

Voices of Queensbridge

Edited by Stephen Petrus and Molly Rosner

Voices of Queensbridge:

Stories from the Nation's Largest Public Housing Development



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LaGuardia Community College

(front cover image) Former Queensbridge resident Hank Carter in conversation with LaGuardia Community College Gardiner-Shenker student scholar Channing Powers at Queensbridge Houses. Carter, a retired senior executive at Long Island Savings Bank and the first African-American to have a hospital in New York City named after him, founded Wheelchair Charities in the early 1970s after his best friend became paralyzed after being shot in cross fire while coming out of a store in Queens.

(back cover image) A view looking northward up Vernon Boulevard from the Queensboro Bridge towards Queensbridge Park, the Ravenswood Generating Station, and Queensbridge Houses. Courtesy Jim Henderson.

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Foreword

I'm delighted to present this volume on the history of Queensbridge, the largest public housing development in the nation, in our very own Long Island City neighborhood. This handsomely illustrated book represents the collaboration of LaGuardia faculty, staff, and students, all of whom were supported by a generous grant from the Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation. I'm especially impressed by the oral histories of Queensbridge residents by our students. They enrich our understanding of public housing in New York City. Along the way, the students make a few discoveries about the vitality of Queensbridge. As the commitment of the federal government to public housing continues to wane, I hope this book finds the widest readership possible, to combat stereotypes and illustrate the need for affordable places to live.

Dr. Paul Arcario
Interim President
LaGuardia Community College/CUNY

Acknowledgments

This volume is the culmination of a Queensbridge Houses research project, conducted by LaGuardia Community College/CUNY faculty, students, and staff and supported by the Robert David Lion Gardiner Foundation. The aim was to add oral histories of Queensbridge residents to the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Collection at LaGuardia and Wagner Archives at LaGuardia Community College. Special thanks go to Kathryn Curran at the Gardiner Foundation for her commitment to the study of Queens history and her devotion to the intellectual growth of community college students. We also owe gratitude to Dr. Paul Arcario, Interim President of LaGuardia Community College, and Dr. Richard K. Lieberman, Director of LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, for their guidance. At LaGuardia, we also benefited from the support of Vanessa Bing, Chair of the Social Science Department, Claudia Chan, Government Relations Manager, Janet Corcoran, Vice President for Institutional Advancement, and Carrie Fox, Foundation-Sponsored Grants Director. LaGuardia Dean Emerita Fern Khan, an innovator in public post-secondary education, introduced us to The Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement staff at Queensbridge. LaGuardia Social Science faculty Steven Lang, Arianna Martinez, and Filip Stabrowski and Archives staff Tara Hickman, Stephen Petrus, Miguelina Rodriguez, and Molly Rosner prepared the Gardiner-Shenker student scholars for the project by introducing them to archival research and the scholarly literature on public housing and by teaching them oral history methods. They all worked with staff at the Riis Settlement and are indebted to Executive Director Christopher Hanway and Director of Senior Services Gail A. Brown for welcoming them into their community and facilitating the introductions between residents and students. Ana María Hernández, Professor and Director of Latin American Studies at LaGuardia, translated three Spanish oral histories in this volume. Paul Lewis Anderson and Jacques Lang filmed the oral history interviews and helped edit them for the short film Voices of Queensbridge. At NYCHA, Millie Molina, Senior Manager for Events and Communications Services, and Barbara Brancaccio, Chief Communications Officer, gave us permission to

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In Memory

In Memory of Lillian Muller (1925 – 2019), beloved Queensbridge resident. For nearly 25 years, she was the first person to enter the Queensbridge/Riis Neighborhood Senior Center every morning. "I'm your number one!," Lillian happily exclaimed to staff and fellow seniors.

Queensbridge Houses Historical Timeline

By Stephen Petrus



1933

- Upon his election as Mayor of New York during the Great Depression, Fiorello LaGuardia prioritizes public housing as part of his vision to modernize the city, arguing that slums breed poverty, crime, and sickness. To establish a municipal authority to provide public housing for New York's working poor, LaGuardia dramatizes the problems of slums with statistical data and vivid anecdotes, underscores the civic, social, and economic benefits of clearance and redevelopment, and effectively lobbies legislators at the city, state, and federal levels for financial support.

1934

- Prodded by Mayor LaGuardia and a coalition of housing reformers, trade unions, and commercial builders, the New York State legislature passes a bill authorizing the creation of a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) for "the clearance, replanning, and reconstruction" of the city's slum districts. Launched by the mayor, the quasi-autonomous authority has many prerogatives, including the powers to sell bonds and condemn land through eminent domain.



First Houses, the New York City Housing Authority's initial development, was dedicated on December 3, 1935, in a ceremony on the Lower East Side attended by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, in the center, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, on the right, and Governor Herbert H. Leman, on the left. First Houses combined tenement renovation with limited new construction and included 122 apartments with modern amenities, such as central heating. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.



Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and Senator Robert F. Wagner lay the cornerstone of Williamsburg Houses in Brooklyn in 1936, as New York City Housing Authority Chairman Langdon Post looks on. Wagner and Congressman Henry Steagall of Alabama co-sponsored the U.S. Housing Act to give financial aid to local public housing agencies to eradicate slums, provide decent dwellings for low-income families, reduce unemployment, and stimulate business activity. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

1935

- NYCHA's initial development, First Houses in the Lower East Side, is dedicated and opened on December 3 in a ceremony attended by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Governor Herbert H. Lehman. NYCHA receives 3,800 applications for the 122 units in the development.

1937

- Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative Henry Steagall of Alabama author the U.S. Housing Act to create the United States Housing Authority to provide subsidies from the federal government to local public housing agencies to improve living conditions for low-income families.



(left) In 1938, in a mostly industrial section of Long Island City, municipal authorities demolished buildings to make way for the construction of Queensbridge Houses. Manufacturing buildings, including the Loft Candy Factory, were dominant in particular on Vernon Boulevard, close to the East River waterfront. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

(below) A sketch of Queensbridge Houses looking eastward illustrates the Y-plan layout of buildings by chief architect William F. R. Ballard. In the foreground are the East River and Queensbridge Park. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.



1938

- Construction of Queensbridge Houses begins on September 6 in Long Island City, Queens, by the East River industrial waterfront, just north of the Queensboro Bridge. The residential population in the area is sparse, and land costs are relatively inexpensive, at less than $1.50 per square foot, making the project comparatively easy to execute.

