

On These Sidewalks of New York, the Sun Is Shining Again By Patrick Breslin
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Everybody's heard about the bad-news Bronx, but few realize there has been an amazing turnaround. Welcome to the good-news Bronx.

My family left the South Bronx in 1960. It wasn't called "white flight" then, but we were fleeing. Our neighborhood, once blue-collar Irish, German, Italian and Jewish, had become principally Puerto Rican and poor. Due largely to the influx of drugs, the rates of crime and violence were rising. One friend's family left a couple of years before we did, after a flaming mattress thrown off a tenement roof landed a few feet behind them as they stood on the sidewalk. Another friend's family stayed a while longer, but they were "moved" by burglars who cleaned out their apartment three times before they finally decided to leave under their own power.

By the 1970s it was High Noon on the South Bronx streets, with drug dealers shooting at one another in broad daylight. As the exodus, now largely Puerto Rican and African-American, continued, the infrastructure started to come apart. Landlords, too, began to leave, many of them torching their buildings for the insurance money as a parting gesture. The banks and insurance companies left. More and more buildings burned, and then wrecking balls and bulldozers knocked down the hollow hulks. President Jimmy Carter came in 1977 and stood on the rubble at Charlotte Street and said something should be done. Then he left. Three years later, candidate Ronald Reagan came and stood on the same rubble. He left too.

The South Bronx was the place almost everyone left. By 1980 it had become ground zero of the most devastated urban area in the United States. That is the perception many people still have of it today. Few know how it got to be that way; even fewer realize there's been an amazing turnaround.

This is a story about the rebirth of a neighborhood--much of it happening within ten blocks of where I grew up--and about the people who didn't leave, who stayed and struggled. Against all odds, they are making the South Bronx once more a place where immigrants can get a grip on the American dream. Now, because of their efforts, government agencies and banks and insurance companies are coming back. Thousands of new housing units have risen from the rubble. Libraries bustle with students. Private foundations are pouring money into development plans designed by local people. A vibrant new community is emerging from the ruins of four decades of wracking social changes, misguided urban policies and the scourge of drugs.

New York City's only mainland borough (the other four are all on islands), the Bronx is separated from Upper Manhattan by the Harlem River. In the 19th century wealthy New York families maintained rural retreats there. A Bronx ironworks built the dome for the U.S. Capitol. The Bronx Zoo sheltered survivors of the buffalo herds then being slaughtered out West.

In the 1920s block after block of six-story brick apartment houses were being laid out in the Bronx, linked to Manhattan by the new elevated electric-train lines. My parents arrived separately from Ireland, found work, married and settled down in a five-room apartment. Outside the fourth-floor windows, the rapid-transit cars screeched around a curve and into the Simpson

Street station. The noise filled our days, so much so that when we got a chance to spend several weeks on an isolated farm in upstate New York in the early 1950s, my mother couldn't sleep for the silence.

Gritty and bustling, the Bronx was a borough of safe, stable neighborhoods in those days. The prevailing ethic was the immigrants' belief that their hard work would make a better life for their children. For a time after World War II that expectation was borne out as the Bronx enjoyed something approaching a golden age. Those were the years the Bronx-based New York Yankees dominated the World Series, and Bronx political leaders helped put John F. Kennedy into the White House. Yet just when the borough seemed at the pinnacle of success, the waves of change that would overwhelm it were already starting to crest.

Cities are where most of society's problems go to happen. After midcentury, New York, like many of the nation's metropolises, had to face up to a shrinking tax base, a devouring automobile culture, a breakdown in family structure, racial tension, crime and drugs. In the Bronx, perhaps the most important change was economic. The borough was built on access to high-wage jobs in Manhattan, but after the war, industries in search of cheaper workers started to leave. When thousands of job-seekers from the rural South and the Caribbean arrived in the 1950s and '60s, the jobs were going the other way.

