

DAILY NEWS

Community Minded: Bronx Group Provides Housing, Economic Opportunities

By Jason Sheftell
June 24, 2011

Spending a day in the Bronx with the residents, students and executives from the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corp. (WHEDco) is a lesson in community development.

Touching more than 30,000 Bronx residents with eco-friendly affordable housing, school programs, health services and economic opportunities, promoting entrepreneurial activities, WHEDco is not your average nonprofit. In the past 10 years, it has almost single-handedly transformed a full city block in the South Bronx from a barren stretch to an educational and living center.



First, the group renovated an abandoned hospital into a housing and health services center. Then they worked with the school construction authority and local parents to build a school steps away, where it provides after-school programs teaching violin, computer skills and healthy diet practices. The program has a waiting list of more than 200 children.

Feeding off the local diversity, Muslim, Latino, African-American, African and Caucasian kids play together as if at some urban utopia. The energy is positive, with children wearing light blue T-shirts and smiles. They carry musical instruments and apples, laughing as they line up for an activity. The ratio of child to teacher or supervisor is eight to one.



*The Urban Horizons building at 50 E. 168th St. in the Bronx was formerly a hospital
(Jeanne Noonan for News)*

"These children should receive the same opportunity as my children," says Nancy Biberman, WHEDco's founder, who has worked her whole life in community development. "Safe neighborhoods, beautiful homes and good education transcend race and class."

Currently, WHEDco operates two residential developments that serve as the centers of its vision for community development — Urban Horizons, at 50 E. 168th St., and Intervale Green in Crotona. The main premise of both is that neighborhood improvement has to be more than just affordable housing.

"Housing alone does not work," says Biberman, who worked in Highbridge before spearheading the purchase of the hospital that now serves as WHEDco's headquarters. "I saw us provide housing in so many areas, but nothing happened in the surrounding area. Crime was still sky-high. Poverty and drug use were rampant. Yes, there was quality housing, but no services. Our programs failed."

Sitting in her office in Highbridge then, overlooking the South Bronx, Biberman saw the giant, nearly full-block abandoned Morrisania Hospital building. It was built in 1926 and had been a beacon to the area, a sign of a strong Bronx. But over the years it had deteriorated into a symbol of neighborhood neglect.

“I sat there and looked at this abandoned hospital and thought about what this building could become,” she says. “I thought what if we could bring that back to life as a real community resource.”



*Nancy Biberman, WHEDco's founder
(Jeanne Noonan for News)*

So Biberman called the city, worked out a deal with the Housing and Preservation Department, secured historic, federal and state tax credits, and bought the building for \$1. WHEDco., formed in 1986, spent over \$26 million renovating it into what Biberman thought would be the perfect community center. It would have housing, health services, a pre-school program and other resources, the cornerstone of WHEDco's purpose.



*Ramon Acevedo's empanada company
uses the communal kitchen in the Urban*

“We do a lot of studies to understand what it is people do and how they earn money within their peer group and neighborhoods,” says Biberman. “Often we find sub-economies, like several people who do catering for parties or bake pies and sell them to their friends or neighbors. We also found certain people take care of children for their friends. We then figure out a way to get these talented, motivated people the services or licenses they need to do this legally and for profit.”

At Urban Horizons, they installed a commercial kitchen with state-of-the-art equipment. With freezers, large stoves and prepping areas, it's as clean and high-tech as any five-star hotel kitchen. More than 10 food companies operate from what is now an incubator of food businesses. Rasol Empanadas, one company there, sells products to Whole Foods. In the child-care sector, WHEDco trained more than 200 Bronx women to get licenses to run day-care centers. In the past two years, they have earned over \$9 million collectively. One, Jackie Buchanan, operates out of her home in the Central Bronx.

“I could never have done this without WHEDco,” says Buchanan (shown in top photo). “There are so many things they helped me learn, like health and diet issues. Some of the infants I had here have gone to college. I like to think I helped with that.”



Biberman's executive vice president, Davon Russell, (*at left*) has similar experiences every day in the preschool Head Start program that operates out of Urban Horizons's basement. A Jamaican-born world-class sprinter who once ran a 10.28-second 100-meter dash, Russell is a trained dramatic actor. He joined WHEDco as director of children's services over 14 years ago. Now he's on the ground working with kids, teachers, supers, residents and contractors to build new facilities, such as a high-tech computer lab.

“We ask people what they want and we listen,” says Russell, who also runs WHEDco’s free summer camp, which draws more than 300 kids. “As the times change, we change with them to provide the services the times demand. Whatever it is we need to do to give people the skill set they need to create opportunity, we do it.”



That’s apparent at Intervale Green, the 129-unit, eco-friendly, affordable-housing building WHEDco owns and runs in the Crotona section of the Bronx. The building has a “green” roof that covers over an acre of land with small soil boxes for residents to grow fruits and vegetables. The LEED-certified Gold building also has free yoga and fitness programs aimed at mind-body enhancement.

(At left: Intervale Green’s oval design makes the best use of its location, Mayita Mendez for News)

Naomi Aguilar goes by “the artist” at Intervale Green. Her apartment is filled with her paintings. A former resident of a shelter after a domestic-violence incident, Aguilar says Intervale Green has helped her redirect her life. She attends FIT and raises three young sons.

“Moving here was a fresh start,” says Aguilar, originally from Chelsea. “I didn’t know what it meant at first to be here with all these programs. We have a farm on the roof and there are reminders everywhere of staying healthy and fit. It’s funny, but when the sign says ‘burn calories not energy,’ I take the stairs.”

One of her neighbors, Benito Quezada, saw an ad for the building while driving by. In the U.S. just four years, he moved his family into Intervale Green, where, like other WHEDco buildings, tenants pay rent based on 60% of annual income. His oldest daughter, who spoke limited English when they arrived, just finished her senior year of high school. She was accepted to Harvard, Yale and Brown.



Community volunteer, William Beller, busy at work planting on Intervale Green’s roof (WHEDco)

“I kept coming home and these thick envelopes were in my mailbox,” says Quezada. “I am so proud. I am thankful for so much. Living here has helped my family. It’s clean and safe and maybe people don’t realize how important that is.”

Watching Quezada, Biberman and Russell have laughed and cried. This is their life’s work.

“We’ve made progress, but this is still the poorest congressional district in the country,” says Biberman. “We want each of our buildings to make a statement, we want them to be big and visible and to show the community what is possible.”



Intervale Green resident Naomi Aguilar with her husband, Milton, and their three boys (left). Benito Quezada lives in Intervale Green with his wife and three daughters (right). (Joy Keh for News)