Lynn Stitt [president of Best Little Cat House in Pennsylvania], who has dedicated her life to providing hospice care to old, sick and terminally-ill cats.”

MOTTO: “Until he extends his circle of compassion to include all living things, man will not himself find peace.” — Albert Schweitzer.

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“They were surprised at how compassionate Americans were towards their animals,” says the woman who received a $1,000 donation from the Japanese television company.

Her work has also won awards: NY1
Tina Chang is having odes of fun taking the borough on an idyllic word journey as Brooklyn’s first woman poet laureate.

The velvety-voiced writer, editor and new mom from Park Slope was selected by Borough President Markowitz last year to be our official spinner of verses — a highfalutin’ appointment that she is using to kindle a thirst for one of mankind’s earliest forms of expression.

There is no job description as such for a poet laureate, whose office dates back to the Dark Ages. The holder is required only to produce a composition if something important happens, and the salary is as non-existent as the Greek poetry god Calliope.

“Poetry doesn’t have the greatest reputation,” admits Chang, who is using her frill-free volunteer post to promote the literary art form and debunk its doggerel in neighborhoods where most people don’t know an assonance — the repetition of similar sounds — from an elbow.

She’s certainly an authority on the sonnet-and-stanza grounding frames, having authored the poetry collection, “Half-Lit Houses,” with another one, “Of Gods & Strangers,” coming out this fall. Chang has also co-edited “Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond,” and co-founded a collaborative reading series for American writers of Asian and African descent.

“People are not afraid of fiction, and would be looked down on if they didn’t read it, but they are not exposed to poetry unless they seek it out,” comments the wordsmith, who teaches poetry at Hunter and Sarah Lawrence colleges, where her students are spreading a love for Walt Whitman and Co. in public schools.

Subways would be ablaze with poetry murals, poems would be etched into benches, verses would fly from banners and schools would have Adopt-a-Poet days, if Chang had her way.

“The words would stay with people for the whole day,” muses the exalted ink-slinger, whose work has been published in American Poet, Ploughshares, and Sonora Review, among others.

Robert Casper, who runs the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., thought so highly of Chang’s work that he nominated her for the job of poet laureate.

“Tina is a dynamic poet, who showed a real love for the borough in her application, and a real commitment to using her position to advance poetry,” he remarks.

He’s right — Chang has big plans for our poetic future.

Now that she’s a parent — mom to 1-year-old son Roman, and infant baby girl Juliette — she wants to include a kid-die poetry tent at the Brooklyn Book Festival this September, and she’s also working on a Brooklyn Poetry website, dedicated to showcasing Brooklyn writers.

Pint-sized audiences have already been touched by her work.

In April, for National Poetry Month, Chang participated in Poem In Your Pocket days at MS 51 in Park Slope, and Fort Greene’s Ronald Edmonds Learning Center, where she had students create original poems by inviting them to mishmash random words, thoughts and desires.

“Suddenly, they were writing things like, ‘I was Superman in Barcelona, and I was wearing the color blue, and everyone thought I was fabulous,’” she smiles.

Chang also ignited a flame of interest in the frozen eyes of seniors with dementia at the Park Slope Geriatric Day Center, where she has delivered the healing power of poetry — a craft she calls “a world on a page.”

“Tina makes poetry real and useful,” says Gary Glazner, founder of the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, who invited Chang along to help bewildered seniors harness their thoughts for a poem they composed together entitled, “Brooklyn.”

“Does heaven look like Brooklyn, with Marty at the gates?” reads a line.

Chang’s own bolts of enlightenment are inspired by just about anything that crosses her path — from an errand list and a rejection letter to a recipe for black bean sauce and a stroll with her husband along the Gowanus Canal. She jots down her thoughts in a spiral notebook from the 99-cent store, and percolates them into wow works.

One of them, “Possibility,” invites the reader to reflect:

“If you remember your place in this world remember that you were restless meat, that you were born four times: first as water, then as a monk, then as an insect, then a malleable distant star flicking on, off, in the child’s insomniac eye…”

Tina Chang is the borough’s top word journey as Brooklyn’s poet laureate always has the right word.

**BIO FILE**

**NEIGHBORHOOD:** Park Slope

**OCCUPATION:** Poet, editor, & teacher

**COMPANY:** Sarah Lawrence College

**CLAIM TO FAME:** “My role as poet laureate of Brooklyn.”

**FAVORITE PLACE:** Coney Island

**WOMAN I ADMIRE:** “My mother, Teresa Lee, because she sacrificed everything to ensure that I have the life I have now.”

**MOTTO:** “Show the greatest compassion for yourself.”

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Tina Chang is the borough’s top word journey as Brooklyn’s poet laureate always has the right word.
Thank you to all the honorees for your hard work.

Negus Jewelry

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Congratulations to all of this year’s Great Women of Distinction!!
Thank you for your great contributions to our fine borough.

New York State Senator
Diane J. Savino
23rd District

2872 West 15th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11224
Phone: (718) 333-0311 • Fax: (347) 492-3623
www.nyssenate23.com

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The Board of Directors and Staff of The Arab American Family Support Center congratulate

AAFSC Executive Director Lena Alhusseini
A true Woman of Distinction!

Lena and the AAFSC team provide essential social services to the Arab American community of New York City.

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South Brooklyn Nephrology Center – Da Vita

Applauds the unique accomplishments of the 2011 Women of Distinction & their contributions to the community!

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Serving the community 29 years!

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www.poreless.com * poreless@poreless.com

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Congratulations to my Mom,

Judi Orlando

Love, Nicole and Brian

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For the 2011 Brooklyn’s Women of Distinction, we appreciate the contributions they make to our community!
I t was a proud moment for Raisa Chernina when the corner of Oriental Boulevard and Corbin Place in Manhattan Beach was co-named “Heroes of Operation Iraqi Freedom Way” — a tribute the ex-Soviet had lobbied hard for because “otherwise who’s gonna tell about those people?”

Uniformed Marines, families of soldiers and a retired Army general stood side by side with the advertising executive and television producer from Sheepshead Bay as the green street sign was installed to cheers and tears in 2005.

A few years later, when the marker mysteriously disappeared, Chernina moved swiftly to have it replaced. She even donated a replica of it — awarded to her as a souvenir — to the 773rd Transportation Company in Queens which brought it to Iraq.

“Those are our kids over there, and they need our support 100 percent,” she says.

Chernina, 63, grows emotional when she speaks about America. She came here in 1980, settling first in Ohio before moving to Brooklyn eight years later with her husband. In the Buckeye State, Chernina met an African-American woman who helped her adjust to life in her new homeland — a bond of friendship she never forgot.

In tribute to that woman, and others who helped her to resettle, Chernina began reaching out to people in Brooklyn, partly to dispel negative myths about Russian Americans, she confides, and partly because she fell in love with the United States.

“This country gave me everything,” says the former political refugee, who celebrated her 20th anniversary here by hosting a community “Chanukah-Christmas-Ramadan-Kwanzaa party” at Rasputin Restaurant in Sheepshead Bay.

In 2003, she formed the Be Proud Foundation for servicemen and their families, partnering with politicians and activists to hail Old Glory’s sons and daughters with tributes, including one she organized a year later at Borough Hall in conjunction with the American War Veterans of Russian Descent Committee. About two dozen military members who fought in Iraq showed up for the salute.

“Russian-American servicemen, along with their American compatriots, have stepped up to the plate and are contributing all of their resources to protect this land — they need to be recognized,” she said at the time.

One of those honorees was Alex Presman, a Marine who lost his foot to a land mine in Iraq.

“Raisa doesn’t have kids of her own, but she cares about the kids of others,” says the Purple Heart recipient, who was so impressed by Chernina’s patriotism that he put her in contact with other soldier families, and agreed to drive her and a group of people to the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington to visit wounded soldiers.

“We went to every room, and handed out candy,” mentions Presman.

Chernina not only wears her heart on her sleeve, but also seizes every opportunity to exercise it: One day, she met a woman handing out fliers on Brighton Beach Avenue about her 4-year-old niece who had leukemia.

Touched by the pre-schooler’s ordeal, Chernina promised to help. She coordinated a fundraiser at National Restaurant, and arranged a press conference and aired free advertisements on Russian television for the family. Then she mobilized nearly 700 donors for a blood drive.

“She’s in remission now,” says Chernina, whose good deeds have sometimes been met with opposition.

Her plan for the street sign, which she unveiled at a community board meeting, was initially shot down by residents furious over the U.S. offensive in Iraq.

“They called me a traitor and a Republican, I almost started crying,” she recalls.

One man in attendance — Councilman Mike Nelson (D–Sheepshead Bay) — came to her rescue.

“He jumped up and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me,” states Chernina who later became a member of that board.

Nelson, an Air Force veteran, applauds her efforts.

“Here is a person who does everything to make America a better place, not just for any one ethnic group, but for all Americans,” he says, recalling Chernina’s empathy for Larysa Bosenko when the Sheepshead Bay woman’s husband, Oleg, was killed by muggers in 2002.

“Raisa held her hand, formulated the funeral and helped raise money for the family,” he adds.

Her work, however, has not been without its fun: Chernina holds the widely-anticipated “Your Highness Grandmother” pageants in Brighton Beach each year to revere matriarchs, whom she calls “the generals.”

“I want their families to pay attention to them now, not when they have passed away,” she explains.

Raisa Chernina’s own extraordinary attention to others is on display for all to see — engraved in metal on a street sign in Manhattan Beach.
CONGRATULATIONS to our daughter Danielle Johnson and all of the Brooklyn’s Woman of Distinction Honorees. May you continue to be an inspiration to others. So proud of all that you do.

xoxo
Mom & Dad

“No Act of Kindness, NO Matter how Small is Ever Wasted” (Aesop)

MetroPlus Health Plan
In honor of the dedication, commitment and excellent work of our Chief Customer Officer Gail Smith
If Brenda Drew’s voice was canned, it would be like chicken soup. The sound of it — full-bodied and warm with a scent of authority — is enough to reduce her rambunctious young charges at an after-school program in Canarsie into obedient kids eager to please their teacher.

Drew, 52, is director of the city Housing Authority’s Breukelen Community Center where the class is held, and she keeps the 6- to 12-year-old children and older teens in line with a few simple ground rules: pull up your pants, don’t cuss, respect each other and the staff, and clean up after yourself. If someone breaks one, he or she is issued a polite warning not to return the next day.

“I tell them, ‘We’re family here, when you come back, we’ll talk.’ ”

The offender usually returns, apologetic, says Drew, who has supervised the parents — even grandparents — of some of the thousands of children she has helped with homework, fed, offered a sympathetic ear and unraveled problems for in the 19 years she has worked at the center as a childcare provider, social worker, “psychiatrist” and weekend custodian to neighbors using the building for special events.

Her reputation precedes her — even with strangers.

Wendy Garrick was a single parent having a tough time finding day care for her son until someone told her about “Miss Drew.”

“She took us under her wing and made sure my son had somewhere safe to go to when he came home from school,” she says.

Body language and eye contact is usually enough to draw Drew’s keen eye to a problem. She once approached the mother of “a crybaby with a sad face” and invited her to send the child to her after-school program. The girl arrived for her first day in tears, recalls Drew, who tempered the tantrum with simple psychology.

“I told her that we’re happy here, and asked her to smile a beautiful smile for me.”

Then, Drew snapped two photographs — one of the girl smiling with the entire class, and one of her unsmiling and alone. She asked the girl to pick which one she liked the best.

“From that day on, she had a smile on, and a center full of new friends,” says Drew, a mother of four and grandmother of five who has her own formula for helping rear well-adjusted children: Lead them to places of interest, and inspire them to do better.

On some weekends she takes her students to Manhattan for sightseeing, lunch and a movie. In class, the children help her prepare healthy, low-fat snacks as part of a smart-eating program she instituted. She also channels their creativity with regular arts and crafts. For a recent decoupage project, she had them use photographs they took during a trip to the Brooklyn Museum.