Partly as a result, the political machinery started to break down. The old Democratic Party that had extended a helping hand to previous waves of newcomers failed to provide the same welcome now. The Bronx was a borough of renters, and the rent-control measures adopted during World War II seemed politically impossible to end when the war did. Ceilings on rent enabled many landlords to justify the deterioration in services and maintenance on their buildings. They started splitting apartments into smaller units. When my parents were paying \$45 a month for five rooms, I knew other families who were paying \$125 for half the space. Racism and prejudice drew their dividing lines. "The element" was the euphemism in my family for Puerto Ricans. Out on the street, "spic" was a fighting word, as "mick" had been a generation earlier for the Irish.

There were other pressures. The imperious Robert Moses, who from appointed office controlled most public-works projects in and around New York for decades, cleared slums in northern Manhattan without providing adequate housing for the people he displaced. Many of them flooded into the Bronx. Moses also rammed the Cross-Bronx Expressway through thriving neighborhoods, evicting thousands more.

Any one of those disasters would have been enough to shake an urban area. It was the Bronx's particular misfortune to experience them all at once. As early as the mid-1960s the southern part of the borough had embarked on a seemingly irreversible decline, and as the devastation spread, the term "South Bronx" was used to describe an ever-widening area. People reached into the past for images to describe the desolation. When someone shot an arrow into the Police Department's 41st Precinct headquarters on Simpson Street, or so the story goes, the police began calling it "Fort Apache." Later, as the city continued razing the neighborhood, the building became known as "the little house on the prairie." Captain Harvey Katowitz, who is retiring this year as commander of the 41st, recalls drug searches and arrests where crowds turned hostile.

"Sometimes we literally had to fight our way in and out of the buildings. There was tremendous distrust."

The 1981 Paul Newman movie *Fort Apache, The Bronx* conveyed those appalling images to a worldwide audience. Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* further underscored the borough's reputation as a lawless wasteland. But among the ruins there remained survivors who hadn't given up.

Last year, intrigued by a few newspaper stories which suggested that things were improving, I went back. I'd been far away, and a long time gone. I'd lived in several Latin American countries, where I learned to respect the struggles of poor people to improve their lives. Now, if what I had been reading was true, a similar struggle was going on in the Bronx.

You don't see the improvements at first, as you drive out of Manhattan over the Harlem River and then under the noisy Bruckner Expressway. The Bruckner sits atop a thicket of concrete pillars, and you head into the Bronx on a narrow road that winds through them. It's a nice spot for mayhem under there, dark and gloomy, strewn with garbage and broken bottles.

A few blocks farther on, the changes start. The blocks of apartment houses here are not the burned-out hulks of a dozen years ago but occupied buildings with curtains on the windows and people pushing baby carriages in front. Then come streets neatly lined by new two-story houses with well-kept cars gleaming in the driveways. Many of these houses have lawns and gardens and window boxes planted with flowers.

At Charlotte Street, where politicians once posed before a backdrop of ruined tenements, the horizon now opens low and wide over a spreading delta of single-family houses with iron and brick fences around the bright green lawns. Some of the houses have wooden decks off the back, complete with barbecues.

These views are disorienting; they clash with my memories. As a kid, I played stickball on narrow streets, between rows of tenements. The sky was something you looked straight up to see, a narrow band of blue or gray hemmed in by the buildings. Now there's more sky, the horizon is lower and farther away. Often, you can see all the way to the bridges, the span of the George Washington to the west, the high humpback arch of the Throggs Neck to the northeast.

Curious about the people who are living here now, I dropped in on Alexandra Immanuel, a tall, graceful woman with a Caribbean lilt in her voice. Originally from the island of St. Lucia, she lives with her husband, Isidore, and five school-age children in one of the new houses on Vyse Avenue, around the block from the parochial school I attended. The first floor of her tidy home has a carpeted living room with new furniture, a dining area, a kitchen and stairs going up to the bedrooms on the second floor. Out back is a fenced-in yard.