1939

- Chief architect William F. R. Ballard implements a Y-plan layout at Queensbridge to maximize access to sunlight by creating more building façade. Bounded by Queens Plaza North, Vernon Boulevard, 40th Avenue, and 21st Street and organized in six superblocks, Queensbridge Houses opens to residents, becoming the largest public housing complex in the nation.

(right) *An overhead view of the construction of Queensbridge in 1939. The project was funded by the federal government. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*

(below) *NYCHA Chairman Alfred Rheinstein speaks at the cornerstone laying of Queensbridge Houses on April 26, 1939. Rheinstein, working with a reduced federal budget, found ways to cut costs without reducing the physical scale of Queensbridge. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*





1940s

- Though NYCHA no longer employs a policy of strict racial segregation, it continues to consider race a factor in evaluating and placing tenants. Many projects become majority white and majority black-Puerto Rican.

1941

- The Queensbridge population includes 3,097 white families and 52 African-American ones.

1947

- NYCHA begins evicting tenants whose annual income exceeds $3,000.

1949

- Title III of the Housing Act of 1949, enacted during the presidential administration of Harry Truman,





(left) On May 5, 1940, 2,000 people attended the dedication of the community center at Queensbridge. Among the speakers were NYCHA co-founder and Vice Chair Mary Simkhovitch, Reverend Peter Fox of St. Mary's Catholic Church of Winfield, and Rabbi Joshua L. Goldberg of the Astoria Center of Israel. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

(below) Among other social services, Queensbridge offered day care for children in 1945. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

extends federal money to construct more than 800,000 public housing units. The act accelerates the expansion of public housing in New York, though NYCHA relies primarily on funding from the city and the state.

1950

- The Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement community center opens at Queensbridge.

1952

- Following an increase in calls from public housing complexes to the New York City Police Department on minor crimes, such as vandalism and delinquency, NYCHA forms the New York City Housing Authority Police Department (HAPD). The HAPD has limited police powers, including the authority to make arrests and carry firearms while on duty.

1953

- The Riis Settlement at Queensbridge begins a partnership with the Fresh Air Fund. The Fresh Air Fund, a

In 1958, New York City enacted legislation to make members of the Housing Authority Police Department sworn police officers, with full peace officer status, and, in the process, made training more comprehensive. At this workshop in 1963 at Queensbridge, F.B.I. agents train housing authority patrolmen in defensive tactics.



not-for-profit agency, provides free summer vacations in the country to New York City children from low-income families.

1953

- NYCHA establishes 21 additional categories of "non-desirability" in the tenant evaluation process, including narcotics addiction, single parenthood, out-of-wedlock children, teen parenthood, "highly irregular work history," alcoholism, and mental illness. Though falling into any one category does not necessarily lead to rejection, it makes placement more difficult and in effect bars most residents on public assistance.

1965

- The United States Housing Authority, along with the Public Housing Administration and the House and Home Financing Agency, are reorganized into the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

1968

- Faced with criticism from welfare rights advocates and federal and city policymakers,

NYCHA relaxes admission standards, announcing it would no longer "deal with the morals of applicants." The numberof non-desirability categories is reduced from 21 to 6.

1970

- As a result of the Supreme Court case *Escalera v. New York City Housing Authority,* NYCHA loses leverage in evicting residents found to be in violation of their tenancy because of criminal behavior. NYCHA residents facing termination of tenancy gain due process protections.

1971

- About 27 percent of public housing families are on welfare, nearly double the amount from ten years earlier. Half the families entering NYCHA are receiving public assistance.

1973

- President Richard Nixon announces a moratorium on the construction of public housing. The decision reflects an ongoing federal disinvestment in publicly built and managed housing.

1974

- Congress passes the Housing and Community Development Act to create the Section 8 program to provide federal vouchers to subsidize rent for housing procured in the private market. Tenants pay about 30 percent of their income for rent, while the remainder is paid with federal money.

1986

- Queensbridge experiences more murders than any other public housing project in the city.

The 21st-Queensbridge F train stop, located at the intersection of 21st Street and 41st Avenue. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.



1989

- The 21st Street-Queensbridge subway station on the IND 63rd Street Line opens at the intersection of 21st Street and 41st Avenue in Queensbridge, improving public transit options for residents. Initially the terminal of the line, it becomes a through station in 2001, serving F express trains.

1992

- Riis Settlement opens the Queensbridge Riis Senior Center.

1994

- Queensbridge resident Nasir Jones, better known as the rapper Nas, releases his debut album *Illmatic*, a series of lyrical vignettes about poverty, violence, and drug use at the development.

1995

- The New York City Housing Authority Police Department merges into the New York City Police Department.

1996

- The Queensbridge Tenants Association supports President Bill Clinton's "One Strike, You're Out" policy



Before the New York City Council approved a plan in 2001 to permit high-rise residential and office construction in Long Island City, the neighborhood largely consisted of low-rise commercial and manufacturing concerns, in contrast to the Manhattan skyline across the East River. Photograph by Demetri Ganiaris.

mandating the eviction of public housing tenants whose apartment units are the scene of criminal activity. Congress passes the legislation.

1999

- Queensbridge resident Ron Artest, selected by the Chicago Bulls with the 16th pick of the 1999 NBA draft, credits his tenacious style as a defender to his upbringing. "Where I came from, and the way I grew up, made me tough, fighting all the time, every day," Artest tells *The New York Times*.

2001

- New York City Council approves a rezoning plan for Long Island City to allow high-rise development within a 37-block area of low-rise buildings in an attempt to attract commercial tenants. The rezoning accelerates gentrification in the area surrounding Queensbridge.

2003

- Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg's stop-and-frisk program, the New York City Police Department stops and frisks 2,325 people at Queensbridge. The program becomes the subject of a racial profiling controversy, as the vast majority of those stopped are African American or Latino.

2005

- The New York City Police Department concludes a sting operation at Queensbridge, arresting 37 people on state and federal drug charges.

2009

- The New York City Police Department arrest 59 people in a drug sweep at Queensbridge, seizing a cache of weapons and about 138 small plastic bags of crack cocaine, 400 loose pieces of crack, 350 vials of heroin, and 100 bags of marijuana.

2010

- Riis Settlement establishes a community garden at Queensbridge.

2012

- In a four-part series, WNYC chronicles Queensbridge Houses through the lens of four generations of the Alston family, residents of the development since 1954. WNYC notes that the family represents an anomaly at Queensbridge, where the average length of residency is 18 years.

2013

- The approximate population breakdown at Queensbridge is 61% black, 2% white, 2% Asian, 30% Latino, and 1% American Indian.

