

## The Bronx Talks Back 2

UNHP

UNHP and our guest bloggers have used [Views from the Northwest Bronx](#) to share the experiences of local groups as well as data and analysis about our community. Our blog series has covered changes in community development, Bronx demographics, multifamily housing sales, and the impact of city housing policy and private investment in the borough.

In this blog post and [another posted](#) this week, UNHP is sharing the northwest Bronx views of neighborhood residents, community leaders, Bronx community development professionals and UNHP board members.



Glenner lives in Kingsbridge, one of the hottest NYC neighborhoods, according to Street Easy and she has very few complaints. She is Jamaican born and came to the U.S. in search of work and fun when she was 25; she found both. In 1993, she moved into her current apartment on Heath Avenue and worked as a private care nurse for many years. She raised her family in the Bronx, but they are all grown up “and seem to think anywhere outside of NYC is better.”

Glenner thinks her community is better now than it was when she moved in. Her building is kept up and was just recently painted and new doors were installed. Glenner has Section 8 rental subsidy, which helps her afford the rent in her apartment. She says the neighborhood is cleaner and quieter than it once was. At age 67, she uses a walker to get around and likes the accessibility of the neighborhood. Stop and Shop on Broadway is fancier than it was, “but the food costs more.” She likes Pioneer and FoodTown when they have sales. She has friends in the neighborhood and occasionally goes to the Bailey Avenue Senior Center for lunch, exercise, and bingo. Glenner would like to stay in her apartment and neighborhood in the years ahead. “I have an elevator, buses and everything I need.”

### ***Glenner, Kingsbridge Resident.***

*The following two comments are part of a linked conversation between John M. Reilly and Brian J. Byrne at a UNHP Board meeting discussing the #ViewsNWBX blog series:*

**John:** I don't see any of that discussion (e.g. regarding the impact of appraisals on the affordable housing market and some of the other issues raised in the #ViewsNWBX blog series) on an organized basis, on any scale. The development stuff is generally a small group of people going to selective meetings. People are just now realizing how much of a negative impact the loosened rules on rent regulation and preferential rents are having on affordability.

When the minimum wage went up that gave people a lot of hope, and if it continues to go up, that could make a big difference here. There's just such a disconnect between what it costs to live here and what people are making. These kinds of things (better wages and opportunities) can help. But there will need to be some push-back in order to keep it going in that direction now.

*John M. Reilly, a life-long Bronx resident, authored the [Keep the Homeless at Home](#) blog post and is the director of [Fordham Bedford Housing Corporation](#)(FBHC). FBHC is the largest community-based affordable housing developer in NYC and owns and manages over 100 safe, sound and affordable buildings in the community.*

**Brian:** I think the push back will come from small communities organizing - the Bronx is pretty big, so when we're talking about THE Bronx, I don't think we'll ever get to a point where there's a united voice. I was impressed to read about the [people along the Jerome Avenue](#) corridor, and the way they have been able to connect and represent the neighborhoods along that corridor. It's that kind of operation that needs to jump up all over the borough. And you'll have voices then.

Historically, the Bronx has always been a bedroom community of Manhattan. Just look at the way the subway lines are laid out; it's all so you can get to and from Manhattan. I've for a long time argued that we need to develop more Bronx-based enterprise, where jobs are here, so people aren't always traveling; and I think that helps, together with the housing, people to stay in the borough and have borough pride. Everyone seems to say they're from the Bronx at some point. But Bronxites don't have quite the esprit de corps of Brooklynites, and part of the reason is that we're in transit all the time. It would be great to see if the City could really focus, and develop more aggressive programs to preserve the affordable housing we have.

*Brian J. Byrne Ph.D. is currently [Fordham University](#)'s Vice President for Lincoln Center, and spent many years at Fordham University Bronx Rosehill campus as Assistant to the President of Fordham Urban Affairs and Vice President for Administration. Brian, like John, also worked for the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition during its early years.*

Corine Ombongo-Golden, is a [Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition](#) leader involved in [Stabilizing NYC](#), a city-wide coalition that is taking on Predatory Equity. NWBCCC, refers to Predatory Equity as a set of conditions and business practices used by landlords and banks or private equity companies that cause over-leveraged buildings. The debt owed on a building (by the landlord to a bank or private equity company) is greater than the rent roll can support. The owner in order to repay the debt on the building may neglect building repairs, services and maintenance, harass existing tenants to get new tenants that can pay a higher rent or strive to raise rents through all possible means. UNHP raised similar concerns in our blog about [the non-regulated lenders](#)that are prevalent in the real estate market.

