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Bronxites gather to share stories, promote unity

By D. J. Costantino on March 21, 2016 at 10:19 am

Residents issue a defiant statement to developers

The notes were signed with Xs and Os, addressed to the “dearest,” adorned with hand-drawn hearts and flowers. They were short love letters to the South Bronx, from its residents both young and old.

“Dearest BX, thank you for always showing us what community power can do! xoxo DF,” read one, scrawled in all capital letters on a Post-it note.

“Born in Einstein Hospital. Ridden the IRT and the Bx4. Swung from subway poles in empty cars. My home, Bx,” said another, signed with a heart.

And one longer missive noted: “We are the only borough that is not an island in this city. We are literally grounded in ways the other boroughs will never be. Greatness is born here, it’s fostered here and it lives here.”

The notes were just one part of an evening at the Bronx Music Heritage Center last Saturday called South Bronx Love Letter — a series of events created to celebrate the neighborhoods here. The event attracted dozens of residents who came to sing the borough’s praises – literally and figuratively — and what resonated most loudly was the resiliency, toughness and above all, the love of the borough. The evening consisted of a musical performance, sing-alongs and story circles, where the 50-plus attendees shared their reflections, memories and impressions of growing up in the boot of the city’s northernmost borough.

“The Bronx represents New York’s toughness,” said Xen Medina, 46, who showed up with his bongos to join the night’s performance.

A small rhythm section of congas, bongos and claves, who named themselves the Bronx Rican Bombers, backed Not4Prophet, a rapper and poet, who told stories of his life in the Bronx through songs interwoven with short anecdotes. Prophet’s voice, whether rapping, singing falsetto or in a



Bronxites gather in a circle to share stories about their borough.
Photo by D. J. Costantino

deep, gravelly tone reminiscent of a heavy-metal frontman, remained at the forefront of the entire performance. His T-shirt was emblazoned with “The Bronx is Burning;” his cap with the red-circle 1 train.

The event was created by the Five Boro Story Project, a citywide organization that aims to bring neighbors together to connect through storytelling and performance. Bridget Bartolini, who grew up in the South Richmond Hill neighborhood of Queens, founded the organization in 2013 upon the belief that storytelling was a powerful tool to strengthen community and build solidarity. Growing up in a neighborhood where “making it was getting out,” she felt that there were too few opportunities for neighbors to interact.

The South Bronx edition comes on the heels of an attempted rebranding of the Mott Haven neighborhood as the “Piano District” by developers building two 25-story residential towers on Third and Lincoln avenues. The developers, the Somerset and the Chetrit Group, and Keith Rubenstein, hosted a widely publicized event called “Macabre Suite,” an A-list party decorated with bullet-ridden cars and projections of a burning Bronx last Halloween.

“And then the Bronx became the Piano District,” said Not4Prophet with a smirk, his body half-turned to the crowd, in a brief moment in between songs. The comment received a collective chuckle from the crowd.

After Prophet’s performance, Bartolini led the “story circles,” and attendees, ranging in age from high school students to seniors, rearranged their chairs and shared personal accounts of growing up in the Bronx, raising their families, and trying to make change in their communities.

“Developers forget to consider what was here before,” said Altagracia Montilla, an educator at FLAGS High School in Melrose, who grew up in Fordham Heights. She stressed that “there is a difference between joining a community and gentrifying a community.”

Yolanda Rodriguez, one of four founders of the BxArts Factory, an organization which aims to make art accessible for everyone in the Bronx, hosted the event in conjunction with Bartolini. Rodriguez, 41, lives in Riverdale, but has lived “everywhere” in Bronx since 1997. She spoke about the negative effects of development, such as new housing that is not affordable to existing residents, but saw the positives in beautification and the development of more Bronx-owned businesses. Above all, she takes pride in the people of the borough for their honesty and lack of pretention.

“You don’t have to be perfect to be a Bronxite,” she said.

Braulio Acuria, 25, who was born and raised in Soundview, where he still lives, said he celebrates The Bronx for its food and the diversity of its people. He was accompanied by Belita Nguluwe, 29, a recent Bronx transplant. Both work in Bronx high schools — Acuria at Mott Hall Bronx and Nguluwe at Harry S. Truman — and both try to encourage storytelling and local pride for their students.

“Developers should cooperate with the community to celebrate the diversity,” Acuria said.

Samelys Lopez, a native Bronx resident, found the storytelling event to be therapeutic, and a way to connect with her neighbors through experience. In reference to the “Piano District,” she felt that the community was not respected for its people or culture, only for its real estate value.

“It was not treated with dignity or honor,” Lopez said. The developers, she added, only want to “capitalize on a painful history.”

Medina, 46, was among the most vocal during the storytelling session, remembering the story of his grandparents. They were, according to him, among the first Puerto Ricans in Parkchester to buy a

home, his grandmother working in a bead factory and “saving everything she got” in order to afford the purchase.

At one moment during the night, everyone in the packed room sang the chorus to “I Am AmeRícan,” a song inspired by Nuyorican poet Tato Liveria. The lyrics stressed the importance of unity, and staying true to one’s roots and community. It was the moment that would set the tone for the entire evening, the crowd growing louder as the song went on – singing it together, in unison, and for The Bronx.

[Original story published on brie.hunter.cuny.edu](http://brie.hunter.cuny.edu)