2014

- Mayor Bill de Blasio launches the Mayor's Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety to reduce crime and strengthen neighborhoods in the 15 NYCHA developments that make up 20 percent of all violent crime in the city's



Numerous auto body shops lined 23rd Street in Long Island City in 2019, two blocks from Queensbridge Houses, reflecting the older, grittier commercial identity of the district. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.

public housing. Queensbridge is one of the 15 NYCHA developments targeted in the mayor's plan.

2015

- The Riis Center at Queensbridge announces a Cure Violence program to decrease gun violence among young people as part of Mayor de Blasio's Mayor's Action Plan. Called 696 Build Queensbridge, the program uses "violence interrupters" and outreach workers to deescalate conflicts through mediation and communication.

2017

- On January 17, Queensbridge marks its 365th day without a shooting. Observers attribute the decrease in crime to a number of factors, among them, cultural and arts opportunities at the local elementary school, offerings at the Riis Center, the 696 program, and the security apparatus of 15 light towers and 360 cameras.

2018

- Queensbridge residents and local City Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer hold a groundbreaking ceremony for renovations to a playground and basketball courts on the complex. The renovations

(right) Citi Bike, a privately owned public bicycle sharing system serving Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and Jersey City, has three stations at Queensbridge Houses, including this one in Queensbridge Park on Vernon Boulevard. In response to low ridership rates among communities of color and poorer residents, Citi Bike in 2013 established a discounted membership of $5 per month for NYCHA and SNAP residents. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.



(below) Queensbridge is one of the few NYCHA developments with a central retail area, including restaurants, a pharmacy, beauty salon, and a supermarket. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.



cost $1.5 million dollars.

2018

- Amazon announces that it will move its second headquarters to Anable Basin in Long Island City, close to Queensbridge. Queensbridge residents are divided about the plan, uncertain that Amazon's promise of jobs and other perks to them will come to fruition.

2019

- Following Amazon's decision to withdraw its plan to build its second headquarters in Long Island City, Queensbridge Tenants' Association President



Halstead Real Estate, the largest privately held real estate firm in the New York City Metro Area, is an emblem of gentrified Long Island City. The firm has an office on Vernon Boulevard, close to both Queensbridge Houses and the affluent Queens West district on the East River waterfront. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.

April Simpson criticizes local leaders City Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer and State Senator Mike Giannaris for their opposition to the tech company. "They never asked what we, the people of NYCHA, actually wanted," Simpson comments in a statement, co-written with the presidents of tenant associations from Astoria Houses, Woodside Houses, and Ravenswood Houses.

A Short History of Queensbridge Houses

By Stephen Petrus



Located in Long Island City, Queens, Queensbridge Houses is the largest public housing complex in the nation, with some 3,100 apartments and nearly 7,000 residents. Queensbridge has a particularly rich history, shaped by federal, state, and city policies and by the evolution of Long Island City from an industrial to a post-industrial neighborhood. It opened in 1939 in a largely manufacturing area, funded by the federal government. Like many other New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments, Queensbridge transformed from a mostly white to a predominantly black and Latino complex in the 1950s and 60s. In recent decades, Queensbridge has faced the pressure of gentrification, fueled by the construction of high-rise condominiums, hotels, and office buildings in the neighborhood. Due to ongoing federal and state disinvestment and NYCHA mismanagement, Queensbridge, like all other New York City public housing developments, is bracing for an uncertain future of deteriorating infrastructure, deferred maintenance, and privatization plans.

Origins

The U.S. Housing Act of 1937 altered the course of development at Queensbridge. Co-sponsored by Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative Henry Steagall of Alabama, the legislation created

(right) *Advised by the federal U.S. Housing Authority to build public housing in vacant areas, NYCHA located Queensbridge Houses in a mostly industrial part of Long Island City to minimize residential displacement. Still, to make way for Queensbridge, 65 families were uprooted, and 15 buildings were demolished, including these on 10th Street and 40th Avenue. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*



(below) *A model of Queensbridge Houses at an architect's office at 625 Madison Avenue in Manhattan. Queensbridge chief architect William F. R. Ballard designed the buildings in a Y-shaped arrangement to provide apartments with maximum privacy and sunlight. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*



the United States Housing Authority (USHA) to provide subsidies from the federal government to local public housing agencies to improve living conditions for low-income families. Among other provisions, the act imposed stringent limits on construction costs, a measure that was largely a reaction to the high-quality and thus expensive Public Works Administration (PWA) projects, such as Harlem River Houses (1937). In response to federal rules, NYCHA chairman Alfred Rheinstein announced a 66 percent cut in the Queensbridge budget.[1]

NYCHA devised creative ways to save costs to avoid reducing the scale of Queensbridge. First, it located the project in a mostly industrial section of Long Island City, just north of the Queensboro Bridge, close to the



Queensbridge Houses under construction on July 3, 1939. A few months later the initial tenants moved in, and, on October 25, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia welcomed them and conducted an inspection of the complex. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

(right) *Aerial view of Queensbridge Houses under construction in 1939, in the foreground by the Queensboro Bridge. This perspective illustrates the proximity of Queensbridge to the East River and the midtown Manhattan skyline. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*

(below) *Located between the East River and Queensbridge Houses, Queensbridge Park was a New Deal WPA project, recreational in character, completed in 1941. This view of the park under construction shows the William Bradley & Son Marble Cutters Company, later to be the site of the Ravenswood Generating Station, a megawatt power plant.*





East River waterfront, where land cost less than $1.50 a square foot. Residential displacement was minimal. A total of 65 families were uprooted, and 15 structures were demolished. Second, 10,000 closet doors, at $25 apiece, were omitted from rooms. Residents instead used curtains or draperies. Third, basements were eliminated, and buildings were constructed on concrete piles. Fourth, elevators stopped only at the first, third, and fifth floors in the six-story buildings. Fifth, builders used concrete slabs for both floors and ceilings, and whitewashed the latter to resemble plaster. Sixth, chief architect William F. R. Ballard designed the buildings themselves in a Y-shaped configuration to maximize daylight, privacy, and air circulation. The





(left) Queensbridge Houses have always included retail establishments, such as Sheffield Farms Super Market. The store sold food, beverages, and household products. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

(below) A bedroom in newly opened Queensbridge Houses in 1941. The largest public housing development in the nation, Queensbridge includes some 3,100 apartments and about 7,000 residents in 96 six-story buildings in six superblocks. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

buildings covered only 25 percent of the 49.5 acre development. Ballard incorporated playgrounds, garden walks, and lawns to provide recreational facilities and green space.[2]

Queensbridge offered residents a modest range of social services and cultural assets. The two community centers on the site included a nursery school, a baby clinic operated by the city's health department, a gymnasium, social rooms, and a kitchen. Adjacent to Queensbridge was Queensbridge Park, fifteen acres of lawns and playgrounds between Vernon Boulevard and the East River, established by the WPA in conjunction with NYCHA and the city's Park Department. The park afforded majestic views of the Queensboro Bridge and the midtown Manhattan skyline.[3]



NYCHA co-founder and board member Mary Simkhovitch speaks at the Queensbridge community center dedication on May 4, 1940. Simkhovitch was a prominent settlement house leader during the Progressive Era and a public housing advocate in the 1930s and 1940s. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.