“Socialization is very important, I’ve seen too many children go into the school system and get pushed to the side,” Drew comments.

Adults, too, have found a friend in her.

After an angry parent tore into her during a Mother’s Day dinner, she sat the distraught woman down, brought her a glass of water and inquired, “Are you OK? What’s wrong?” The woman broke down and disclosed that she was in the middle of a divorce, and had no one to talk to.

“I’m a phone call away,” Drew told her.

Kadheijah Noel, 23, who calls Drew her “second mother,” can attest to her big heart.

“She handles every child differently because she knows that every child is not the same,” says Noel, a former member of the after-school program who now volunteers there as a Girl Scout leader.

That type of common sense has, at times, saved the day for Drew.

When a teen trip to a neighboring community development left her feeling uneasy, she rented a DVD and held the movie night at her own center instead.

“That way they didn’t miss out on the experience,” she explains in that soothing voice which has prevailed over many a difficult situation — just like chicken soup.
WE SUPPORT THOSE WHO AIM HIGH.

American Airlines congratulates the Brooklyn Women of Distinction.
Jill Eisenhard

Solving Red Hook’s poverty one person at a time

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

If we don’t do this, then who will?”

Red Hook teens David McCoy, Abraham Sanchez, Taiwan Burrus and Mohammed Martinez adopted the motto for their PowerPoint presentation about the steep high school dropout rate in their neighborhood — an industrious feat which earned the youth leaders at the Red Hook Initiative a cash grant from America’s Promise, a youth foundation established by former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The boys used the funds to survey locals about the root causes of delinquency, and held pro-active workshops on literacy, cooking and current events at their community-based organization’s after-school programs.

“They were amazed that they wrote down their idea, and someone thought it was good enough to send them a check,” says Jill Eisenhard, 36, founder and executive director of the multi-service group she created in 2002 to address Red Hook’s inter-generational poverty through education, employment, health and community development opportunities.

She was familiar with the quaint, waterfront enclave, named for its red clay soil and point of land projecting into the East River, having made frequent trips there as a health educator with Long Island College Hospital.

She switched careers upon realizing that Red Hook’s problem-plagued, under-served residents would be better off if they were taught — and paid — to run their own community programming.

She obtained a grant from the March of Dimes, hired 10 women from the city-run Red Hook Houses and taught them a 12-week course on women’s health.

The floodgates were flung open.

Soon, Eisenhard became aware of other pressing community concerns.

“One day, a 15-year-old came into the center at around one in the afternoon and when we asked her why she wasn’t in school, she replied that she had dropped out,” says Eisenhard, who moved rapidly to expand her operations.

In the weeks, months and years ahead, she worked to stabilize disillusioned area youngsters, many of whom were without family role models.

She instituted 30 programs and services to provide them with peer-counseling and leadership skills, plus job opportunities, support services and creative outlets, such as a youth-run, online radio.

Eisenhard has offered a strong shoulder to broken youngsters, repairing them with solid action: She has assisted them with GED courses, driven them to college to settle them in, and even roused them in the mornings with a cheery text message or phone call.

The outpouring of community support has spurred her onwards.

“One of the things that stuck out for me in the beginning was that the workshops were always well-attended, and the people seemed to be genuinely interested, and wanting more,” says the visionary, who today employs 35 teens and returned $243,000 in salaries to the area last year.

Red Hook has been revived by Eisenhard’s work, according to one long-time resident.

“Jill has that ‘it’ factor, she is the woman behind the scenes making it happen, she’s an unsung hero,” claims Community Board 6 member Andrea McKnight, who has lived in Red Hook for 40 years, and proudly claims her waterfront community was always a diamond in the rough.

“Now, it’s polished,” remarks the woman, who has benefited personally from one of the center’s programs by losing five pounds just weeks after joining a new weight-loss class there.

Eisenhard’s insight has withstood tough times.

The financial crisis of the mid-2000s gobbled-up lesser groups, but she relocated her’s to brand new digs at Clinton and Centre streets, and secured $400,000 in capital funding.

Concerned members and staffers rallied around her, making “hope” pins which they sold for $2 a pop, and contributing a portion of their wages to the pot — raising $10,000.

One private donor, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, has given more than $100,000 to the Red Hook Initiative.

“I was so impressed with what Jill is doing, and the big difference she is making in a community that needs help,” says the benefactor, who regularly attends the group’s Thanksgiving dinners, food fairs and other social events.

The best part of all, explains Eisenhard is when she learns through the grapevine that people think of her and her staff as family, and her center as their second home.

One 10-year-old member confirmed as much when he brought her a homemade cheesecake, recently.

“He told me, ‘Here, my grandmother sent this for you,’” she shares.

The proof of the pudding remains in Jill Eisenhard’s hard work to change the cycle of poverty in Red Hook, and turn hardships into happiness for its residents.

BIO FILE

NEIGHBORHOOD: Red Hook

OCCUPATION: Executive director

COMPANY: Red Hook Initiative

CLAIM TO FAME: “Creating a space where youth can find what they need throughout their pre-teen and adolescent years.”

FAVORITE PLACE: “The Red Hook Initiative … of course!”

WOMAN I ADMIRE: “I admire any woman who is willing to stand up for what she believes.”

MOTTO: “You can make anything happen if you truly believe in it.”

Photo by Stefano Giovannini

Photo by Stefano Giovannini
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Mathylde Frontus
Coney Island has an ally

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

Mathylde Frontus was an early bloomer. She began reading at 2, started first grade at 4, entered high school at 12 and became a college freshman at New York University at 16.

“I was an old soul,” chuckles the executive director of Urban Neighborhood Services, a group the mental health clinician and social worker founded in 2004 to bring hope to weary Coney Island where she grew up.

Frontus, 33, still lives in Coney, but now she’s helping residents turn their lives around by providing free workshops, counseling teens, teaching folk about a greener future and honoring returning veterans with tributes in libraries.

She has also pounced on crime in the area, organizing anti-violence rallies as co-chair of the Coney Island Coalition Against Violence.

In January, she had local merchants, students and parents participate in a poster campaign and panel forum to decry gun violence, which peaked in 2010 with 10 murders in Coney Island and adjacent Brighton Beach.

One of the 1,000 posters distributed to every business in the neighborhood’s western tip showed a green “flatline” seen on a heart monitor with the words, “Violence Takes Our Loved Ones Away.” Another warned, “Life is a Gift. Don’t Waste It.”

“Our children should be reminded that violence is not the way to go,” says Frontus, who saw her share of it on walks home from Edward R. Murrow HS during the early-1990s.

“I saw the kids and the gangs, I saw the drug abuse.”

She was so affected by the doom that she started serving the homeless in a soup kitchen “every Saturday like clockwork” and coordinating holiday toy drives for hospital patients. She joined her school’s Council for Unity chapter and sponsored a child in Africa.

Frontus pounded the pavement to spread word about her group, making cold calls, and enlisting the help of charities, interfaith organizations and elected officials.

“I called people out of the blue and told them that I was starting a help organization,” she comments.

The response was swift and gratifying.

A church allowed her to use its basement as an office, and she invited the community to a rap session.

A handful of girls showed up, challenging all of her skills.

“I used different icebreakers, such as, ‘Today, I feel like...’ or ‘I hate it when...’ to get them to open up.”

Frontus focused then on what has become the staple of her group, today — mentoring teens about peer pressure, sex, and self-esteem.

“I pointed out to them that they were in charge of their own fate and destiny, I was like Dr. Phil,” she explains.

Frontus began incorporating health and wellness workshops, successfully applied for a small grant and organized a 2007 community screening of “Every Mother’s Son,” a film about three diverse women who unite for justice after their sons are killed by cops.

A panel discussion on police-community ties followed. The guests were 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement co-founder Noel Leader, and Gerard Papa, a cop brutality victim from Coney Island who testified at the Mollen hearings on police corruption and brutality in the early 1990s.

A year later, when Frontus took a group of teens on a trip to Harvard — one of her alma maters — as part of her Coney Island College Tour Program, many of them were inspired to hit the books.

“Some of them had never been on a trip before,” she mentions.

Another program, an eight-week course for high-school students entitled the Summer Youth Leadership Project, introduced youngsters to critical thinking and inspired them to volunteer in the community, including at senior citizen centers.

Some of the first fruits of those labors emerged in 2009 when Frontus sent her “young leaders” to work at Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus’s Coney Island Boom-A-Ring, which proudly reported back that the partnership had won Ringling an internal industry award.

Toni Soto credits her hunt for work to Urban Neighborhood Services.

“They helped me regularly with my job search,” she says.

Others have found a cradle of support there, such as Amanda Santiago, a gunshot victim, who wants to thank Frontus and her staff for rallying around her.

“They helped me to get through a difficult period, and are still helping me,” discloses the woman.

These stories — and many others — remain a testament to Mathylde Frontus’ commitment to realize her childhood dream, and make a positive difference in Coney Island.
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Melissa Glass

The woman who brought ‘Boo’ back to Cobble Hill

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

It’s never too early to begin preparing for the year’s most diabolical day, especially in wild ‘n’ wacky Cobble Hill, which can’t wait to get its ghoul on, thanks to Halloween hostess Melissa Glass.

The Cobble Hill Association member has transformed the annual Cobble Hill Park Halloween Parade from a sparsely attended drag, hardly worth a respectable “Boo!” to the most anticipated shindig of the year with enough eye-popping bells and whistles to make the Headless Horseman howl with ecstasy.

“I wanted to take it up a notch,” says the retired investment banker, who arrived on the scene five years ago to find a cheerless staging ground at Cobble Hill Park, a bluestone and cast iron sanctuary with a handsome granite entrance and herringbone-patterned brick walkways, where the bone-jangling fête had been reduced to a few pitiful paper streamers and some milksoop jack-o’-lanterns.

The 50-year-old wife and mother set about reinventing the spectacle, scouring Halloween websites in the summer for an eerie-licious assortment of eye-candy to lure revelers and restore glory to a park which her group helped birth in the early 1960s by petitioning the city and collecting more than 1,000 signatures.

Her hard work has paid off: Last year, close to 5,000 festive frolickers attended the spine-tingling pageant, with music by the Jah Pan Steel Band — another of her pulsating additions.

Glass is Cobble Hill’s undisputed Halloween queen, contends Association President Roy Sloane, who has lauded her with a “Heroes Award” to prove it.

“Melissa is a dynamic force, and the parade is a tribute to her ability to organize and inspire others,” he states.

Her management moxie is also on display at the Dodge YMCA in Boerum Hill where Glass is the board chairwoman, and branch representative to the Board of Directors for the YMCA of Greater New York — two more of her volunteer positions. Her mandate there, too, is to get the community involved. One way she has managed that is by recruiting more area residents to the board to equitably represent the region, generating more interest and increasing membership.

“I wanted to get the word out that the Y is more than just a gym,” she explains.

Her outreach has brought fitness classes to seniors in their homes, and to Arab American facilities to preserve the modesty of Muslim females. And her partnerships with Long Island College Hospital and Brooklyn Bridge Park have exposed the families to Tai Chi and Zumba classes on Pier 1 in DUMBO. In April, Glass helped coordinate a Healthy Kids Day at the Y, featuring a cooking class to help children develop healthy eating habits, and last year she raised the bulk of $240,000 in scholarships for the organization’s summer camp and Strong Kids Campaign, enabling hundreds of struggling Brooklynites to join as members and enroll in programs.

She has also diversified the Leaders Club for teens by introducing college tours and gardening workshops, among other new initiatives, yet much of her time, Glass says, is spent brainstorming ideas.

She perfected the trait during her 15 years in high finance, transforming entrepreneurs into industry powerhouses. McCaw Cellular Communications is one of her success stories.

The cellphone pioneer partnered with AT&T in 1990 to introduce “Cellular One,” the first truly national cellular system, due in part to Glass’s work with the company.