Alexandra was a girl of 14 when she came to this neighborhood in 1971, and she lived here with her mother and sister throughout the 1970s--"the worst years," she told me. "Buildings were rundown. We couldn't go out. There was a feeling of despair. I felt like a prisoner in my own house."

Still, she made it through high school, started nursing school and married Isidore. The Immanuels were paying \$715 a month to rent an apartment in public housing in 1991 when they saw a sign advertising new houses for sale in the Bronx. They did the numbers, discovered they could handle the cost and applied to the local community organization that sponsored the new housing. After undergoing intensive interviews, filling out the usual purchase paperwork and coming up with a down payment, they moved in. "The kids love it," Alexandra told me. ~They can play in the yard, and I don't have to worry. The neighbors are good. Everybody looks out for each other."

Thousands of Bronx families like the Immanuels have been helped into new or rebuilt housing by community development corporations, a grassroots approach to problem-solving here that has much in common with similar efforts mushrooming all over the world. In the South Bronx this process started with Father Louis Gigante, a Catholic priest who grew up in Greenwich Village, worked in Puerto Rico and then in the early 1960s came to St. Athanasius, in the Longwood section.

At that time, Great Society programs were pumping federal aid into America's cities, and a lot of it went to the Bronx. Various community leaders and organizers sprang up to take the money, but sometimes all they did with it was provide jobs for their friends and supporters.

Father Gigante wanted to see more concrete results. He became a blunt spokesman for the poor people of his parish, leading many of them to Manhattan for in-your-face protests to city officials. But his master stroke was the Southeast Bronx Community Organization (SEBCO), the activist group he founded to give local people a voice in rebuilding their neighborhood funds solicited from private foundations as well as government agencies. "That was the first community-based corporation, the one that got the whole thing going," according to Father Bill Smith. Father Smith was the pastor at neighboring St. John Chrysostom, my old parish, for 24 years before moving to St. Athanasius in 1985 to succeed Gigante. "Gigante was the catalyst, and he brought the others along."

SEBCO, which Gigante still runs, rebuilt and refurbished much of the housing around St. Athanasius and became the prototype for a score of similar organizations. Two of the most important ones in my neighborhood were the colorfully named Banana Kelly and the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes, the group that helped the Immanuels get their home.

You can trace just about any of these groups back to one person. For the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes, that person would be Genevieve Brooks. A wiry woman of limitless energy, Brooks is now the second-term deputy borough president of the Bronx, but her roots go back to the farming community of Anderson, South Carolina.

Brooks was 17 when she came to New York City to live with her uncle. She later moved into an apartment on Seabury Place, near Charlotte Street. Soon she noticed that the marble trim in the building's hallways wasn't being cleaned. When she complained to the landlord, he told her that she was the only one who had a problem and suggested that she move to Queens or Park Avenue. Instead she helped form a tenants association, and after that things started to improve inside the building. Outside, the hulks of burned-out cars stayed on the streets for weeks and

drugs were being dealt openly. Brooks and her neighbors formed a block association and tried to get the city to clean the streets, pick up garbage and provide more protection. Nothing happened, so they began to do the work themselves.

"People thought we were nuts," she recalls. "We started sweeping our own streets, we went into the backyards and pulled the garbage out." After that, Brooks just kept right on going. She started a child-care center, worked on voter registration and got appointed to the community planning board. Eventually Brooks, Father Smith and representatives of nine local groups put a new organization together to work on a 100-block area's common concerns. When the organizers were choosing a name, someone observed that they were "desperate" about the problems they faced, and so the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes was born.

Not far away from the community served by the Desperadoes, high on an apartment house wall overlooking a small park you can see a brightly colored relief sculpture of four children playing jump rope. Artists John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres cast the sculpture a little more than a decade ago as part of their "homage to the people of the Bronx." Similar street scenes celebrating the neighborhood's people grace tenement walls nearby. Behind the jump-rope sculpture a block of Kelly Street makes the smooth curve that inspired the name of that other organization, Banana Kelly.