(left) *Queensbridge Houses offered residents many social and cultural programs, including this tap dance class, in 1941. Recreational activities fostered a sense of community among tenants. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*

(below) *Young children at the Queensbridge nursery school, probably in 1940. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*

Bounded by Queens Plaza North, Vernon Boulevard, 40th Avenue, and 21st Street, Queensbridge Houses opened in 1939 in a ceremony attended by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and NYCHA co-founder and Vice Chair Mary Simkhovitch. The development, consisting of 96 buildings in six superblocks, represented the commitment of government to provide public housing for the working poor. It also reflected LaGuardia's desire to modernize the city. He became a champion of public housing, underscoring the civic, social, and economic benefits of clearance and redevelopment. The inaugural residents were delighted. Their apartments featured electric refrigerators, gas ranges, and kitchen cabinets. "We have five-and-a-half rooms, all of them bright and sunny—and a bathroom all to ourselves," remarked one mother, formerly a resident of a Brooklyn tenement.[4]

*Harlem River Houses **(right)**, dedicated in 1937, and Williamsburg Houses **(below)**, in 1938, were both initially segregated by race, in contrast to Queensbridge. In 1941, Queensbridge was made up of 3,097 white and 52 black families. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*





Demographic Change

Among other policies that reshaped Queensbridge in the postwar decades, shifting tenant eligibility requirements were particularly significant. At the outset, NYCHA families had to meet stringent financial and social criteria. To gain residency, they were required to have a breadwinner with a stable occupation. Potential residents had to possess bank accounts, insurance policies, and housekeeping skills. But, as a federal project, mostly funded by the USHA, Queensbridge was different. Out of a desire not to compete with the private market, the federal government wanted to reserve public housing for only the poorest families. At Queensbridge, NYCHA resisted federal mandates somewhat but conceded to allow for 20 to 30 percent of the complex's population to be made up of families on public assistance. From the start, Queensbridge was mostly a white project, in contrast to the segregated Williamsburg and Harlem River Houses. In 1941, Queensbridge residents included 3,097 white and 52 black families.



Two little girls, one white and one black, play "house" together at the Queensbridge nursery school in 1942.

The earliest residents recalled many interracial friendships.[5]

The postwar era witnessed major demographic change at Queensbridge. Military veteran families constituted a considerable percentage of the population. In 1947, NYCHA began evicting tenants whose annual income exceeded $3,000. In 1953, NYCHA established 21 additional categories of "non-desirability" in the tenant evaluation process, including narcotics addiction, single parenthood, out-of-wedlock children, teen parenthood, "highly irregular work history," alcoholism, and mental illness. Though falling into any one category did not necessarily lead to rejection, it made placement more difficult and in effect barred most residents on public assistance. Amid the suburbanization of the upwardly mobile white working and lower middle classes and the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities, Queensbridge changed in racial composition during the mayoral administrations of Robert F. Wagner, Jr. (1954 – 1965) and John Lindsay (1966 – 1973). Many current Queensbridge residents were products of the Great Migration, including Nellie Pettway (from Alabama), April Simpson



Collecting rent at Queensbridge in 1949. In 1947, NYCHA had established a policy to evict residents whose annual income exceeded $3,000, aiming to create model tenants through strict financial criteria. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

(Alabama), Stanley Kline (North Carolina), and Rita Frazier (Virginia). By 1969, the complex's population was 63 percent black, 21 percent white, and 16 percent Puerto Rican. Nineteen percent of Queensbridge families were on welfare.[6]

Many former residents maintained ties to Queensbridge, including the family of New York State Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan. Nolan's father Philip grew up in Queensbridge, along with his four siblings, raised by their parents Sarah and Philip, Irish immigrants. Life became immeasurably difficult for the Nolans when the elder Phillip died of a heart attack. "You see this was a big thing in our family, that here's a widow with five young children, and she was able to have an apartment in Queensbridge and how important that was," reflects Assemblywoman Nolan. Sarah worked tirelessly, and the family took advantage of local amenities. Young Philip, for example, boxed at the Jacob Riis community center, swam at the Astoria pool, and took summer vacations in the country through the Fresh Air Fund. The family left Queensbridge in 1954 following the death of Sarah. Philip got married soon after, and Catherine was born in 1958 in Syracuse. The Nolans returned to Queens, taking up residence in Ridgewood. But Catherine never forgot her family roots in Long Island City. Elected to the 37th Assembly District in 1984 to represent western Queens, she took a special interest in Queensbridge, providing funds to re-establish the Riis Center as a social focal



(left) *Sarah Nolan, grandmother of New York State Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan, circa 1953 at Queensbridge Houses. Sarah and her husband Philip were Irish immigrants. They raised five children at Queensbridge. Following her death in 1954, the Nolan family left Queensbridge and moved to Syracuse. Courtesy Catherine Nolan.*

(below) *Philip Nolan, father of New York State Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan, circa 1953 at Queensbridge Houses. He had just left the Air Force and was celebrating his engagement to his fiancée Margaret. Courtesy Catherine Nolan.*

point at the complex. "I always say I'm NYCHA once removed," remarks Nolan.[7]

Liberal policies at the city and federal level during the Lindsay administration remade NYCHA yet again. Faced with criticism from welfare rights advocates and federal and city policymakers, NYCHA relaxed admission standards in 1968, announcing it would no longer "deal with the morals of applicants." The housing authority reduced the number of non-desirability categories from 21 to 6. Queensbridge resident Susan Boyce, who moved to the complex at the age of 9 in 1969 with her family, recalled the change in eligibility requirements. "When I first moved into Queensbridge," she remembered, "you had to be married. Now you have more single parents." Federal legislators made other changes. In 1969, Congress passed the Brooke Amendment to the National Housing Act, capping public housing rents nationally at 25% of a tenant's income. The measure in effect raised rents for the working poor and reduced them for welfare tenants. Public housing authorities lost rental income, used mostly for maintenance and daily operation costs. Congress failed to provide subsidies to compensate for the revenue. NYCHA lost millions of dollars and faced the