Her powers of persuasion are thoroughly blue-chip, too, vouches Elizabeth Toledo, executive director of the Dodge YMCA, who recalls how Glass — a board member on the Parent Association of Packer Collegiate Institute — swayed the president of the YMCA of Greater New York to personally lead a volunteer board orientation at their branch, something which had never been done before.

“It was like Mohammed coming to the mountain,” comments Toledo. “Melissa is very determined when she wants something, she does her homework and she makes a good case.”

Glass makes a tasty roast chicken, too. She packs the dish in a basket with soup, brownies and other homemade treats, and delivers them to the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue Homeless Shelter several times a year.

“I just drop it off, it’s no big deal,” she says, mentioning the act of grace in passing.

Community service — the act of giving selflessly for the benefit of others — continues to be a rewarding work in progress for Melissa Glass.

“It makes me smile,” she says.
Elaine Guido
A neighbor who’s proud to help her neighbors

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

Elaine Guido was preparing gift baskets at the American Legion hall in Bay Ridge when a hysterical woman stormed in, screaming, “If you don’t help me, I don’t what I’m going to do!”

“She threw herself bodily on me!” says the president of the Bayfort Benevolent Associates, a community service organization in Dyker Heights, which has helped Brooklynites in need for nearly 70 years.

“Have some coffee and we’ll talk,” Guido, 67, told the gloomy visitor, who was distraught over a looming divorce, the thought of raising two children alone, and being tossed out onto the street because of unpaid rent.

She calmed the woman down.

“Nobody’s going to throw you out,” Guido assured her.

Then, she tackled the grim situation with skills garnered from decades of experience as a Special Projects Operations’ manager for the Board of Elections, and a volunteer activist and Republican state committeewoman.

She dispatched a group member to the landlord’s home to verify the story, and offered the woman a meal.

“A few hours later, we had paid her rent, given her food for her kids, put her in a car and taken her home,” says Guido, whose group relies on member donations to serve hard-up folk in Bensonhurst, Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights, Sheepshead Bay, Park Slope and parts of Staten Island.

Other people’s wretchedness has left a poignant imprint on the community leader, who has helped by addressing their needs, unconditionally.

When Discipleship Outreach Ministries approached her for assistance with a drive, she consulted her group and sent over “a couple hundred coats, shoes and boots.”

“Elaine has an unfailing dedication to helping people, and she works hard to do what she does,” says Jim Lamond of the St. Vincent De Paul Society chapter at St. Patrick’s Church in Bay Ridge, where Guido rushed to the rescue with food parcels after Wall Street reneged on its community assistance program.

She has stayed strong through tough times, caring for her ailing husband, mother and brother — all of whom she buried in the past year — while continuing her day job and volunteer work, before calling it a day at her spouse’s hospital bedside.

Guido has raised money for seeing eye dogs, clothed and sheltered the homeless, addressed quality of life issues, helped put aspirants on the ballot and sprung into action in emergencies.

“Our motto at Bayfort is ‘Neighbors Helping Neighbors,’ so that’s what we do,” she explains.

Debbie Stevens, a financially-strapped single parent, located Guido after being turned away by a church. She was stunned when help arrived within hours.

“A weight was lifted off my shoulders,” shares the grateful woman, who says she plans to reimburse the group even though she was told she didn’t have to.

Guido also hustled to help after a fire left five families destitute, buying large quantities of food, raising $2,000 in cash and delivering the donations with some group members to St. Ephrem’s Church where the victims were staying.

“They had lost everything, and when they saw us coming they started to cry,” she recalls.

An overcome Bayfort member began to weep, too. She was soon set straight by Guido, who informed her: “They don’t need our tears, they need our smiles and support.”

The model citizen has given ample amounts of both to Brooklyn.

Guido established “A Taste of Bay Ridge” more than 20 years ago to showcase the neighborhood’s restaurants under one roof, sending leftovers to nursing homes. It continues to draw thousands of visitors each year.

Her appetite for civic service has been whet, too, by memories of people she has helped — among them, a problem-plagued ex-pat from Ireland.

“We took care of her rent and utilities,” she says, adding the woman tracked her down 10 years later, thanked her again and repaid her in full. These success stories, says Elaine Guido, inspire her to continue wading through the trenches.

“Even if I’m physically exhausted, I don’t care, I go back for more, because it’s good,” she smiles.

BIO FILE

NEIGHBORHOOD: Dyker Heights
OCCUPATION: Manager of Special Projects Operations
COMPANY: New York City Board of Elections
CLAIM TO FAME: “I work every day to inspire others, and help others understand that there is always someone out there to encourage you to pull yourself up, and make it happen.”

FAVORITE PLACE: Brooklyn Heights
WOMAN I ADMIRE: “Jane Addams [1860–1935], founder of the Settlement House Movement, who helped tens of thousands of immigrants adjust to life in the U.S. by offering them job training, medical services, education, child care, and cultural programs in their own neighborhoods.”

MOTTO: “When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and I could say, ‘I used everything you gave me.’ ”
By Shavana Abruzzo

Bay Ridge preservationist Victoria Hofmo had lobbied hard to have Senator Street designated a historic district, even persuading the top official at the Historic Districts Council to come down for several serene strolls along the stately strip of brownstones between Third and Fourth avenues.

When she learned in 2002 that the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation was finally paying attention, Hofmo wasted no time in forming a block association for the 38 row houses built in the early 1900s on a street named for 19th-century Sen. Henry Murphy, who owned the property where Bliss Park now stands.

First, Hofmo, the director of an after-school program, faced the challenge of motivating enough people on Senator Street to do the required legwork when many of them had never heard of a historic district before.

The well-informed and no-nonsense activist’s ebullience quickly worked its magic, said Ron Gross, who owned one of the three-story, bow-front homes and attended the meeting because he was intrigued by the Bay Ridge Conservancy president’s desire to save beautiful old buildings from the wrecking ball.

“The passionate way Victoria spoke was so infectious that in our excitement we found that we had volunteered without hesitation,” says Gross.

Hofmo’s zeal gave Gross the motivation needed to do the research and writing required to create the “Senator Street Historic District” — the first historic district in Bay Ridge listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

At the time, Hofmo asserted, “These homes are perfectly fine to live in, charming old buildings.”

She argued that developers who flipped properties for profit — or bought them up and left them fallow — destroyed the quality of life in Bay Ridge.

“People move out because of things like this,” contended the woman, whose clarion calls have helped move mountains in Bay Ridge, and perked up some powerful ears.

Councilman Vincent Gentile (D–Bay Ridge) credits his own preservation work to Hofmo.

At her behest, soon after she took office in 2003, Gentile forged a preservation committee which rezoned 369 Bay Ridge blocks in Brooklyn’s largest rezoning project at the time — with Hofmo helping to lead the charge.

“Victoria has a vision of what the community can become, either for good or for bad, like no one else I’ve seen,” states the lawmaker, who passed a zoning law two years later to protect the area’s residential quality.

One of Hofmo’s visions can be summed up in two words: “Fedders homes.”

She coined the term to describe the crude, high-rises with Fedders’ air conditioner sleeves poking out of the windows, which she felt were a blight to the neighborhood. The glib phrase became part of the Bay Ridge vernacular, and is preserved for posterity in the “Official Dictionary for Unofficial English.”

Hofmo’s yearning to bottle Bay Ridge’s memories also extends to people now long gone, but not forgotten, thanks to her.

She’s a huge fan of all things Scandinavian, due to her mainly Norwegian, Danish and Swedish descent, and has committed herself to safeguarding Bay Ridge’s illustrious Scandinavian heritage.

She established the Scandinavian East Coast Heritage Museum in the mid-1990s to celebrate the customs and contributions of Scandinavians, who have called Brooklyn home for nearly 400 years.

“Scandinavians, mostly Norwegians, were up and down the whole waterfront, Eighth Avenue was called ‘Lapskaus Boulevard’ after a kind of stew,” Hofmo said in a July 2008 interview with The New York Times.

She has yet to find a permanent home for the “hodgepodge” of books, records, photographs and artifacts, which number in the thousands, and which are available for off-site exhibitions and education programs. But the one-of-a-kind archive, stored for now in the basement of a house — and comprised of such rarities as a hand loom from the 1800s, municipal certificates and musical instruments — speaks to her cultural pride and remains a source of intellectual curiosity for children and adults.

Hofmo’s annual events have introduced thousands of people to the habits of Norway, which gave more of its population to the U.S. per capita than any other country, except Ireland.

Her lively community parties include a Danish-style Mardi Gras before Lent known as Fastelavn, Viking festivals and Santa Lucia Christmas pageants.

This spring, Hofmo organized a rollicking cabaret tribute for Peggy Lee after discovering the late American entertainer and songwriter had Scandinavian roots.

Hofmo, 52, is so proud of her ancestors’ role in shaping Brooklyn that she side-steps one of their main principles: The Jante Law, or Janteloven in Norwegian, which frowns upon boastful behavior.

As far as she is concerned, Bay Ridge’s storied past cannot be shouted enough from its rooftops — one historic brownstone at a time.
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Danielle Johnson
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Congratulations To Our Neighbors
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Victoria Hofmo • Elaine Guido
Harbor Fitness Club

Kings Candy
Congratulations all the Honorees
Well done, ladies!
Rose Huczko usually comes home from work to find a plastic bag or two stuffed with essentials hanging on her front door knob. The mini soaps, toothpaste and other sundries are left by neighbors eager to help the 66-year-old office clerk from Midwood with her charity work.

“I ask people to give me travel-size items because homeless people can’t carry a lot of stuff around with them,” says Huczko, who assembles them into “comfort bags” for Park Slope Christian Help, where she volunteers in the soup kitchen.

When a transient asked her for spare change one day, she handed the man a bag and invited him to the food pantry for lunch.

Huczko has spent most of her life reaching out to people in need, a calling that she discovered after becoming a teen volunteer at a day camp for the deaf. She has ministered to strangers in hospitals, visited them in nursing homes, collected food and clothing for them, raised funds for them through the Rosary Society of St. Brendan’s Church, and “adopted” some of them in such far off lands as Guatemala and Uganda through the Christian Foundation for Children and Aging.

She has managed it while raising a family, surviving breast cancer, nursing her late husband through illness and working a 40-hour week in three days so that she can devote more time to her volunteer work.

“Rose is an amazing, energetic, Christian woman who makes everyone feel important,” says Rosanne Bruschi, a fellow Sunday School teacher at St. Brendan’s Church who has known Huczko for more than 20 years.

Bruschi added that Huczko writes regularly to all of the parish shut-ins (“she keeps a list”), and welcomes new church members by finding out their names and introducing herself with a hug.

“When they come the following week, they know her!”

Huczko has tried to inspire humanity in children, too: She had her daisy troop at St. Brendan’s, where she helps out on Fridays, write letters of gratitude to American soldiers stationed overseas, and send them crayon drawings of sunflowers, “to thank them for all that they do.”

Around the holidays she brought the girl scouts to the Veterans Administration Hospital in Bay Ridge — and to nearby Holy Family Home — for a seasonal sing-song, later ringing in the New Year with a trip to a senior assisted living complex across from the church. That visit blossomed into an intergenerational friendship the day they all sang “Happy Birthday” to a lonely World War II vet who was turning 85.

“He was so thrilled, and they got such a great deal of pleasure from it,” remarks Huczko, who informed her girls, “You see how little it takes to make someone’s day.”

The grandma has experienced her share of that joy: On one of her trips to Beth Israel Medical Center-Kings Highway Division in Midwood — where she brings Holy Communion to patients twice a month — she met a woman with breast cancer and was so moved by her that she began to visit her regularly.

“We spoke about treatments, and I told her about my own experience with cancer,” she says.

Elaine Chan, the chaplain at Beth Israel, has received feedback from patients who have met Huczko.

“They tell me that Rose’s visits are very important to them,” she says.

The feeling is mutual for Huczko, who is at a loss for words over her big-hearted hobby.

“It’s just been what I do probably because I enjoy the smiles on the people’s faces, and knowing that maybe I comforted someone once in a while,” she confides.

