

WHEDco selects first new president in 25 years

BY PATRICK ROCCHIO

The leadership baton has been passed at one of the borough's leading community development organizations.

The Women's Housing and Economic Development Corp. has its first new president in its 25-year history.

Nancy Biberman, who founded the organization in 1992 and has since served as its president, has stepped aside and named Davon Russell as her successor.

"I believe in the Bronx – in the women who have been tireless advocates for themselves and their families, in the music that has enlivened street corners and moved people to dance for decades, and in the memories and energy of the 'Boogie Down' that have endured despite the city's constant cycle of change," said Biberman.

Biberman said that what she personally wanted to accomplish has been achieved, and she found the anniversary of the organization an appropriate time to make a change.

She said she was proud to pass the baton to Russell, who started as a drama teacher at WHEDco working in summer youth and after-school programs and is currently an executive vice president in charge of programs.

"Davon is a lifelong educator who has overseen, grown and deepened sig-



Nancy Biberman, founder and outgoing president of WHEDco. Photo courtesy of WHEDco

nificant aspects of WHEDco's work, while mentoring countless young people and serving as a role model for the entire WHEDco staff," said Biberman. "Davon is a star."

When the organization was founded in the early 1990s, Biberman spent two years working with women identified as leaders in their communities in an effort to identify their needs.

"The main idea was not just build housing, but really improve people's lives," said Biberman, adding "We



Davon Russell, incoming president of WHEDco. Photo courtesy of WHEDco

tried to encourage aspirational thinking."

WHEDco eventually advocated for building a school at the old Morrisania Hospital, which had been vacant for two decades.

Soon the organization was working with the School Construction Authority and parents to establish the school.

A number of projects followed, including after-school programming, a commercial kitchen business incubator, childcare and an affordable and

sustainable housing development completed in 2007: Intervale Green.

Biberman will continue on as WHEDco's president emerita, and will serve as senior advisor to the WHEDco's Bronx Commons development in Melrose, which will include 305 units of new affordable housing and a new music hall with a 300-seat capacity when completed in 2019.

Biberman will also be assuming a more limited role focused on housing development and policy, according to the organization.

Russell said that WHEDco's goal is to think and act as they always have done and to be responsive to new needs as they arrive.

"Under Nancy's leadership, we grew WHEDco into a force that not only houses hundreds of Bronx residents, but educates and enriches thousands more," said Russell.

Russell said that the Bronx is changing and one of the questions he expects to work to answer is the organization's and community's response to these changes.

He said he would like to see people that WHEDco works with in communities like Morrisania, Crotona Park East, Highbridge and Melrose get to be active participants in these changes and to continue to be able to afford to live in their communities.