Margaret Nolan (nee Muccio), mother of New York State Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan, circa 1953 at Queensbridge Houses. She and her fiancé Philip had just purchased a car. They would be married in 1954. Courtesy Catherine Nolan.

threat of bankruptcy. By 1971, about 27 percent of NYCHA tenants were on welfare, nearly double the amount from ten years earlier. As NYCHA became more accessible to poorer people, eviction procedures changed. In 1970, because of the Supreme Court case *Escalera v. New York City Housing Authority,* NYCHA lost leverage in evicting residents found to be in violation of their tenancy due to criminal behavior. NYCHA residents facing tenancy termination gained due process protections.[8]

Public housing faced a stigma in the nation at this time. In 1972, Pruitt-Igoe, a public housing complex in St. Louis known for poverty, crime, and racial segregation, was imploded with explosives by federal and state authorities, symbolizing the failure of urban renewal. While some critics cited the modernist architectural design as the cause of the demise, others pointed to the systemic mismanagement of the project, the decline of manufacturing in St. Louis, the flight of the white middle class to the suburbs, the high number of unemployed tenants, and local political opposition to public housing. In 1973, President Richard Nixon announced a moratorium on the construction of public housing. The decision reflected the ongoing federal disinvestment in publicly built and managed housing.[9]

As other housing authorities struggled nationwide, NYCHA fared comparatively well for several reasons. To begin with, it had a more mixed population of resident families, particularly those still residing in higher-









Images from the televised demolition of Pruitt-Igoe public housing buildings in St. Louis in April 1972. City authorities imploded the towers due to high vacancy rates and crime, prompting conservative critics to argue that Pruitt-Igoe was symbolic of the failure of public housing. Photograph by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

income, city-funded projects. NYCHA management also pursued best practices in policing, renovation, community affairs, and landscape design. These efforts helped NYCHA secure and utilize the maximum possible federal operating subsidies. The success was evident in the demand for public housing in New York. In 1972, NYCHA had a waiting list of 147,000 families, a negligible vacancy rate, and a turnover rate of only six percent.[10]

Crime

In the 1970s, Queensbridge saw an increase in crime and gang activities, mirroring broader trends in the city. New York was not unique in this regard. Most large American cities experienced a spike in crime, as suburbanization and deindustrialization depleted urban centers of economic resources. Queensbridge residents expressed concern to local authorities about unsafe conditions at the complex. In 1971, in a letter to NYCHA chair Simeon Golar, City Councilman-at-Large Eugene Mastropieri discussed the vulnerability of Queensbridge residents and called for better services. "I would appreciate the immediate appointment of more housing police in the area and improved lighting in or about the project," Mastropieri advised Golar. Christina North, a leader at the United Cultural Appeal of Long Island City, obtained 1,600 names of Queensbridge residents on petitions calling on NYCHA to restore



Rookie patrolmen from the Housing Authority Police Department train in defense and arrest tactics in 1963 at Queensbridge. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

central lobby apartment doorbells, lock roof exit doors at night, and establish a curfew for teenagers. Meanwhile, as the city cut social services after the 1975 fiscal crisis, the rate of families on welfare at Queensbridge jumped, peaking at 25 percent in 1978.[11]

In the 1980s, the crack cocaine epidemic in New York hit Queensbridge especially hard, leading to rampant drug trafficking, loitering, and a spike in shootings at the development. "I can say things definitely got out of hand during the crack era," remembered Queensbridge resident Susan Boyce. In 1986, Queensbridge experienced more murders than any other public housing project in the city. "Ain't nothing but crime in here," remarked an elderly Queensbridge resident following the eruption of gunfire in Queensbridge Park at a 1987 concert that resulted in the death of one man and injury to five others. In Queens in general, the murder rate increased by 25 percent from 1987 to 1988. About 38 percent of the homicides were directly related to crack. The epidemic tore at Queensbridge's social fabric, intensifying feelings of fear and mistrust among residents.[12]

Queensbridge became a site of inequality, characterized by a concentration of poverty among mostly African-American residents. Those most marginalized and isolated were young black men. They faced racial discrimination and had few opportunities in the job market. Some turned to illicit activity in the underground economy. Queensbridge became a spatial expression of economic disadvantage and neglect. The trends were chronicled by Queensbridge residents and hip-hop artists Nasir Jones, better known as Nas, and

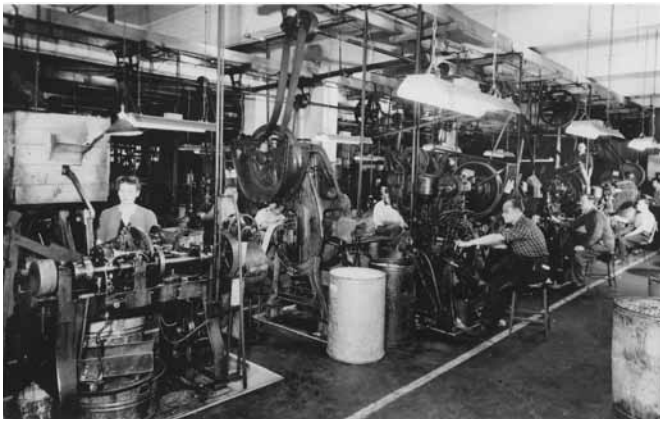


On the corner of 21st Street and 40th Avenue, across from Queensbridge, the Nas mural, dedicated in 2016, is an homage to the rapper's childhood home. His record Illmatic (1994), widely considered to be the finest hip-hop album of all time, is a lyrical portrait of Queensbridge, chronicling gang rivalries, despair, and deprivation. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.

the duo Mobb Deep, consisting of Havoc and Prodigy. Nas, in his debut album *Illmatic* (1994), rhymed about poverty, violence, and drug use at the complex. Arguably the greatest hip-hop album of all time, *Illmatic* documented the trap doors, rooftop snipers, and street corner lookouts of a hellish landscape. "N.Y. State of Mind," the standout track on the album, illuminated the mindset of a kid with grandiose dreams forced to hustle and sell drugs to make ends meet and, in the process, confront the inherent dangers of street life. In *The Infamous* (1995), the second studio album by Mobb Deep, another hip-hop classic, Havoc and Prodigy presented lyrical vignettes about crime and poverty in inner city neighborhoods. Prodigy reflected, "What did we want our sound to be like? The lifestyle that we was living, the lifestyle that we grew up in." The lead single "Shook Ones (Part II)" stood out in particular, offering the perspective of youths engaged in warfare with rival crews. Prodigy intoned, "I got you stuck off the realness, we be the infamous/You heard of us, official Queensbridge murderers."[13]