That spirit has touched even her neighbors, some of whom have been motivated to do their own part for people in dire straits because of Rose Huczko.
La Leche League of Marine Park/Madison

The Members & Supporters of La Leche League of Brooklyn-Marine Park/Madison congratulate Paula Utilla on her selection as a “Brooklyn Woman of Distinction.” Paula's love and dedication towards helping breast-feeding mothers and babies is inspirational. As a Leader and Lactation Consultant, Paula is committed to supporting and protecting breast-feeding. We wish Paula all the luck in the years to come.

With Love,
Jennifer Leopold, co-Leader LLL of Marine Park/Madison & LLL Members & Supports
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The Faculty, Staff, and Athletic Department at St. Edmund Prep H.S. want to congratulate our own Danielle Johnson as well as all honorees for this great honor.

An Admirable Woman by Alyssa Vazquez (age 10)

A person I think is admirable is my best friend Danielle Johnson. I think she is admirable because she is talented, smart, funny, and beautiful, hard working, and a wonderful friend. Danielle is talented because she is a great coach. She is smart because she helps me a lot and is a teacher. She is funny because she makes me laugh whenever I am down or unhappy. She is beautiful because she is herself and is proud of it. She is a hard-worker because she is a teacher, a coach, and a wonderful friend to have because not only is she a great friend to me, she feels like a sister to me.

I love you Danielle. (March 2011)

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Danielle Johnson

Everyone’s fairy godmother, lifting spirits and lives

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

Danielle Johnson and some friends were out painting the town red one Friday night when the Marine Park resident received a text message from a 7-year-old boy who lived on her block.

“Are you coming to my hockey game tomorrow morning?” he was eager to know.

Johnson, a 29-year-old gym and computer teacher at Midwood Catholic Academy — and a volunteer swim coach at St. Edmund Preparatory HS — received plenty of ribbing from her party pals who scoffed that she would never be up at the crack of dawn for the early-morning tourney after a zesty frolic the evening before.

They missed the net.

She showed up at the appointed time — even when the boy’s own mother didn’t — and was rewarded by “a big smile” from her pint-sized fan.

“There was no way I wasn’t making it!” she says.

Johnson, a fast-paced woman whose words tumble out like a waterfall, has built a reputation in her community as being the go-to gal, from driving neighbors to medical appointments and watching their kids, to rounding up a group of children on the spur of the moment and taking them to the movies or for a fun outing to the Aviator Sports complex at Floyd Bennett Field. She has taught many of them to swim, and most of them think nothing of showing up at her house unannounced eager to play a board game, chat, forage for a snack, or just hang out “with Dan.”

“If you looked in our refrigerator, you’d think a 5-year-old lived here, it’s like Camp Johnson,” laughs this fairy godmother, who says she can be snoozing on the couch in the home she shares with her parents when a young visitor bounds in through the “usually open” front door wanting to be entertained.

“They’ll come out of nowhere, and then I call up their parents and ask, “Do you know where your kids are?”

One of those youngsters is Alyssa Vazquez, 11, who lives across the street. “She’s joined at my hip,” Johnson endearingly states.

The girl helps out at Johnson’s swim meets, and would like to coach her own swim team some day.

“Danielle is a good person for me to look up to because she’s really nice, she helps me with my homework and she takes me to a lot of places,” says the sixth grader who attends Good Shepherd School in Marine Park.

For Johnson even the vicious Christmas week blizzard — when many Brookynites were holed up at home — was child’s play. She braved the outdoors to see if anyone on her block needed anything from the store. She even helped to clear the unplowed streets.

“My dad and I must have shoveled the whole block,” she says.

Later, when the snow turned to ice and she learned that a friend’s elderly father had slipped in the street, she rushed over to help.

Johnson is also in a class by herself at her school. Last year, the Girls Catholic HS Athletic Association named her “Coach of the Year” — a proud moment for the vollie who has coached the swim team for nine years, held 18 swim-a-thons at her alma mater, St. Francis College, and raised thousands of dollars for St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, St. Mary’s Star of the Sea in Far Rockaway, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and others.

The licensed lifeguard has also raised money independently for the Foundation by participating in benefit winter swims with the Long Beach Polar Bears Club.

That’s not all: Each April, Johnson helps out with the annual fundraising card parties, using her spare time to solicit neighborhood businesses for donations, assemble gift baskets for the raffle and attend to other details.

“If you give Danielle a cause, she becomes passionate about it,” says Anita Bello, a kindergarten teacher who has worked on several school events with her.

A “cause” presented itself one day when a student arrived for class sobbing uncontrollably. Johnson took the girl aside, got her to open up and discovered that her aunt had been tragically killed in a random shooting. Her concern didn’t end there: Johnson even showed up at the wake.

“The look on the kid’s face was like, ’You’re here for me,’ “ she recalls.

Then, last October when the mother of a student died in childbirth, Johnson swiftly coordinated a fund-raiser with her swim team, raising $12,000. They gave half of the money to the grieving father for his children’s tuition costs, and the rest to the Garden of Dreams, a charity which works in partnership with Madison Square Garden to fulfill the wishes of children with challenges.

“When kids realize that they are helping others, that’s going to stick with them,” she explains.

It’s a lesson that Johnson — a volunteer at the ovarian cancer T.E.A.L. walk each September — teaches at every available opportunity. She recently mobilized her troops for a benefit to help a student participate in the Avon Breast Cancer Walk, which requires each walker to commit to raising at least $1,800 before they can even enroll.

“I get a natural high from doing things that put a smile on someone else’s face,” she says.

Clearly, for Danielle Johnson that feeling has become like a potent drug which refuses to loosen its grip — even when she’s out on the town on a Friday night.

BROOKLYN’S WOMEN OF DISTINCTION 2011
BROOKLYN PERINATAL NETWORK, INC.

CONGRATULATES

NGOZI MOSES
GAIL SMITH
&
LENA ALHUSSEINI

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FOR YOUR LONG TIME COMMITMENT AND UNWAVERING SERVICE TO OUR COMMUNITIES

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76 NEVINS STREET
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The Agape Tabernacle International Fellowship, Inc. of Brooklyn, New York would like to CONGRATULATE

Rev. Dr. Barbara Austin Lucas

our beloved Founder and Apostle, for receiving the honor of being recognized as a Brooklyn “Woman of Distinction”.

We salute you for your more than 30 years of faithful, committed and dedicated leadership to the spiritual development and empowerment of residents of Brooklyn. We thank God for your strength and courage personified in your godly example that inspires us all.
Lynn Kelly took power-schmoozing to new heights as president of the Coney Island Development Corporation when she sold international investor Valerio Ferrari on the “People’s Playground” by holding boardroom meetings in the sky — inside a “conference room” which rose 85 feet, featured heart-plunging drops, zippered around 180-degree hairpin turns and zoomed at 60 mph.

The sessions aboard the Cyclone Roller Coaster were a deal-maker for the president and CEO of Zamperla USA and Central Amusement International, which won a 10-year city contract in 2010 to operate theme parks at the former Astroland site. The pact rewarded the seaside town, which was rezoned in 2009 as part of a larger revitalization plan, with one of its best summer seasons in decades — and the promise of more to come this year.

“As we ascended the Cyclone, Lynn would point out all the different parts of the wonderful view from up there,” said Ferrari when reached in Vicenza, Italy, home of ride-maker Zamperla, which supplies amusements to Disney World and is using Coney Island as a laboratory for cutting-edge attractions, among them, the Soaring Eagle Coaster.

The big dipper whips up speeds of 40 mph in under two seconds, and is the first new roller coaster to grace Coney in 84 years, thanks in part to Kelly’s enthusiastic cheerleading.

“Lynn’s explanation for the entire process was very important to us in our decision,” added Ferrari.

Kelly’s savvy promotion of the city’s plan for a mixed-use neighborhood — featuring an amusement and entertainment district with a beachfront park that kept several of Coney’s prized pearls intact — left such a lasting impression on the new ride czar that he named one after her.

The flying carousel, called “Lynne’s Trapeze,” is embellished with iconic images of the area and remains a sweet tribute to the 37-year-old urban planning whiz from Park Slope, who departed for Staten Island last December to take over as president and CEO of a regional arts center and museum.

“I wouldn’t have left if Coney wasn’t in a good place — it was my baby,” says Kelly, who helped to de-wrinkle one of the most complex and contentious rezoning campaigns in New York history, spending much of her decade at the corporation building consensus, deflecting criticism and promoting Coney’s charms, oftentimes on the same boardwalk where Hollywood legend Cary Grant once clanked the planks as a humble stiltwalker.

The road to revive Coney was a roller coaster ride in itself, marked by bruised feelings, finger-pointing, fiery rallies, unceremonious evictions of long-term boardwalk businesses, and even a lawsuit that soared to the state’s highest court before being dismissed.

The turbulent times had their kooky moments, especially when the neighborhood’s miffed performance community took to the public stage.

“There was a ‘starving mermaid,’ a ‘preacher’ preaching about the future, and I regularly had a man who sang on his guitar to ‘save’ Coney Island — but that’s what made it fun and challenging,” says Kelly, who attended more than 300 meetings between 2005 and 2009, and wielded her sharp instinct judiciously to preserve Coney’s glory, dumping frayed fixtures such as “Shoot the Freak” and going to bat for oddball stalwarts, including Sideshow and other celebrated programs.

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“There are people who think that burlesque performers and glass walkers are frivolous, but I would argue that they’re a piece of American history,” contends the ex-city official, whose fans include a man who locked horns with her over Coney Island’s future.

“I gave Lynn a lot of tsuris, but even when I gave her a hard time, she always maintained a level of grace, and always had my respect,” says Dick Zigun, president of Coney Island USA, which runs the sideshow and other celebrated programs and spectacles, including the annual Mermaid Parade, where Kelly — a wannabe mythological sea urchin — loved to make an anti-bureaucratic splash in a green sequinned costume sewn by her mom.

Lynn Kelly’s fond memories of Coney Island travel back to her youth when her grandfather would take her for rides on the Cyclone, whose rumble he described as the “greatest sound in the universe.”

His last conversation with her before his death in 2009 reaffirmed her belief about the area’s intergenerational lure.

“She rounded up millions of capital dollars for the home of sword-swallowers, firebreathers and other unrivaled characters when it faced eviction.

“She rode the Coney Island development roller coaster

**BIO FILE**

**NEIGHBORHOOD:** Park Slope

**OCCUPATION:** President and CEO

**COMPANY:** Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden (formerly president of the Coney Island Development Corporation).

**CLAIM TO FAME:** “I helped rezone Coney Island to bring it back on track for a great future as one of the nation’s top amusement destinations.”

**FAVORITE BROOKLYN PLACE:** “The view from the top of the Cyclone before it descends.”

**WOMAN I ADMIRE:** “My mom, Barbara Bodnar, who has endless compassion for people and is incredibly open-minded.”

**MOTTO:** “You get more bees with honey than you do with vinegar.”

**FAMOUS CITY RESIDENTS:**

*Brooklyn’s Women of Distinction 2011*

![Photo by Steve Solomonson](image-url)
The Students and Faculty of
Midwood Catholic Academy

Congratulations
Elaine Guido
Maureen Moore
Bob, Kate & Bobby Golden

The Bayfort Benevolent
Associates, Inc.

Thanks for all that you do
for our community
We are very proud of you
Dr. Philippe Mercier, Chair
Shaida Etheart, Vice-Chair
Josy Alcindor, Treasurer
Marina Lane, Secretary
Jeff Lindor, Community Liaison
Elizabeth Flores, Program Asst

Elaine Guido
Congratulations
on this well deserved honor
Maureen Moore
Bob, Kate & Bobby Golden

The Board of Directors and Staff of
Urban Neighborhood Services, Inc.

Congratulates
Ms. Mathylde Frontus,
Founder and Executive Director
On Receiving This Well-Deserved Honor from
Courier Life/CNG Publications
She is indeed a Brooklyn Woman of Distinction !!!