This comment by Corine is from a Stabilizing NYC press conference. "There are no words strong enough to describe David David (her landlord). He is known as the master of strategic harassment, and his alias is bully vampire Dracula. He makes me cry every time. My beloved husband Craig was diagnosed with lung cancer, stage 4, in 2011. We wrote the landlord for leaks in our bedroom during chemotherapy, as they were negatively affecting his health. David was inconsiderate; he not only refused to do anything about the leaks, he also sent us to court during this time falsely claiming that we did not pay the rent. Of course, the court sided with us but it was incredibly stressful to go through while I was also fully responsible for my husband's care. I had to move our bed into the guest bedroom because it has less leaks and it was less cold than in our bedroom. I had to put towels around the windows and change them to avoid mold. We also couldn't use electricity in those spaces. He passed away before we ever got repairs."

***Corine Ombongo-Golden, is a Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition leader involved in Stabilizing NYC, a city-wide coalition that is taking on Predatory Equity.***

Graciela, 42, works as a nanny and has lived in the Bronx for 17 years. Graciela is self-employed and, because of her fluctuating income, is a master saver - always maintaining an emergency fund and staying within her budget. Graciela has never been late on her rent,

but since last year her landlord has refused to accept the rent or renew the lease. "Yo nunca había dado problema, pago a tiempo. En estos 13 meses, aprendí mucho sobre este proceso." "He perdido mi paz"- I lost my peace, she sighs as she recounts her 13 months experience in housing court due to lack of repairs and landlord harassment.

Graciela wasn't made aware that she had a preferential rent. [This type of rent](#) strips away your rights to a regulated rent increase. When she received a new lease with a significant rent increase, a preferential rent of \$1,400 and a legal rent of \$2,300 – she had questions. She received a visit from the landlord who told her to simply sign and not to worry about the legal rate, otherwise "I can't continue collecting your rent". Graciela refused to sign the lease and the landlord ripped the document in her face and began an order due to non-payment. Graciela, who lives in her one-bedroom apartment with her children, investigated her rights and requested her rent history. Inconsistency in the rent amounts, and a falsely reported move led her to file a complaint with DHCR for lack of lease renewal, repairs, and overcharges.

Ongoing trips to Housing Court and two pro-bono lawyers later, the landlord opted to settle and not see the judge. Effective in May 2017, after the proceeding began, the court ordered the landlord to pay a compensation of \$2,000 in rental credit for lack of repairs and service, to issue a new lease with the correct legal rent of \$1,019, and for harassment to stop. Things started to feel like they were going to return to normal for the family. However, the new lease, which she received in June, includes an electric charge although Graciela pays her own Con-Ed bill. This breach in contract makes her concerned that the landlord may take repercussions against her family or may now harass her children. If needed, this time she'll begin the court proceeding and continue to show up to housing court, "es un ejemplo para mis hijos, que crean en la justicia". This is an example for my children, to believe in justice.

Graciela and her family live near the Jerome Avenue rezoning area, where displacement is a concern. En la corte vi otra inquilina de este edificio con el mismo problema. El proceso es confuso y largo- los inquilinos se desesperan – el miedo reina. Muchas persona nuevas se han estado mudando al edificio. El super dice que son de shelters "I met my neighbor in court and she is having a similar experience. This process is long and confusing; tenants become afraid and give up. It's difficult to see so many seniors and other vulnerable tenants in this process. Many new people are moving into the building and the super says that they are from the shelters; the landlord can receive higher rents through different subsidies, we are being pushed out."

### ***Graciela, Bronx Resident.***

*The following two comments are from homeowners in Bedford Park reacting to [Is the Bronx Building- Look for Yourself//Views from the Northwest Bronx](#). Elizabeth and Lois live in Bedford Park and many of the photos of demolished homes and green construction fences from this blog post are located on the blocks surrounding their homes:*

Elizabeth has been a Bronx resident for 25 years and has spent the last 10 years as a proud homeowner in Bedford Park. She was drawn to her three-family home in Bedford Park

because it was reasonably priced and there was great train access to Manhattan. She also wanted to be involved in the community and Bedford Park, with its town feel, dollhouse homes, apartment buildings, and tree-lined streets, seemed to be the right place. Elizabeth certainly found the community involvement she was looking for; she is a volunteer gardener and tree-keeper on Mosholu Parkway, helps the summer youth from Mosholu Montefiore Community Center create and maintain pocket gardens and pick up litter. She is involved in neighborhood association meetings, park meetings and Community Board 7. She enjoys going to Mosholu Parkway and seeing her diverse neighbors from all over the world enjoying the shady green space.

Elizabeth loves her neighborhood, but is concerned about the loss of homes, like hers, through demolition and purchase by developers. Elizabeth felt our blog on building in the Bronx was pretty accurate. Across the street from Elizabeth two houses are scheduled to be demolished and developed as an 8-story building. A neighbor who rents an apartment has been looking in Bedford Park for a home to buy and has bid on four houses only to be outbid by developers looking to build multi-family rental properties. "It is the variety of housing that draws people into Bedford Park, the cute homes with the porch and front and backyards as well as the apartment buildings—these are the things that help create the network of neighbors." Elizabeth receives letters almost every week from real estate companies looking for her to sell and "name her price." Other homeowners in the neighborhood may be willing to sell but as for Elizabeth, "I am not selling."