Back in 1977 no one was celebrating the people of the Bronx. That was the year the city sent marshals and demolition crews into this same neighborhood to take down three tenement buildings. Some 30 families were living in those structures, and they had already started to fix them up. Facing eviction, the families resolutely formed a human chain around their buildings, and with reporters at the scene, the city decided to back down.

Flushed with success, the victors incorporated their organization as the Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association. With publicity and official recognition came access to loans from government programs and a New York bank, and the rehabilitation of the three buildings was completed. In the process, Banana Kelly director Yolanda Rivera told me, "we learned construction, we learned management, finances. We learned everything ourselves because we knew we wouldn't be able to afford to pay consultants to do it for us." They decided to keep right on building, block by block. Their motto: "Don't move. Improve."

Throughout the 1980s, both Banana Kelly and the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes worked hard to prevent further destruction of existing housing and to build back over empty lots. If organizing had given them clout, the progress they made on their own gave them something equally important--credibility. Downtown, where the power and the money have always been in New York, people started listening. The city, which had seized many abandoned buildings for taxes, began turning them over to community groups and providing loans for rehabilitation. The groups lobbied banks and insurance companies to do business in their neighborhoods again. The nonprofit Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), which was created by the Ford Foundation to operate nationwide as a bridge between communities and corporations, helped persuade businessmen that there was indeed money to be made investing in poor urban neighborhoods.

The key to LISC's ability to lure private investors is a federal tax credit for low-income housing. Since 1987, thanks to that credit, LISC has been able to raise nationally more than \$950 million in investment funds from 106 corporations. Some of that money was used to help finance nearly 2,000 new or refurbished housing units in the Bronx, a fourth of them in projects sponsored by Banana Kelly and the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes. Even before LISC got into the act, the city government--convinced that the tide was turning in the South Bronx--had already committed \$4.2 billion for a major housing effort there.

Over the past two decades the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes have helped build or restore more than 2,000 residential units, including the 89 houses in Charlotte Gardens. Banana Kelly has grown from its original three tenements into a freewheeling organization that manages 45 buildings containing more than 1,000 living units. Another 1,500 units it helped build are cooperatively owned. But it takes more than housing to create a community.

In many cities, slums have been resurrected by "gentrification," with well-heeled buyers snapping up buildings at bargain prices and restoring them. In the South Bronx, it's the poor who are getting a chance to own a piece of the action. From the beginning, according to Yolanda Rivera, "the promise was made that the community would be rebuilt for the people who stayed."

Banana Kelly and the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes wanted tenants who had a sense of responsibility. They screened the people who applied to move into their buildings, and they took the time to visit with families like the Immanuels. "I interviewed every family before they moved in," Genevieve Brooks recalls. "I wanted to see how the parents related to the children, and what the children's goals were." She was looking for people who would strengthen the neighborhood. Once it was rebuilt, she didn't want it sliding down again. "I was brought up on a farm where you kept your yard, your house, your surroundings clean. Litter and abandonment--that was foreign to me."

Marc Jahr, a program director at LISC who worked for eight years as a community organizer on the streets of Brooklyn, thinks that attitude is important. "The Mid-Bronx Desperadoes don't tolerate graffiti in their buildings. They clean it off immediately. That sends a message that somebody cares about this building. That's a message that was missing in the South Bronx for years."

It's a message the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes and Banana Kelly send every day. The housing may have been rebuilt, but the neighborhoods still need tending. Getting crucial services like health care, for example, is still a challenge. Last year Banana Kelly helped establish a children's health clinic, and just a few months ago the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes helped open a modern doctors' office: before, the only choice most residents had was an emergency room at a city hospital, where they could wait an entire day for care.