The Students and Faculty of
Midwood Catholic Academy

Congratulations Danielle Johnson
on her
Woman of Distinction Award

The Board of Directors and Staff of
Urban Neighborhood Services, Inc.

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Elaine Guido

The Bayfort Benevolent
Associates, Inc.
Liza Kramer

She does it all — because it all needs to get done

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

What do scuba diving with manta rays in Micronesia, advocating for a home improvement store in Mill Basin and writing a dissertation on the bagel have in common? Canarsie free spirit Liza Kramer, of course.

The 34-year-old nonconformist has done all three — and more — becoming quite a whiz at mixing pleasure, business and education, and helping to improve life in her community by working with grass-roots groups and political institutions across the city while journeying to some of the world’s most remote areas as a professional scuba diver to swim with the fishes.

“Being a Brooklynite was part of what gave me the moxie to do it all,” says Kramer, who has worked as a deputy director for former Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum, a deputy chief of staff for former Assemblywoman Adele Cohen (D–Coney Island), and as assistant director of the American Jewish Committee’s New York Office, putting her combined experience to good use by promoting a greener, friendlier, wealthier Brooklyn in her spare time.

The Community Board 18 member, who is also on the Board of Trustees of ASA College, and the board of the Jewish Community Council of Canarsie, has advocated for Brooklynites at the grass-roots level: She supported the construction of a Lowe’s home improvement store near King’s Plaza last year while others on her board grumbled about the arrival of a big-box behemoth, which they felt would bring more traffic to the residential area.

“I’d rather see the money go back into Brooklyn,” comments Kramer.

Board Chairman Saul Needle is impressed by her independent streak.

“Liza spoke out eloquently in favor of what she felt was important to her community,” he shares.

Kramer has worked to unify Brooklyn through partnerships with diversity groups, including the We Are All Brooklyn Steering Committee, where she helps coordinate pro-immigration rallies and anti-hate crime events.

Then, there’s her drive for a self-sufficient borough.

Kramer has tooled around town in an energy-efficient van, holding information sessions and expos in parks and other venues — some of them in conjunction with the American Red Cross — to educate people on topics such as energy efficiency, and being ready in the event of a calamity.

“We would have a prize wheel, and give away things like emergency-preparedness kits,” remarks Kramer, who has turned residents onto pressing community issues.

One town hall meeting she helped arrange about the construction of KeySpan (now MCU) Park in Coney Island drew 500 people — including Mets owner Fred Wilpon.

“It was a turning point where the community embraced the economic boost it would bring,” she states.

Kramer’s powers of persuasion are plenty powerful.

She had Gotbaum to schlepp over to Brooklyn for meetings.

“Liza was an involved employee, who went out into the field a lot, and got me to go to the meetings,” recalls the ex-city official.

Kramer has periodically left that field to explore the depths of the ocean blue. She began scuba diving in college, gained her certification shortly thereafter, and started to back-pack around the world, diving with sharks in the Sinai Peninsula, Thailand, Australia, Egypt, the Caribbean and the western Pacific.

“I wanted to expand my horizons,” reveals the enterprising woman, who also designs fitness and dating-themed iPhone apps.

Her new venture offers yet another opportunity for adventure: She is the founder and CEO of Funky Fitness for Chunky Chicks.

She is still tweaking the organization, which will debut in June, and offer dance-based exercise classes, special events and fitness products for women who are, or have been, a plus size.

“I want to promote a philosophy of psycho-spiritual and physical transformation that emphasizes the importance of loving the body you’re in, now!” explains Kramer, who is continuing to explore wondrous arenas to add new meaning to her life and work.

Her reason is delightfully simple: “Coming from a place of service is the best place to find joy.”

BROOKLYN’S WOMEN OF DISTINCTION 2011
Dr. Barbara Austin Lucas

Serving God while serving the rest of us here

Dr. Barbara Austin Lucas can recall the precise moment that changed her life forever. It was 1971, and Lucas was a 19-year-old student, waiting at Kotoka International Airport in Ghana for a flight home to Brooklyn, when she says “a divine thing” spoke to her.

“It said, ‘You will be back,’” recounts the Canarsie resident, who was studying folklore and helping to build a school in the West African nation as part of her undergraduate studies.

At the time, of course, the teenager was unaware that one day she would indeed return as an educator, a missionary, an evangelist, an ordained minister and the founder of an international fellowship, leading mission tours and workshops throughout Africa and the Caribbean — her work lauded by such groups as the NAACP.

That initial trip to Ghana left an indelible impression on Lucas.

In her first week there, impoverished villagers feted her with a welcome ceremony and a banquet.

“It was very touching, they had the fire going, and the drums going, I fell in love with the country and the people,” says the clergywoman, who returned to Africa three years later — this time as one of the first participants of the African Methodist Episcopal Church’s Teachers-In-Partnership Program to help educate and minister to high school and university-level students in Liberia, a republic founded by freed American slaves.

One evening in the capital city of Monrovia, after finishing a rehearsal for a play she was directing for the university’s drama club, she visited a church where a minister approached her and told her something startling.

“She said God was calling me,” says Lucas, who hadn’t thought of becoming a woman of the cloth, even though she was already preaching the gospel to people in an unofficial capacity.

Back in Brooklyn, she responded to the call by becoming an ordained, bi-vocational pastor, establishing a church in Canarsie called Agape Tabernacle International Fellowship, and teaching religious education and urban ministry at, among other institutions, the Alliance Theological Seminary.

In 2008, the mother of three set a record by becoming the first woman to preach at the historic Bethany Baptist Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Much of her work has been focused on improving the lives of young people: She fostered national pride in young Liberians by introducing them to African authors they had never read before, and later opened up her Brooklyn home to some of them when they fled a political coup.

One of them was 16-year-old David Daniels, today a Methodist bishop in Liberia, who fondly remembered his “concerned and committed” former tutor when contacted for this story in Monrovia.

“She was a lively and interactive teacher, who talked and carried herself with distinction and dignity, and helped me to find my purpose,” says the clergyman.

On home soil, Lucas organized prayer vigils around schools — among them, Canarsie’s now-defunct South Shore HS — to guide disenfranchised youth. She established an after-school tutorial center and summer program at the Bridge Street African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant, and helped conceive the Bridge Street Preparatory School while increasing the church membership from 700 to more than 4,000 with her electrifying sermons.

Her faith-based group Women, Organizing, Mobilizing, and Building has enabled women to strive for self-sufficiency through workshops and initiatives, such as the Annual Manifest Destiny Conference Series, The W.O.M.B. Investment Club, The Women in Leadership Lecture Series, and The Destiny Fitness Walk.

“You teach a woman, you teach a nation,” announces Lucas, who co-led a health summit in March at the Desmond Tutu Center in Manhattan to start a dialogue about self and sexuality, and its impact on the rise of sexually-transmitted diseases in communities of color.

Yoreel Trumpet, a public health educator and an ordained minister from East Flatbush, has pounded the pavement alongside the pastor, participating in spiritual marches on the Brooklyn Bridge to pray for the city, and rallying against drug dens in under-served areas; one crack house on Hancock Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant was demolished, she says, because of Lucas’s intervention.

“The gifts in her, they just come forth,” shares Trumpet who credits the spiritual leader with encouraging her to complete her doctorate.

“You need that person to tell you that you’re going to make it, you need that voice when you’re ready to give up to tell you to hold on, that change does come,” she says.

Barbara Austin Lucas can attribute her own work to a similar “voice” she once heard in the airport of a far-off land, which not only changed her life, but that of countless other people around the world.
Louisa McGregor passed away shortly after this article was written, so we run it now as a tribute to this courageous hero.

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

“I am not the type of person to sit still or lay down to die,” says Louisa McGregor, a wife and mother from Marine Park who has been roundly tested by her own words after being diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2007 at the age of 41. After the initial shock wore off, the plucky patient turned into a warrior woman. She pored over related literature; discovered that doctors lacked the knowledge, understanding and tools to make an informed prognosis; and started an organization with her sister, Pamela Esposito-Amery, called “Tell Every Amazing Lady About Ovarian Cancer” — abbreviated to T.E.A.L. for the official ribbon color of ovarian cancer.

McGregor’s quest was to alert “all women everywhere” to the disease which killed an estimated 13,850 Americans in 2010, with 21,880 new reported cases in that year.

Her battle plan was simple enough: To raise money for the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund. Doing that in between her multiple surgeries, grueling chemotherapy treatments and short-lived remissions — and on days when she could barely get up, or was crippled by raging fevers — was another matter. The light bulb went off when McGregor discovered to her amazement that New York, the benefit walk capital of the world, didn’t have one for her type of cancer.

Invigorated, she and Esposito-Amery organized a non-competitive 5K jaunt at Prospect Park in September, 2009, for Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. They contacted “every family member and friend,” and posted brochures in stores and restaurants. On a tip, McGregor contacted Sharon Blynn, founder of Bald is Beautiful and host of a PBS documentary about ovarian cancer. Blynn connected McGregor with the husband of a cancer victim whose wish it had been to hold an outdoor fund-raiser.

“Our event helped him cope, and he became one of our sponsors,” states McGregor, who was too ill to participate in her own inaugural walk, which drew 1,000 people and raised $50,000.

The second T.E.A.L. walk, held last September, was attended by even more people, and McGregor, whose failing health once again prevented her from walking, smiled when she presented a check for $55,000 to executives from the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund.

“Louisa has made a tremendous impact not only on the issue of ovarian cancer, but on women throughout the tri-state area,” comments Audra Moran, the fund’s chief executive officer.

Supportive family and friends have rallied around, too, trying to ease the family’s anguish by forming food chains and chipping in for a cleaning lady. McGregor, who conducted the interview for this story on a day when she could barely talk, rang in the New Year from a hospital bed with a 108-degree fever while her husband, John, and their children, Ashleigh, 11, and Spencer, 17, kept vigil.

McGregor says that she is touched and moved by the kindness of strangers, who have boosted her fund-raising efforts. Some of them have given her celebrity memorabilia to auction off, including a guitar signed by rocker Jon Bon Jovi, a signed jersey from Jets’ quarterback Mark Sanchez and a football autographed by every player on the Gang Green. In March, state Sen. Marty Golden (R–Bay Ridge) selected her as an honoree for his annual Women’s History Month tribute, and she received a humanitarian award from Lions Clubs International, increasing her profile as an activist who is determined to put T.E.A.L. on the map, and have it become as synonymous with ovarian cancer as the Susan B. Komen Foundation is with breast cancer.

Those who know McGregor say that her unassailable will is also her sustaining force. “Her spirit didn’t quit,” discloses Donna Johnson, who participated in a food chain after learning about McGregor’s ordeal from a neighbor.

She marvels at the stricken woman’s ability to remain optimistic. “She was in so much pain when she came home from the hospital, but she was still able to smile and crack a joke with us.”

Louisa McGregor’s own battle for life has become a formidable test that she says she wouldn’t wish on anyone. “My whole thing is that I don’t want another family to go through what we’re going through,” she explains.

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CONGRATULATES THE 2011 BROOKLYN WOMEN OF DISTINCTION!

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These special words are reserved for these women who have devoted their time, energy, and hearts to improve the lives of others throughout Brooklyn.

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AT THE IN CONEY ISLAND

FOR INFORMATION CALL:
CAROL MAGLUILO
Office: (718) 260-8319 • cmagluilo@cnglocal.com
The abandoned lot across the street from Zenobia McNally’s Flatbush house was a derelict’s playground — and a thorn in her side.

The ardent greenie, whose own backyard was a wellspring of flowers and vegetables, envisioned a self-sustaining community garden at the blighted site on Lott Street between Beverly Road and Tilden Avenue, which had become a magnet for drug addicts, litterbugs and unscrupulous dog walkers.

“I thought, ‘What can we do to make this a viable space, and to make people learn about their food intake?’” says the eco-minded businesswoman, who was born into an agriculturally astute family in Panama, but who now lived in a neighborhood where fast food was often the diet staple.