### ***Elizabeth, a homeowner in Bedford Park.***

*Lois Harr commented on our [Is The Bronx Building](#) post with the following:*

Bedford Park, a mixed density community, is being built up and 10- to 14-story multifamily buildings are being squeezed in next to existing 7-story buildings. And in the case of my block, next to two story private homes on a very narrow one way street. Planning reps have told us that one of the purposes of zoning regulations is to preserve the character of a community. If someone walked around Bedford Park, the character would be clear: an eclectic mix of walk-ups, elevator buildings of 5-7 or so stories and - until recently - a significant number of 1-4 family homes. But like the goose that laid the golden egg tale - outside speculators using government financing are about to destroy it.

*And has the following additional comments:*

Given all that, my situation might seem hopeless in the face of bad zoning combined with owners, speculators and developers poised to use government subsidies to make lots of money at the expense of the quality of life and affordability throughout Bedford Park. So imagine my interest in a recent visit to Bedford Park by Leila Bozorg, NYC Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) Deputy Commissioner of the [Office of Neighborhood Strategies](#) (ONS).

The ONS is supposed to make sure HPD's development and preservation efforts are "guided by meaningful community engagement and coordinated with public investments... and that HPD's investments leverage broader community objectives..." ONS insures that

“...HPD’s investments contribute to building strong, healthy, resilient neighborhoods in all five boroughs.” And ONS commits to “strategic preservation and development through engagement with tenants, landlords, community leaders, and neighborhood stakeholders on issues involving the creation of vibrant neighborhoods anchored by affordable housing.”

If HPD’s ONS is serious about this purpose, they’ll need to play some catch up on my block. Inappropriate zoning on my narrow one way street allows for an oversized 14 story building with government subsidy to be built by outside developers. It’s already led to tenants being harassed into moving as well as an unsatisfactory investigation of a fire and people being bought out without much prospect of finding equally acceptable and affordable homes. That doesn’t sound like strategic preservation to me.

I myself have lived on this quiet street for 37 years. I own my house outright, raised my family here and fully expected to live here until I decided, if I decided, to move. This is a completely vibrant neighborhood but ironically we’re already losing our very anchor under the guise of building affordable housing. I look forward to the Office of Neighborhood Strategies and Deputy Commissioner Bozorg fully engaging in our issues here in Bedford Park. Because, no matter how you slice it, it’s still true that nothing about us without us is for us.

And the government shouldn’t pay for it.

***Lois Harr has lived and worked in the Bronx her whole life. She currently serves as an Assistant Vice President for Student Life at Manhattan.***

Jannet has lived in the Bronx for 15 years with her family off of Broadway in the North Riverdale section of the Bronx. She rents a rent stabilized one-bedroom apartment for \$1,001. She “loves the neighborhood. It is clean, I have a good landlord and super and I feel safe.” She enjoys access to stores and restaurants and the lack of trains doesn’t bother her as she uses the buses for transportation. As a annually contracted worker Jannet worries about her finances, but she is a good saver and feels prepared for an emergency. When asked about the future, her thoughts turned to the national level: She is “not optimistic. Trump will cut services and I’m happy Obamacare is in place.”

***Jannet, Bronx resident***

Alicia, a life-long Bronxite, has real concerns about safety. She grew up in Mott Haven, but her father was murdered in that community, which she still feels is “dangerous, even with all the new buildings.” She moved to a safer Bronx neighborhood in Pelham Bay, but her housing is in bad condition with mold and a long wait for repairs. She has a pension, but struggles to pay \$1,285 for her one-bedroom apartment. Alicia is concerned about her neighborhood and fears that it will not remain safe.

***Alicia, Bronx resident.***

Matthew is a young man who lives with his parents in the Fordham Bedford area of the northwest Bronx. He has lived in the Bronx all his life and is relatively new to the workforce. He is grateful to live with his parents because he can't afford his own apartment. Matthew feels the Bronx has a pretty good future. He thinks other parts of the Bronx are going through gentrification and "the Bronx doesn't deserve its bad reputation."

### ***Matthew, Bronx Resident***

Yvonne, a senior citizen, has lived in the Bronx for 35 years. She lives in a Housing Development Fund Corporation (HDFC) Co-op and pays \$875 for a three-bedroom apartment. Even though that is affordable by Bronx standards, she still finds it hard to pay the rent. She lives off her Social Security and due to a bankruptcy, some portion of her Social Security is garnished. She is looking for part-time work to help supplement her income. Yvonne approves of all the new building in the community, but is concerned that Bronx people are not getting the apartments. She would like to see more police in the neighborhood and improved subway and bus services. She uses the neighborhood senior center and feels that the future in the Bronx is "bright if people work together. Young people need opportunities."