At the same time, hostility between Queensbridge and local law enforcement increased. Complaints of police brutality were common. The tension boiled over in 1989 following the death of Queensbridge resident Richard Luke in the custody of the Housing Authority Police Department. Luke, an African-American man, died lying face up in a restraining blanket. Housing officers claimed the death was a result of cocaine intoxication and heart failure. Queensbridge residents rejected the police's account, and relatives, friends, and neighbors of Luke led two days of protests. The anger at the rallies was palpable, an expression of simmering resentment at police misconduct. Some 200 demonstrators tried to block traffic on the Queensboro Bridge, where they were stopped by roughly an equal number of police officers. Nas recalled the standoff. "The neighborhood wasn't having it," he reflected. "When [Luke] was killed by the cops, that was around the time a lot of race crimes were happening, whether it be police or just being in the wrong neighborhood in New York. Cops were always acquitted." Ultimately, a state investigation found that Luke choked to death on his own vomit.[14]

Crime at Queensbridge remained stubbornly high in the 1990s and 2000s, as it dropped precipitous-





(left) *Eagle Electric Company workers operate their machines in a Long Island City factory in 1945. Just after World War II, when manufacturing activity peaked in local factories, warehouses, and refineries, Long Island City was referred to as the "workshop of America."*

(below) *A view of industrial Long Island City, with newly constructed Queensbridge Houses at the left, in 1941. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.*

ly in the city during the administrations of Rudolph Giuliani (1994 – 2001) and Michael Bloomberg (2002 – 2013). In 1992, at an emotional community meeting, Queensbridge residents expressed frustration at the ongoing violence around them. "I was pushing a baby stroller and a bullet whizzed past my head and hit somebody else," Janet Cole, president of the Queensbridge Tenants' Association, told *The New York Times*. Nearly 100 tenants supported an unsuccessful proposal to hire security guards from the Nation of Islam, known for their tough stance on drugs, to patrol Queensbridge and augment the size of the HAPD.[15]

In the 1990s, city and federal officials, eager to demonstrate their toughness on crime, embraced punitive measures. In the process, they made increasing numbers of arrests, focusing on urban neighborhoods made up of poor people of color like Queensbridge. In response to high crime rates in the city, Rudolph



One Court Square, commonly known as the Citigroup Building, opened in 1990 in Long Island City, becoming the tallest building in New York City outside of Manhattan, at 658 feet, until it was surpassed in 2019 by the Brooklyn Point Tower. Pictured here in 1996, the Citigroup Building stood out as the dominant edifice in the neighborhood, surrounded by low-rise row houses, auto shops, and manufacturers, until the 2001 rezoning of Long Island City facilitated the construction of high-rise office buildings, condominiums, and hotels. Photograph by Demetri Ganiaris.

Giuliani and his Police Commissioner William Bratton put into practice aggressive policing techniques based on the "broken windows" criminological theory of social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling. In an influential 1982 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Wilson and Kelling argued that relatively minor but seemingly pervasive nuisances in public spaces made cities unattractive and undesirable. If tolerated and neglected, small problems, such as broken windows and vandalism, invited more serious crime. It was the responsibility of city governments, the authors concluded, to fight petty crime with the same intensity as dangerous offenses. In effect, Wilson and Kelling associated the demise of cities with antisocial behavior and deflected attention from structural deficiencies in the economy as an explanation for urban blight. Giuliani and Bratton embraced the neoconservative "broken windows" theory and cracked down on "disorderly" individuals, targeting drunks, addicts, panhandlers, loiterers, prostitutes, rowdy teenagers, graffiti writers, and the mentally disturbed. Most people arrested were young men of color and low income. The strategy, called "zero tolerance," in tandem with CompStat, a statistical approach to mapping crime geographically, had dramatic results. Crime in New York plummeted, astonishing observers worldwide. But zero tolerance also led to allegations of civil rights abuses and accusations of police brutality.[16]



A view of Queensbridge Houses in 2019 with new structures and buildings under construction across 21st Street. The high-rise condominiums, hotels, and office towers in the area reflect the disparity of income between Queensbridge residents and newcomers to the neighborhood. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.

The Vue Hotel opened in 2017 on 40-47 22nd Street, one block from Queensbridge. The hotel promises guests "boutique comfort" and highlights its proximity "near the subway and Manhattan attractions including Central Park, Rockefeller Center, Times Square, the Empire State Building and Madison Square Garden." Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.



In 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act, providing for 100,000 new police officers, $9.7 billion in funding for prisons, and $6.1 billion in funding for prevention programs. It was the largest crime bill in U.S. history. The congressional authors of the legislation implemented a three-strikes rule, mandating a lifetime in prison for those convicted of a serious violent crime with two or more prior convictions, including drug possession. The national prison population doubled in two decades. In 2015, former President Bill Clinton expressed regret for signing the bill. Queensbridge residents spoke of young men of color disproportionately affected by the law, imprisoned for lengthy sentences. "See my brain is incarcerated," Nas raps on *Illmatic*.[17]

Gentrification

Deindustrialization and gentrification transformed Long Island City from an industrial to a post-industrial



***(above)** Bikers on the sidewalk riding Citi Bikes by Vernon Boulevard across from Queensbridge Houses in 2019. Sometimes referred to as "runners and bikers" by Queensbridge residents, the new upper-middle-class professionals in Long Island City reflect the gentrification of the neighborhood. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.*

(right) *The Long Island City waterfront remained industrial in character until the 1990s, when real estate developers, supported by city and state authorities, began to transform the area into an affluent residential and commercial area. The Manhattan skyline is visible in the background in this 1974 photograph. Photograph by Gildo Nicolo Spadoni.*



(below) *Silvercup Studios in the foreground with recently constructed high-rise condominiums in the background and the Citigroup Building, on the right. A bread manufacturing plant until 1975, Silvercup became a film and television production facility in 1983. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.*



neighborhood from the 1980s to the 2010s. The trends, in effect, deepened the economic and social isolation of Queensbridge. In Long Island City, Queensbridge became a veritable island of poverty amid a sea of affluence.