“I come from the jungle, and you can’t take the jungle out of the girl!” roars McNally, who swung into action like Tarzan on a sugar-cane high.

She gained permission for the makeover from the land’s owner, secured a city grant and rallied her neighbors to help her clear the lot, refreshing it with mass plantings and renaming it Lott Gardens.

Within months, the monstrosity was landscaped with freshly pruned trees and bursting with the first shoots of impatiens, chrysanthemums, Chinese cabbage, Scotch Bonnet peppers and leafy callaloo — just the tip of McNally’s mighty floral and edible iceberg.

Three years later, Lott Gardens’ bounty is being shared by block dwellers, its rainwater-harvesting capabilities are some of the first eco-friendly boons for the area, and its budding gardeners are learning to grow their own vegetables while incorporating healthy foods into their lifestyles.

“My little space has meant so much to so many people, it’s amazing,” states McNally, 50, a finalist in the Brooklyn Community Foundation’s 2010 Do Gooder Awards.

Two people smitten by her work are Pauline and Alvin Gibbs, who live across from Lott Gardens and credit the terrific turf with perking up their quality of life.

“It was messy before, but now it looks good, and folk can’t fool around here anymore,” says Pauline, 68, who helped plant flowers and vegetables there last spring, and plans to do the same this year because she likes to make fresh salads with the locally-grown and pesticide-free produce.

“The tomatoes and string beans are mmm, mmm, mmm, deelicious!” she says with a hearty lip-smack.

Hubby Alvin, 80, adds that he, too, has been inspired to ply his green thumb at the spiffed-up space, alongside his wife, son, grandson and family friends.

“In Zenobia, we have someone who cares, that’s the bottom line,” he says, mentioning that McNally is also a community watchdog who polices the block to make sure that vagrants don’t gain a foothold, while holding several clean-ups a year to keep it neat, and rising with the birds on pick-up mornings to make sure sanitation workers collect all the garbage.

The activist’s reputation led to a run for the City Council, for which she was endorsed by the League of Humane Voters, and Lambda Independent Demo-
Celebrates Our Own Woman of Distinction

Wendy Z. Goldstein
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Aura Mejia
A tireless fighter for the less-fortunate

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO
Santa Romano was trying to cope with her 11-year-old son’s battle with brain cancer when the single parent was slapped with an eviction notice by her slumlord, who was looking to dump the low-income family from its rent-stabilized apartment in Sunset Park and cash in on gentrification.

Then she met Aura Mejia, a tenant advocate and community organizer with the Fifth Avenue Committee in Park Slope, who helped the distraught woman settle her case in court.

“I felt depressed and hopeless, now I feel better because I know that Aura will always support me,” says Romano.

Mejia’s golden touch, which has helped more than 30 tenants sidestep eviction in the first three months of this year alone, comes from a simple philosophy.

“Everybody has the right to a decent home without being harassed,” says the 37-year-old wife and mother who has resolved nearly 2,000 tenant-landlord disputes in the seven years she has been with the group, which serves Red Hook, Sunset Park, Gowanus and Park Slope.

Mejia’s clients, she explains, are mostly illegal immigrants who are fearful of their undocumented status; some don’t send their children to school, and others flee silently after being harassed by their landlords.

“They don’t know that they also have rights,” she says.

The advocate files complaints on their behalf with rent-regulating agencies, directs them to legal aid, accompanies them to Housing Court — at times, footing the bill herself for cab rides for the disabled — and then follows up on each case.

First, she tries to reason with the property owners who sometimes surprise her. She recently helped a disabled senior recover $500 in overpaid rent from a landlord who had overlooked the fact that his tenant was enrolled in the Disability Rent Increase Exemption Program. Thanks to Mejia’s job skills and quiet courtesy, he apologized and promptly wrote out a check.

“The woman really needed the money because her husband had been laid off, and he was collecting empty bottles to make ends meet,” said Mejia.

Tales of their hardships have only increased her desire to help undocumented people, who she believes are a contributing force in New York.

When she went to an apartment house in the South Slope to investigate the case of a single mom worried about being turned out on the street, Mejia found herself cornered by other tenants in the building with similar stories to share. She responded by forming a tenant association in the lobby, and eventually helped many of them straighten out their beaks.

“We met each week, and I told them that it was important to stay united,” she said.

The law, too, is on her side: Assemblyman Vito Lopez (D–Bushwick) co-sponsored an expansion of the 1982 Loft Law, extending rent stabilization protections across a wider area of the city.

It doesn’t hurt that Mejia, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Guatemala, can actually relate to her clients: Her 4-year-old daughter was born with a birthmark on her tongue, known as vascular mal-function, which has hampered the tot’s ability to swallow or eat, and disfigured her face. And Mejia’s father was an undocumented welder before he obtained his U.S. citizenship through an employer and sponsored her to join him.

She recalls spending her teen years in a moldy apartment in Midwood with an asthmatic mother who was constantly sick.

“Things would have been different if we had known our rights,” says the activist, who honed her trade on the lowest rung of the ladder — as a volunteer with the Fifth Avenue Committee, intrigued by the group’s commitment.

Today, Mejia’s expertise is helping a new generation of housing advocates. One of them is Lorenzo Van Ness, a volunteer at the organization, who says that he is amazed by her dedication.

“Aura is one of the most patient people I’ve ever met,” he said. “She’s always willing to help.”

He is not alone in his admiration. A couple of years ago, co-workers surprised Mejia with an office birthday party, and dozens of her clients showed up with a homemade Mexican feast for her.

One of them was Santa Romano, who says that she can find comfort in one thought even in her darkest moment: “Whenever I need anything, I know Aura is there for me.”

BIO FILE

NEIGHBORHOOD: Sheepshead Bay
OCCUPATION: Tenant advocate and community organizer
COMPANY: Fifth Avenue Committee
CLAIM TO FAME: “Helping people keep their homes.”
FAVORITE BROOKLYN PLACE: Sheepshead Bay
WOMAN I ADMIRE: “My mother, Aura, because she worked two jobs for us to be better.”
MOTTO: “There’s nothing that keeps its youth, so far as I know, but a tree and truth.” — Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Aura Mejia
A tireless fighter for the less-fortunate

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Madeline Wrzesc
Legal Assistant
A strong infrastructure of support and referral services is essential to the survival of our next generation, contends Ngozi Moses, who established an organization to ensure that happens. “I cannot be well if my environment is unhealthy, therefore, I have no choice but to work to improve it,” says the founding executive director of the Brooklyn Perinatal Network, a service organization birthed in 1988 to address high infant mortality rates, and to help mom and baby in under-served communities stay alive and healthy.

Moses and her staff help at-risk residents — including single mothers ravaged by poverty and substance abuse — access vital information, services and health benefits by networking with medical providers, community groups, and city, state and federal agencies, to provide a solid stepping stone toward a better future.

“We have seen a significant reduction in infant death, and improved maternal and child health status,” remarks Moses, whose group serves about 8,000 clients a year, and who arrived on the scene to confront a dizzying statistic — there were 30 deaths for every 1,000 live births in challenged areas such as Fort Greene and Bedford-Stuyvesant.

There is still more work to be done, she adds.

She’s right — infant mortality rates among African American and Puerto Rican New Yorkers remain disproportionately high, with 9.8 and 6.3 deaths, respectively, for every 1,000 live births, compared to 3.9 among Caucasians and 3.1 in Asian/Pacific communities.

The rates are even worse in some areas of Central Brooklyn.

“It is no coincidence that these same neighborhoods are also some of the poorest in the city,” states Moses, who hails from Guyana where she trained as a pharmacist, growing up in a socially aware family that shared its limited resources with neighbors.

Later, she became an avid participant in the Afro-Guyanese cultural-political scene in the South American nation.

Moses continued her community involvement after emigrating to America, joining parent associations at her children’s schools, and helping to develop enterprising support programs in the neighborhood, including ones which “adopted” immigrants and refugees, and supplemented local food pantries.

She has been known to take the gloves off when necessary.

In 2007, Moses and a group of advocates rallied to keep four health clinics open, which the coalition claimed served tens of thousands of people living in neighborhoods with high rates of illness and infant mortality — employing old-fashioned political arm-twisting and YouTube videos to aid its cause.

“We must keep the pressure on,” Moses said at the time.

The centers closed, but the coalition managed to secure $5 million in state funding for a new health center in Brownsville.

Her standing power has amazed one city official, who co-founded the Caribbean Women’s Health Association with her in the mid-1980s.

“Ngozi’s commitment and dedication has not wavered,” states Deputy Borough President Yvonne Graham, adding that Moses’s work has helped expectant and new moms embrace new responsibilities.

“She has helped to make them aware of the need for early and continuous prenatal care,” she comments.

Moses, 62, who is on the Coordinating Committee of New York’s Commission on the Public Health System, has built social capital, and tilled the soil in a way that has made it easier for medical providers to introduce unprecedented prenatal programs in their institutions.

She helped bring the silent problem of depression among pregnant and postpartum women to the forefront, assisting Kings County Hospital and Woodhull Medical centers to develop detection and treatment services.

Moses’ work has helped the country, according to Kenton Kirby, a former Healthy Start community advocate.

“Ngozi exceeded expectations by reducing the high incidence of infant mortality by half, and as a result ensured continued federal funding across the nation,” he says.

Brooklyn’s under-served communities have discovered a friend and advocate in Ngozi Moses, whose tireless work on their behalf has ensured that the next generation has a healthy start in life.
Judith Stern Orlando
Without her, Coney Island would be no fun at all

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

Coney Island has a future as bright as the lights on its Wonder Wheel, with more residential, business and recreational opportunities on the way, according to Judith Stern Orlando, executive director of the Astella Development Corporation.

“It’s a safe bet that her group will pave the way, as it has done for the past 36 years, by providing affordable housing, commercial revitalization and economic development along a mile-and-a-half stretch of land, sandwiched between W. 37th St. and Stillwell Avenue just west of the “People’s Playground.”

Many of those improvement projects have happened on Orlando’s watch, including the construction of nearly 1,000 single-family homes, eight mixed-use buildings and a 10-unit rental, all of which have helped raise Coney’s profile as more than just a place to play skeeball.

“I enjoy seeing a community develop,” says the 62-year-old urban soldier, who grew up in the Sheepshead Bay-Nostrand Houses, and regularly visited Coney Island as a kid.

Orlando was already adept at navigating the real estate maze by the time she arrived at Astella in 1988, having cemented alliances with city, state and federal agencies as former director of commercial revitalization at the Flatbush Development Corporation.

“I was familiar with the community, and familiar with housing issues,” states the administrator, who faced a tough job.

Coney Island attracted few visitors at the time. Luna and Steeplechase parks were long gone, and a controversial urban-renewal plan in the surrounding neighborhood had replaced middle-class homes with low-income housing projects, contributing to a surge in crime. Failed city plans for new amusement projects only left the area littered with vacant lots and little hope.

“We decided to concentrate on home ownership to give people the opportunity to invest in the community, and in themselves,” explains Orlando, who held free real-estate workshops for eligible prospective buyers, and invited industry experts along to demystify the jargon.

“One time, Judy had 13 different agencies come down for a panel discussion about things we weren’t even aware of, like energy efficiency and rebates,” says Pamela Pettyjohn, a retired transit worker who bought her three-story townhouse 11 years ago with Astella’s help.

“Some developers build houses, sell them and walk away, but Judy stays on top of it to make sure that property values continue to go up,” she says.

Orlando’s canny workshops helped keep Astella’s nose clean during the national subprime mortgage meltdown in the late-2000s.

“We have very, very, very few foreclosures because we are conscious of predatory lending, and very strict about people’s eligibility,” stresses Orlando, who isn’t shy about informing unqualified applicants, “Right now, it’s not your time.”