Both groups emphasize the training and hiring of local people. Many Banana Kelly staff members live in the buildings they manage. "Most social service agencies draw lines between staff and clients," the director of one Banana Kelly program told me. "We don't look to hire professionals. We invest in training local people because it builds the capacity of the

neighborhood. If our funding were cut tomorrow, the professionals would be gone, but these people would still be here."

One key neighborhood job is the building "super," or superintendent--the person who is responsible for keeping each apartment building clean and running. Late last fall, in a classroom on the third floor of a former public school building, I watched teacher Charan Mangru, a native of Guyana, work with seven young men, all high school dropouts. His students were learning how to compose a job-application letter. It was part of the "life skills" section of a five-month course designed to prepare them and 16 other students for careers in building maintenance and construction. Twenty-three students started the course, one of several that a Banana Kelly program called Family and Community Enrichment offers residents. In other life skills classes those seven students were learning the basic reading, writing and math they had not learned in school.

Mangru had outlined the job letter on the blackboard, and now he handed out sample paragraphs. "I don't want to copy off the paper," one student objected. "I want to write my own letter." Prominently posted on the wall was an article about Gen. Colin Powell, who as a boy lived just a few blocks from this classroom.

Several blocks away I found Augie Demera teaching the "vocational skills" segment of the same course in the gutted-out basement of a Banana Kelly building. Demera was one of a number of young South Bronx natives working for Banana Kelly and the Mid-Bronx Desperadoes who told me they were "giving back something to the neighborhood." In his workshop I saw drywall partitions with enough practice electrical wiring to power a rock concert, and a locker room full of sinks installed along one wall. Demera teaches electricity, plumbing, carpentry and boiler maintenance, all necessary skills for building superintendents. "When they finish this course," he said, watching a trio of young women wiring an electrical connection on a piece of plywood, "they'll have the basic skills they need to run this building."

Who knows--maybe someday they'll be able to help run the community. Banana Kelly recently trained homeless students at the Bronx Regional High School to help build their own dormitory. The Mid-Bronx Desperadoes are involved in everything from administering civilian street patrols and putting on youth talent shows to operating small-loan programs and fixing up public parks. I sat in on staff meetings that covered such topics as a book drive for one apartment building's library, a condolence note for a tenant whose mother had died recently, and a program to test children for lead poisoning. Several times a week there are community or block association meetings where residents take up such problems as lack of security, supers who are unavailable for nighttime emergencies, broken washing machines, late parties and loud music.

A young man at one Mid-Bronx Desperadoes tenants meeting put his finger on what may be the organization's biggest remaining challenge. "We've accomplished a lot of our dreams," he said. "We've got the services a family needs. But people want to go to work."

Perhaps more than any other factor, it was the loss of jobs that destroyed the old Bronx. Now, after helping rebuild their neighborhoods and restore services, community groups are going after economic growth. The Mid-Bronx Desperadoes have helped revitalize several rundown

commercial areas and are moving ahead on their most ambitious economic project to date, a supermarket and shopping center that Ralph Porter, who succeeded Genevieve Brooks as director, hopes will create more than 500 jobs. Meanwhile, Banana Kelly has formed a joint venture with Swedish and American companies to build a modern paper-recycling plant along the Harlem River railyard that would add another 300 jobs to the local economy.

Neither of these ambitious schemes is by any means a sure thing, nor is it clear that enough jobs can ever be created to lift the South Bronx out of poverty. On the other hand, a look at what's already happened there suggests that the future could be full of surprises. The Mid-Bronx Desperadoes and Banana Kelly were born in desperation. Now they negotiate investment plans with international corporations. Genevieve Brooks only wanted to get the trim in her apartment house cleaned. Now she helps oversee the entire borough.

On Simpson Street, just across from the building where I grew up, I saw a bilingual mural that captures the spirit of the South Bronx today. "Dios bendiga nuestra comunidad," it says, over a field of bright flowers. "God bless our community." And down in the corner, in English: "There is hope."