Referred to as the "workshop of America" after World War II, when industrial activity peaked in local factories, warehouses, and refineries, Long Island City began to decline as a manufacturing district in the 1970s. During the postwar era, deindustrialization transformed the economies of New York and other American cities in the northeast and Midwest. From 1950 to 1975, New York lost about 66 percent of its factory jobs. Against the backdrop of population decline, infrastructure deterioration, and failing schools, the demise of industry contributed to a crisis in New York and other cities. It also decreased good employment prospects for Queensbridge residents. A community activist remembered a time when a Queensbridge tenant could "walk down the street and find a job." In gentrified Long Island City, the days of finding decent blue-collar jobs in the neighborhood were all but over.[18]



The transformation of the Long Island City industrial waterfront into a residential and commercial area accelerated in the 1990s with the establishment of Queens West, a redevelopment project on 74 acres in Hunters Point. The addition of ferry service in 1998, marked in this ribbon-cutting ceremony with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and other city officials, made it convenient for Queens West commuters to travel to Manhattan. Courtesy Queens Borough President's Office.

(right) *The iconic Pepsi-Cola sign, created in 1936 by Artkraft Strauss Sign Corporation and designated a New York City landmark in 2016, is located in Gantry Plaza State Park in Long Island City on the East River waterfront. The sign, 120 feet long and 60 feet high, visible from Manhattan's east side, was initially located on top of the former Pepsi bottling plant that closed in 1999. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.*



(below) *Prominently featured in Gantry Plaza State Park, a 12-acre state park in the Hunters Point section of Long Island City, these gantries were part of the former dockyard and industrial district. Gantries included car float transfer bridges, served by barges that carried freight railcars between Queens and Manhattan. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.*



Gentrification happened in fits and starts in Long Island City, driven by state and city policies to encourage real estate developers to reuse vacant industrial facilities in creative ways or replace them with high-rise condominiums, hotels, office buildings, and recreational space. Silvercup Studios, a film and television production facility close to Queensbridge, exemplifies the adaptive reuse of industrial space, supported by state tax breaks. Located in the former Silvercup Bakery building, a bread manufacturing plant that closed in 1975 after a union strike, Silvercup Studios opened in 1983 and helped give Long Island City an identity as a center of artistic production. The western part of the neighborhood witnessed the demolition of manu-

facturing buildings and the construction of residential towers. Queens West, a redevelopment project on 74 acres in the Hunters Point section of the district near Queensbridge, for instance, embodies the transformation of the East River waterfront from a derelict industrial area to an upscale residential and commercial enclave. Authorized by the state legislature in 1984 and co-sponsored by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and the Empire State Development Corporation, Queens West includes 11 residential buildings, more than 170,000 square feet of retail, two public schools, and 13 acres of parkland and recreational space. In 1983, Port Authority executive director Peter C. Goldmark Jr., seeing the lucrative potential for redevelopment by the East River, observed that "Americans like to shop by the waterfront, eat by the waterfront, work by the waterfront, sit in parks by the waterfront."[19]

The gentrification of Long Island City accelerated with the 2001 rezoning of the neighborhood to permit office, retail, and residential development in an area previously zoned for commercial and light industrial use. Proposed by the City Planning Department and approved by New York City Council, the plan facilitated high-rise development in 37 centrally located blocks made up of low-rise buildings by Queens Plaza. The goal was to foster investment, take advantage of the neighborhood's mass transit and proximity to Manhattan, and attract commercial tenants otherwise inclined to move to Jersey City. Local manufacturers opposed the rezoning, out of concern of being priced out by rising real estate values. City Council responded with a plan to preserve the neighborhood's 17,000 manufacturing jobs. Despite the forecast of municipal leaders, the 2001 rezoning did not work out as anticipated. Though City Planning predicted only 300 housing units would be constructed, about 13,000 were built, and more than 95 percent were market-rate luxury housing. One example was the Hayden Apartments by Rockrose Developers. With rental units beginning at $2,655 for a studio, residents had access to a dog-grooming station, yoga studio, private rooftop park, library, and a basketball court.[20]

The gentrification of Long Island City yielded few benefits to Queensbridge residents while it exacerbated income inequality. Though some tenants appreciated the increased bus service, availability of organic gro-



Located on 40th Avenue, across the street from Queensbridge, Urban Upbound provides underserved New Yorkers employment services and financial counseling. Founded in 2004 by Queensbridge resident Bishop Mitchell Taylor, Urban Upbound, with offices also in the South Bronx and East Harlem, collaborates with city agencies, businesses, volunteers, and residents to promote economic mobility. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.

cery stores, and the renovation of Queensbridge Park, they realized that these improvements were meant not for themselves but rather the newcomers to Long Island City, mostly upper-middle-class professionals, often called "runners and bikers." "All this lighting, fixing up the grounds, we had trees that were laying down, falling all over the place, now all of a sudden the dead trees are gone, and they are putting in pretty trees to grow. . . . This is not for us," remarked Queensbridge resident Marilyn Jones. The average income in the neighborhood increased more than 50 percent from 2000 to 2010. But at Queensbridge the median household income in 2018 was $15,843, considerably below the federal poverty line for a family of four. Nearly 60 percent of households relied on food stamps. "We are going to be strangers in our own community," commented Queensbridge resident Margaret Barnes. Still, as a result of their status as public housing tenants, secure in their tenancy, the gentrification did not displace Queensbridge residents. But they noted that the new hotels and businesses did not hire them and that overall there was a diminishing number of employment opportunities in the area, outside of low-wage jobs in the service sector. Queensbridge Tenant Association President April Simpson remarked:

> Long Island City was nothing but factories years ago, a waterfront area that wasn't really used . . . Now,

> it's prime real estate. They are building extensively over here. This is another fight of mine. They are not hiring people from this community, in these new condos or hotels they're building up. We've protested, we've picketed, they don't hire anyone, not only from Queensbridge, but Astoria [Houses], Ravenswood [Houses], or Woodside [Houses]. They are not hiring any of the public housing residents in these communities. . . . So, who are they building this up for? And it's not affordable to any. It's affordable to the wealthy. Not even the middle class can afford it. So, it's definitely not for the poor people.