Coney’s merchants, too, have benefited from her Midas touch: In 1996, Astella broke ground on an empty lot at W. 17th St. and Mermaid Avenue, converting it into a convenience store, a primary health care facility and a pharmacy.

In the late 1990s, and in the following decade, Orlando instituted matching grants to improve facades along Mermaid Avenue, installing graffiti-proof mesh gates, among other new features, along the neighborhood’s main commercial corridor. She has also brought in a seasonal farmer’s market, and arranged for plays and operas to be performed on the boardwalk. Her annual sand-sculpting contests continue to draw art-smart visitors from around the world: Pettyjohn says she met tourists from Japan and Germany last year, who made a special transcontinental trip to be a part of the spectacle.

“Judy has been instrumental in making Coney Island a better place,” says Frank Giordano, a founding father of Astella, who was on the board which selected Orlando for her current post 23 years ago.

“I felt that she would be the person who would do a good job for us, and I was right!”

Orlando’s reach has also transcended generations.

A young Russian boy, who came to one of her workshops years earlier to act as a translator for his parents, showed up at her office recently to seek help with buying a house, she comments.

“He’s a police officer now!” she says, proudly.

Judith Stern Orlando’s work and reputation as a developer, educator, community champion and visionary have secured her a firm place in the heart of the “People’s Playground,” where the future looks rosier indeed — thanks in large part to her.
T

here was an unlikely eulogist at the funeral when Margot Bishop's husband passed away — the top customer executive from the family's health maintenance organization.

"It really meant a lot to her that I went," says Ditmas Park resident Gail Smith, the chief customer officer at MetroPlus Health Plan, which provides low or no-cost health insurance to eligible people living in Brooklyn, Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens.

The family's despair was made easier because Smith was ready to provide a helping hand and cut through the red tape, whenever necessary, says Bishop.

"Every time I had a situation that I couldn't handle, I would get in touch with Gail, and she straightened it out."

Smith, a former director of Managed Care at Kings County Hospital Center, has ensured that distressed New Yorkers remain healthy — and have access to support services — since 1997 when she arrived at MetroPlus as a senior associate director.

She quickly moved up to the next rung as associate executive director within three months, and then onto deputy executive director before assuming her current post where she oversees a staff of more than 250, networking with hospitals, medical providers and community-based organizations to provide under-served, challenged and low-income people with access to quality health care.

Some of her more than 400,000 customers are in dire straits, living transitory lives without employment or adequate housing, or struggling with substance abuse, mental health or language and literacy problems, explains Smith, whose organization — located in the Wall Street area — is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, offering assistance in 13 languages, including Spanish, Russian, Urdu, Haitian Creole and Bengali.

"Our job is to get to these folk, and to reach out to them in the languages they speak," she states.

Smith is quick to take action on behalf of clients who forget to recertify their insurance.

One woman, who let her's lapse, discovered the organization's human element.

"We sent a marketing representative to her home with the forms," shares Smith, who has made medical appointments for her customers, helped them fill out applications, including ones for their children's summer camps, assisted them with prescription refills ("They may have dropped their medication down the toilet — it happens"), or simply offered them a sympathetic ear when life seemed overwhelming.

Smith is no couch potato after putting in 12 and more hours a day on the job.

She is on the executive board at Community Board 14, and the co-chair of the Education, Libraries and Cultural Affairs Committee, in addition to sitting on the boards of the Brooklyn Perinatal Network, the Perkins Local Advisory Board at Kingsborough Community College, and Redemption, a community-based organization to help disadvantaged and underserved youth. She is also a member of the Medicaid Managed Care Advisory Review Panel.

Smith has helped children fit in with their peers, too: She helped to institute a uniform policy at PS 139, where her daughter was a student.

"That way the kids, who couldn't afford expensive clothes and sneakers, didn't feel left out," she explains.
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Anne Swern has a staggering statistic to share: serious crime in Brooklyn — murder, rape, robbery, burglary, assault, grand larceny, vehicular theft and arson — is down 80 percent since 1990.

Swern should know — she has been putting hard-boiled crooks behind bars, and rehabilitating non-violent ones, for 30 years as the top deputy to District Attorney Charles Hynes with a staff of more than 1,000 attorneys and clerks.

“I want the people of Brooklyn to feel proud of their criminal justice system because it outshines many others in the country,” announces the award-winning first assistant district attorney, a Brooklyn Law School graduate and adjunct professor from Brooklyn Heights, who is quick to point out our judicial virtues.

We boast New York’s largest drug court, and the state’s first mental health court, plus our legislative brains are “constantly” picked by national public think-tanks, such as the Vera Institute of Justice, says Swern who helps to process upwards of 100,000 cases a year.

She has handled thousands of them, personally, launching her court career by defending an 8-year-old hit-and-run victim, back in the day.

Last November, Swern successfully prosecuted one of the “teardrop tattoo” robbers, who received 25 years for his part in the brazen, daylight crime sprees which terrorized Red Hook bars in the summer and fall of 2007. The case was a cliff-hanger with all the drama of a real-life “Law and Order” episode, complete with wanted posters in area establishments and bartenders brainstorming contingency plans for depositing cash, as fear swept the neighborhood — particularly when a young female bartender was robbed at gunpoint, her arms, legs and mouth bound with duct tape.

“Anne stands out in every way as a prosecutor and a problem-solver,” says Derek Champagne, district attorney of Franklin County, N.Y. and president of the District Attorneys Association of New York State, which hailed Swern with its prestigious Robert M. Morgenthau Award last year.

Champagne looked to the crime-fighter to implement an alternative sentencing initiative in his own county, modeling it after Brooklyn’s nationally acclaimed Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison Program, the first such prosecution-run program in the nation — overseen by Swern.

“A lot of us were sceptical, but Anne helped educate us on the benefits and the pluses, and now we have a number of people who have gotten their lives together and are productive members of society,” he says.

Swern, 55, has been honored by New York’s other prime legal eagles for her public service, which includes overseeing three substance-abuse treatment courts, serving on the New York State Commission on Drugs and the Courts, helping to install a historic program to divert veterans from prison, and creating partnerships with the City University of New York to steer young felons towards a better future.

She was given the Justice Leadership Award in 2009 by Family Justice, the New York City Bar Association presented her the Thomas E. Dewey Medal in 2006, and she was named the Kings County Criminal Bar Association’s first Prosecutor of the Year in 2000. In addition, Swern received the 1999 Humanitarian of the Year Award by the Education and Assistance Corporation.

The crimebuster continues to blaze the judicial trail, armed to the hilt with more “firsts.”

The Red Hook Community Justice Center, which she also supervises, is the nation’s first multi-jurisdictional community facility, operating Civil, Family and Criminal courts out of a refurbished former Catholic school. One of its model projects is the youth court, which trains teenagers to serve as jurors, judges and attorneys in real-life, low-level cases.

Rehabilitation of non-violent offenders is the “holistic” wave of the future because there are as many different ways to solve crimes as there are criminals, according to Swern.

“You can’t prison-build your way to public safety, and it’s our responsibility to explore all paths while keeping the public safe,” she asserts.

Jesus Merced, a 17-year-old reformed wall-scraper from East New York, says he received a new lease on life after his eye-popping murals were showcased to rave reviews in the same courthouse where he was tried.

“It knocked a clear image into my head, and it showed me that I can make a living off my talent, and that I shouldn’t waste it on nonsense,” says the teen, who now mentors young law-breakers at the district attorney’s office each week, and whose works are being commissioned by dazzled friends and neighbors for a pretty penny — thanks in no small measure to the public service of Anne Swern, who is doing her fightin’ best to turn crime statistics into success stories.
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Madonna probably wasn’t breast-fed,” says Paula Utilla who can tell from the pop star’s gap-toothed smile that she likely suffered from “tongue tie,” an operable birth defect which could have hampered her ability to nurse.

Utilla, a 35-year-old mom of two, has become something of a breast-feeding expert around town since becoming a “leader” with La Leche League International, a research-backed group acclimating new mothers to an age-old practice which, according to the Bergen Beach resident, is still in the diaper stages in the United States.

She received sneers from passers by when she legally breast-fed her baby in public during a trip to Six Flags Great Adventure, and she was rebuffed by some pediatricians when she wanted to post signs up about her group in their offices.

Rejection only fueled her goal to raise awareness about the benefits of nursing which she says can thwart diabetes, osteoporosis and even cancer: A study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology by Yale University backs up Utilla. Researchers there discovered that women who breast-fed for two or more years reduced their risk of breast cancer by 50 percent.

Still, her post-natal crusade has been a bumpy ride: After the Canadian expat gave birth to her son at a Brooklyn hospital, nurses there discouraged her attempts to nurse him, wresting away her newborn after delivery and feeding him formula for his first meal — despite her protests.

“It made me feel like nothing,” says Utilla, who wanted to breast-feed because she learned that it helped dispel postpartum depression, a condition which had landed her own mother in the hospital.

Her dismay became an engine for change after she located a league chapter in Marine Park. Within a few years she became a certified leader, running a support group from her own home, and addressing topics such as nipple pain and proper baby positioning — using a fake baby and breast as props.

“Putting those two guys together is the answer to most infant feeding problems,” says Utilla, who traded her career as a nurse to become a licensed lactation educator with the New York Lactation Consultant Association, and began her own lactation consulting business while teaching free breast-feeding classes at the Brooklyn Birthing Center in Marine Park.

She reached out to expectant families by holding complimentary breastfeeding seminars in the lobby of Babies “R” Us, and by helping to organize free family-day fund-raisers to spread the word that “breast is best”: Breast-feeding stimulates a mom’s milk production, but the lack of nursing information — partly attributable to modern culture and the outsized messaging ability of the formula industry — dissuades new moms from bonding with their babies the old-fashioned way, says Utilla.

“Paula’s very knowledgeable and passionate about her work, she’s put a lot of babies to the breast,” states Natalya Yelin, a supervisor at the Women, Infants and Children Program-Maimonides Medical Center in Borough Park, where Utilla counsels low-income moms.

In between, she fields calls from frantic new parents, allaying their fears by sometimes traveling to their homes or accompanying them to the doctor’s office.

Michelle Lambrakis was nervous about her baby’s upcoming tongue tie surgery when she turned to Utilla for help and support.

“She came with me to the specialist when I had no one else to go with me,” says the Homecrest mom.

The labor of love has become an eloquent mouthpiece for helpless infants.

“I love the fact that I can speak for babies when they can’t speak for themselves,” says Utilla, who probably wouldn’t have been too tongue-tied to give Madonna’s mom a few tips on breast-feeding — a topic as natural to her as mother’s milk.
Afer Nancy Venturine’s kid brother, Peter, was killed by a bat-wielding thug in 1989, she immortalized the friendly 15-year-old by creating a youth center in Canarsie for his heartbroken pals called Pete’s Place.

“He was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” discloses Venturine, 50, co-owner of the Pearl Room restaurant in Bay Ridge.

She decided that the best way to cope with her own emotions was to provide other teens with a safe place to meet.

The ensuing trial only compounded the shattered family’s bereavement because it was eclipsed by the racially tense and high-profile Yusuf Hawkins murder in Bensonhurst which occurred that same year. The slap on the wrist dealt to Peter’s killer — he was out of jail in six months — was yet another crushing blow.

Lesser mortals might have buckled under the ordeal, but Venturine, a self-professed deeply spiritual person, looked upon its aftermath as “a blessing,” a term she uses liberally to describe her life journey which has unearthed some mind-boggling opportunities along the way.

When she found herself a single parent around the time of Peter’s death, she became a general contractor, a trade that then offered few opportunities for women. But this daughter of a plumber discovered that her knack for unclogging sinks and soldering pipes also became the nuts and bolts for her latest venture — running her own construction company. She became one of New York’s first approved female contractors, and later a developer, successfully bidding on dozens of state and city contracts in Brooklyn, Manhattan, The Bronx and Yonkers.