### ***Yvonne, Bronx Resident.***

John Van Bommel is a real estate attorney who has come to specialize in affordable housing development in the northwest Bronx by working with community-based developers like BUILD, Fordham Bedford Housing Corporation and UNHP. John grew up in the Bronx and is the son and grandchild of life-long Bronx residents. After spending most of his childhood years in the NYCHA Castle Hill Apartments and attending Cardinal Hayes H.S. and Lehman College, John was ready to leave the Bronx. John became an attorney and in 1988, while he was working for a private law firm, met Jim Mitchell of BUILD and assisted on his first tax credit, vacant building gut rehabilitation deal.

John quickly became involved in the early tax credit projects that were part of the [community development movement in the northwest Bronx](#) and NYC. Working on these types of projects, with the dedicated staff in the community that were so committed to and thoughtful about their work and its importance, "really lit a flame in me. I felt that by working with this movement, and more specifically these good people, I was doing good by the Bronx." As both John and the staff from the Bronx community-based organizations, that he came to call friends, became more skilled in development, and public funding expanded, community-driven development in many forms increased; vacant buildings were renovated, Freddie Mac foreclosure deals were refinanced and tenants associations saw their building renovated and occupied buildings were upgraded with tenants in place. John believes that the nonprofits took all the risk in those early days of Bronx community development and that the rise in private developers using public funds in the Bronx today is based on that foundation. John is wary of some contagious thinking today that

nonprofits cannot do development and he thinks it is not true. Experienced, well-staffed nonprofits can develop deals just as well as their for-profit counterparts, with more respect for the long term survival of the project and the neighborhood; and “when a nonprofit fights for every dollar it goes into the building for the tenants.” John likes to think of himself as “a vicarious do-gooder” and is grateful to have been able to lend and develop his legal skills towards the purpose of supporting Bronx nonprofits and the creation and preservation of affordable housing in the Bronx.

***John Van Bommel is a real estate attorney in private practice who specializes in nonprofit legal assistance and affordable housing development.***

Niki has lived in the Bronx since she was two years old. She grew up on Minerva Place, sometimes with family living in different apartments. Niki works for UNHP and recently moved into her own apartment in the Fordham Bedford neighborhood with a friend. Growing up surrounded by family, including visits to the Dominican Republic to spend time with more family, attending [Our Lady of Refuge school and church](#), and having many friends in the community made Niki feel happy and secure. Niki and her friends were among the first to take the SAT Preparation class offered by Fordham Bedford Community Services, and Niki took courses at the Rosehill campus throughout her time at Fordham University. While she was at Fordham she came to understand that people viewed the Bronx very differently than she did; some Rosehill students were even afraid to go outside the gate. “There are safety issues everywhere, not just in The Bronx. While I was at Fordham we would constantly get security alerts that a student walking alone at 3am had their phone stolen – that just showed bad common sense and something could happen anywhere.” She likes being able to walk to work and when she goes out with her friends on the weekend they usually go to Manhattan. If they are going out in the Bronx they “might go to the Applebees on Fordham Rd or the Bay Plaza mall, and the Bronx Beer Hall is on my summer to-do list.” Through working at UNHP, she became more aware of the affordable housing issues. “I knew my mom, who works full-time as a home health aide, sometimes struggles to make the rent even now that her rent is frozen [through SCRIE], but I wasn’t completely aware before that affording rent was such a widespread issue in the Bronx.” Niki, a Getting Ahead graduate, learned budgeting from her Mom, “Don’t spend money you don’t have.”

***Niki Q., UNHP staff & Bronx resident.***

The challenge now in the Bronx is affordability. Not that there are not buildings with big code enforcement problems still, but the huge abandonment and disinvestment of 40 years ago is not the problem. There has been some work to control rent increases in recent years but there’s more to be done in that area. And we need to continue to advocate for better wages for working people who make up the vast majority of Bronx residents.

We have excellent higher education institutions in our borough that could be places where folks with low wage jobs could get more training so they could compete for higher paying jobs. But this is the kind of thing that requires some changes in work schedules and

flexibility so adults with family responsibilities can get the time to take advantage of such trainings.

Given what we know about Brooklyn, and how the real estate market exploded there, if that were to happen in the Bronx, it would be very difficult for a lot of people to stay here. Instead of making the Bronx Brooklyn, let's make the Bronx the Bronx, and up the wages and keep a cap on the rent.

***Roger Hayes, UNHP Board Member, Former Assistant Commissioner NYC Department of Health, NWBCCC community organizer and staff director at NWBCCC.***