In her 20 years in the business, Venturine undertook 30 construction projects, transforming dilapidated buildings and former drug dens into affordable housing units. Many of them are still there, including an apartment house in Bedford-Stuyvesant at Two Macon St. between Halsey and Fulton streets; another one at 1090 East New York Ave. between E. 95th and E. 96th streets, in Brownsville; and an occupied apartment building which Venturine refinshed in Prospect Heights at 285 St. Johns Pl. between Plaza Street East and Underhill Avenue.

“It was a good feeling to be able to do something positive,” she says. Another chance presented itself shortly before she opened The Pearl Room in 2005 with her son, Anthony Rinaldi. Venturine’s pastor invited her to attend a retreat at the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility, a medium security prison in Staten Island. She went with her late mother, Marie, and a friend — hesitant at first.

“We didn’t know what to expect walking into a men’s prison,” she recalls. The visit was so successful that soon Venturine was juggling duties at her new restaurant — while volunteering to teach Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes at St. Jude School in Canarsie — with biweekly visits to the prison, where she read the Bible with inmates, listened to their problems and tuned them to gospel jam sessions.

One of those prisoners was a convicted killer from Williamsburg named Joseph Rudd, who was nearing the end of his 25-year sentence when he attended one of Venturine’s prayer meetings where he sought and found comfort.

“Nancy took the place of family and brought me closer to God,” says Rudd, 52. Venturine’s kindness left such an indelible impression on the ex-con that he helped her minister to prisoners at the Manhattan House of Detention.

These days, Rudd is a regular patron at The Pearl Room (“the bacon-wrapped grilled chicken with candied yams is outta this world”), and credits his salvation to the “humble woman who does a great job at touching a lot of hearts” — sometimes by raising tens of thousands of dollars for charity.

In 2007, someone alerted Venturine—who had raised money for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation — to the Wounded Warrior Project, a program which helped gravelly-wounded soldiers assimilate back into society. When a veteran who had served in Iraq showed up at The Pearl Room with his wife and young son, Venturine says she was shocked to see his scalded face and missing extremities — the grim fruits of a bomb explosion.

Soon after, she held the first of several fund-raisers for the organization at her restaurant, donating 100 percent of the proceeds to the group, and raising tens of thousands of dollars for disabled American war heroes by holding events such as silent auctions, emceed by “Sopranos” star Tony Sirico.

Her selflessness and humility continue to amaze her friends.

“She does so much, yet you don’t even know that she’s doing it,” says Jeanne Eisenhardt, whose husband once owned and operated an ale house near The Pearl Room.

Nancy Venturine has her own take on the matter.

“I’ve been blessed,” she says, simply.
A year ago, Robert Brown was a recovering alcoholic from Flatbush, struggling with his sobriety in a seedy transitional home he shared with 23 other desperate men in the impoverished Ocean Hill/Brownsville section, scraping by on $24 a month in food stamps, and entangled in a deadly Catch-22.

“It was basically an illegal boarding house where everybody was getting high, including the manager,” says the 55-year-old former bus driver, who had severed ties with his family and couldn’t bear the thought of returning to the bottle.

Then, he learned about Neighbors Together, a help organization in the area, which served as a triage agency for people in emergency situations.

Brown, who had seen enough buck-passing bureaucrats in his time, went reluctantly at first, keeping to himself and eating a “delicious” meal in the soup kitchen, graciously named the “Community Café.”

He was impressed by what he saw.

“Nobody looked down on us for being down on our luck, or turned us away because we stunk a bit,” discloses the man, who became intrigued by the astounding work being done on behalf of one of the nation’s poorest communities in a small, bustling office, whose staff and programs were overseen by a 31-year-old Ivy Leaguer named Rachel Waltz.

The even-keeled director was the product of an upper-middle-class family from Delaware, and the polar opposite of her destitute clients, many of whom suffered from mental health and substance abuse problems, or couldn’t adjust to life after prison.

Brown turned to the social worker for help, touched by her kindly manner and deft skills.

“Rachel did everything with love in her heart and a smile on her face,” he comments.

Within months, Waltz helped Brown obtain his full entitlement of food stamps, plus found him secure new lodgings in an assisted living facility in the Bronx while helping him to sort through his inner demons with free therapy sessions that were more productive, he says, than any he had known before.

“Rachel gave me hope because she really cared that I got out of the muck and mire,” adds Brown, for whom finding a supportive group of people and a clean place to live was “like every holiday rolled into one.”

She is the lucky one, contends Waltz, who operates four on-site clinics to help individuals with legal and mental health issues, filing paperwork for them, providing them with information and referrals to other vital social services, and holding their hand through tempestuous times.

“I walk away feeling really inspired by the courage and strength these folks have,” she says.

“They may be severely depressed, but they keep waking up, fighting against the system and improving their lives.”

Waltz’s work extends far beyond assisting people with their immediate needs.

“My role is helping them uncover their own sense of competency and strength, and propelling them to use that and go out into the world,” she explains.

Elliott Carter, 49, was a former homeless client from East New York, plagued by addiction and shaky mental health, who became an agent for change after meeting Waltz.

He began talking to young people in his neighborhood about the need to help others, and started to volunteer in the Community Café.

“I didn’t have much to give, but I did have time, so I did anything I could to help out the organization,” says Carter, adding that he appreciates Waltz’s support.

“One time, I was having problems with people in a recovery facility I was at, and when I told Rachel, she physically went with me to talk to them and tried to help sort it out,” he shares.

The indomitable spirit of people, who have little else left, has impelled Waltz to continue her work in a neighborhood where many others wouldn’t dare to walk.

“I was born with a lot of privilege, but I always had a strong commitment to ideas of quality and fairness,” she states.

Her philosophy has been life-changing for thousands of people, including Robert Brown, who says that he is repaying the human rights activist in the only way he can right now — by nominating her for this award.

“If I had a million dollars, I’d give it to Rachel, but she would probably give it away to her clients,” he laughs.

A social worker who makes a difference every day

Rachel Waltz

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Janie Whitney the heart, soul and strength of East New York

By Shavana Abruzzo

Janie Whitney received the unbearable news in the spring of 1989. Trey, her handsome, strapping 18-year-old son — a full-scholarship student at New Hampshire’s Brewster Academy, and one of the top-rated high school basketball players in the country — had been killed in a boating accident just days before his graduation.

“It’s still something that’s hard to digest,” shares Whitney, founder and C.E.O. of the Bethlehem Baptist Academy, a school in East New York, serving students in nursery through eighth grade, which Trey attended.

It was later relocated and re-named the Trey Whitfield School in memory of the popular 6-foot-8-inch, 240-pound power-forward, who led his team to the New England State Championship, and was bound for the University of Richmond at the time of his death.

“Trey was the type of child who would give the shirt off his back to anybody,” says Whitney, a former financial analyst and founder of a now-defunct day care center and after-school program in Bushwick, who created Bethlehem Baptist Academy in 1983 to bring quality education to her under-served neighborhood.

She even persuaded her church to buy a vacant high school annex, and used its modular classrooms to rear a brand new generation of bright graduates — using tuition, and donations from foundations, corporations and individual donors, to fund her new school.

Many of Whitney’s students have gone on to attend Penn State University, Vassar College and other heralded scholastic institutions.

A key to the school’s success has been her push to involve parents.

“We call our school a miracle in Brooklyn, and we developed some beautiful children who went on to become very successful,” says the woman, who also co-founded the Trey Whitfield Foundation with her son’s father, Argle Whitfield, to provide gifted youngsters in need with support and scholarships.

The couple has turned the death of its own child into a better life for the children of others.

Kari Gibbs, a former troubled teen embroiled in a domestic violence situation at home with her mother’s live-in boyfriend, found a guardian angel in Whitney.

“Ms. Whitney had a whole lot to do with who I am today,” says Gibbs, who went on to become a certified public accountant, and an attorney with her own law firm in Georgia.

She says she caught the educator’s attention one day when she came to class visibly distressed and ill-prepared for an important test.

“Ms. Whitney asked me what happened, and the next thing you know, she made a call on my behalf, and got me out of there.”

Gibbs went on to deliver the salutatory address a few years later when she graduated from Brewster Academy — a school which continues to ensure that Trey Whitfield is not forgotten.

Annual memorial lectures there still honor the friendly student, who worked in summer camps, lobbied his municipal government to institute a Dr. Martin Luther King day in New Hampshire (it has one now), and was known to gravitate toward the underdog.

He once came to the rescue of a young handicapped girl at Brewster, who was being scorned by her school mates during a formal event.

“Trey went over to her and asked her to dance, and everybody respected her after that,” reveals Whitney, whose school choir regularly performs at Trey’s tributes at his alma mater, whose website references how the devastated parents coped with their loss.

“They wanted nothing more than to make sure Trey’s friends and the community he loved so much were cared for,” reads an excerpt.

Derek McNeil, who was in the year below Trey at Bethlehem Baptist Academy, remembers Whitney fondly.

The investment banker, who has offices in five states, thinks of her as his second mom.

“I came from a single-parent home, and to put it simply, there would be no Derek McNeil without Janie Whitney,” he contends.

It was Trey Whitfield’s desire to change the lot of his challenged neighborhood, often remarking to his mother that when he grew up and became “somebody big,” he would return and “build things for the children to have.”

Janie Whitney has taken her son’s castle in the air to heart, and made it a dream come true for East New York’s underprivileged youngsters.

Bio File

Neighborhood: East New York
Occupation: Founder and CEO
Company: Trey Whitfield School (co-founder of the Trey Whitfield Foundation)
Claim to Fame: “Providing scholarships, helping children to further their education, cultivating young minds into mover-shakers of tomorrow, and continuing the memory of my son, Trey.”
Favorite place: Trey Whitfield School
Motto: “If I can help somebody as I pass along the way, my living will not be in vain.”

Brooklyn’s Women of Distinction 2011

Photo by Stefano Giovannini

Photo by Shavana Abruzzo
Thank you to our selection committee

Nicole Robinson-Etienne
Wildlife Conservation Society
A Brooklynnite born and bred, Robinson-Etienne graduated from Sheepshead Bay HS before picking up a political science BA from Fordham University and a law degree from Northeastern.

Now at the Wildlife Conservation Society’s beloved Coney Island aquarium, Robinson-Etienne does outreach to the community and local government as the center’s assistant director of city and state affairs.

Kate Fitzgerald
Wildlife Conservation Society
The multi-dimensional Fitzgerald has enjoyed a diverse career thus far due to her artistic talents and willingness to serve the public. Fitzgerald has acted, produced, directed, and written in various entertainment media.

Professionally, she has also worked for various human- and kids-rights groups, including the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Stockings with Care, and Rosie O’Donnell’s For All Kids Foundation — all while serving as a community affairs manager at the Aquarium.

Elizabeth Toledo
Dodge YMCA
Toledo’s position as executive director of the Dodge YMCA is just her latest job in a career chock full of experiences with children and youth. Before her current post in Downtown Brooklyn, Toledo was the executive director of the Bronx YMCA, and a child care consultant for Dignity of Children.

Rachel Amar
Waste Management of New York
Inspired by Al Gore’s vision of an environmentally healthy country, Amar has become well known for her efforts as a community advocate on environmental and public health issues in New York and across the country. Previously, Amar worked for the Prospect Park Alliance and the Department of Education before becoming Community and Government Relations Manager for Waste Management of New York, one of the city’s foremost sanitation companies.

Renee Victoria McClure
National Grid
A native New Yorker, McClure has used her strong managerial, people, and technological skills to help many organizations and associations initiate and promote their goals throughout her career. A sought-after speaker, panelist, host and trainer for professional conferences and workshops, McClure currently works for National Grid in community investment, helping various departments within the company meet their initiatives and solutions. McClure has also garnered numerous awards including the US Black/Hispanic Engineer Information Technology Magazines Women of Color Award which she received in 2001.

Our in-house judges were (from left) Jeanne Eisenhardt, Carol Magluilo, Stephanie Stellaccio, Celia Weintrob and Jennifer Stern.
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Thank you for your leadership and for your efforts.