Indeed, the recently constructed developments did not merge into the existing economic and social fabric of Long Island City. Urban planners, city leaders, and real estate developers viewed the neighborhood as an investment opportunity and catered to the needs of the upper middle class. "Include us in the planning," insisted Gail A. Brown, Director of Senior Services at Queensbridge. The transformation of Long Island City was stark, emblematic of trends not only on the Brooklyn-Queens waterfront but also of neoliberal policy that subsidized the expansion of the corporate and real estate sectors. More than 40 apartment buildings were constructed in the neighborhood between 2010 and 2018. On average a unit in the buildings cost more than $1 million. The high-rise condominiums and office buildings surrounding low-rise Queensbridge Houses became a potent symbol of New York's second Gilded Age, an unmistakable Tale of Two Cities.[21]

Community

Queensbridge residents persevere despite an unfavorable political and economic climate. They take pride in their community, even if many aspire to move out. "I love Queensbridge," Tenant Association President April Simpson expressed. The average length of residency is eighteen years. They draw strength from their diversity. In 2013, the population was roughly 61 percent black, 30 percent Latino, 2 percent white, 2 percent Asian, and 1 percent American Indian. At Queensbridge, they build social networks, take educational classes, and participate in cultural activities. In interviews with Abt Associates and the New York Uni-

696 Build Queensbridge is a program for Queensbridge residents ages 16 to 24, established in 2015 by the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement to decrease violence and build relationships among young people. Photograph by Saveliy Ukhlin.



versity Furman Center, tenants reflected about "sticking together [if] something happened." A teenager observed, "Everybody stands together here. . . . It's like one whole unit." Even if people don't know each other, they would "lend a helping hand [if] something was to go down."[22]

Queensbridge community organizations help bring residents together and advocate for political and financial support. The Tenants' Association works closely with local New York City Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer on issues of maintenance and renovations. The Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement is the social center at Queensbridge. For young people, the Riis Academy offers tutoring, college preparation, field trips, and programs for teenage boys and girls about relationship choices. For senior citizens, the Riis Senior Center serves lunch every weekday in a cafeteria by the community garden plots. It also offers health screenings, financial education workshops, exercise classes in Tai Chi, dancing, and walking, and courses in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). "I love my senior center," reflected resident Mar-



From 2018 to 2019, La Guardia Community College Gardiner-Shenker student scholars conducted oral histories with Queensbridge senior citizens at the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement to add to the NYCHA Collection at La Guardia and Wagner Archives. In 2019, Queensbridge seniors danced at an event at the Riis Center that showcased the work of the students. Courtesy NYCHA Collection.

garet Barnes. "It's not only a place to come to, but a place to grow. We have computer and arts classes. In the summer, we do swimming at the Astoria pool." Jesús Merchan, another resident, added, "Now that I am in Queensbridge Houses and go to the senior center I have more friends, more social interaction. I don't feel alone."[23]

And yet, challenges remain. Crime continues to undermine social life at Queensbridge, despite a drop in rates from the 1980s and 1990s. In 2018, five crews, defined as gangs with between 15 and 30 members, were active in Queensbridge, in addition to four in nearby Ravenswood Houses. "It seems as if the territorial beef between Ravenswood and Queensbridge has been ramped up," commented Bishop Mitchell Taylor, the senior pastor of Center of Hope International, a non-denominational church located by Queensbridge. "A lot of kids need a father figure," observed Queensbridge resident Clovia Thomas. In 2015, the Riis Center announced a Cure Violence program to decrease violence among young people as part of Mayor Bill de Blasio's Mayor's Action Plan. Called 696 Build Queensbridge, the program uses "violence interrupters" and outreach workers to deescalate conflicts through mediation and communication. Among other initiatives, the 696 program in 2016 organized an anti-violence walk through the neighborhood, a public screening of a documentary on the effects of violence, and a community cookout co-sponsored by the Tenants' Association and Father Alive in the Hood (FAITH).[24]

The greatest challenges stem from the ongoing decline in public support for public housing at the federal and state levels and from deteriorating buildings, made worse by NYCHA malfeasance. NYCHA dwellings

citywide may need as much as $32 billion in repairs. The authority's aging buildings suffer from leaky roofs, mold, broken elevators, and faulty heating systems. Chronic problems at Queensbridge include rat infestation and long waiting periods for indoor maintenance, both in apartments and common areas. In other ways, Queensbridge is relatively fortunate. In 2015, Mayor de Blasio announced that the city will invest $60 million in rooftop replacement construction and that the federal government will contribute an additional $27 million. Still, many problems loom. In 2018, in the wake of a lead paint scandal and heat outages at numerous NYCHA dwellings, the federal government investigated the housing authority's governing structure and issued a scathing report, accusing officials of misconduct, indifference, and outright lies in the management of the city's public housing. NYCHA admitted the conduct and agreed to oversight by a federal monitor, among other concessions. In the final analysis, the future of NYCHA likely involves the formation of public-private partnerships in the operation of the authority. The NextGen NYCHA plan, established in 2015, seeks to shift some housing developments to private management to balance budgets, provide better service, and collect rents from tenants. What this means for Queensbridge Houses remains to be seen.[25]

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The Queensbridge Oral History Project, An Overview

By Molly Rosner



In the fall of 2018, a talented group of LaGuardia Community College students embarked on a project to document the experiences of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) residents. These stories were intended to enrich the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives' NYCHA collection, which until this project mostly reflected the government and the agency's perspective on public housing. The vastness of public housing in New York City necessitated that the students focus on one public housing project. Queensbridge Houses were selected based on the fact that it is the largest public housing development in the country, and its vicinity to the college.

With guidance from the staff at the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives, the Gardiner-Shenker Student Scholars were introduced to primary historical sources and spent





time reading archival documents from the NYCHA collection. Three LaGuardia Community College Social Science professors, Filip Stabrowski, Steven Lang, and Arianna Martinez, held regular seminars to discuss the historical context and development of NYCHA.

In addition to primary documents , the students read secondary sources including chapters from Fritz Umbach's *Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy*, Nicholas Bloom's *Public Housing That Worked: New York in the Twentieth Century*, and Tom Angotti's *New York For Sale*. They also screened the documentary *Queensbridge: The Other Side* produced by Selena Blake.

The students had the opportunity to meet with public housing expert, Nicholas Bloom, Professor of Social Science at NYIT. After the session with the students, Bloom reflected, "By having the students work with the residents on these kinds of oral history projects, they have the opportunity to confront their own … prejudice about public housing. But also in the … materials they create, they show that other side of public housing."[1] The students also met with LaGuardia Community College Music Professor William Fulton to discuss the history of hip hop at Queensbridge.





After this initial preparation, students attended an oral history workshop to learn best practices for conducting oral history interviews.[2] Students were introduced to Queensbridge tenants through a relationship that the Archives forged with the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House, which provides meeting space, activities, classes and meals to seniors living in the complex. The tenants who most frequently attend the programs and meals at the Riis Center are the older population of Queensbridge – ranging in age from about 50 to 90 years old. For this reason, this first phase of the oral history project focuses on an older generation of tenants, whose stories often span decades of living in Queensbridge housing.

The students ranged in age, experience as researchers, and came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Some had grown up in public housing while others had never personally encountered it.

The students first met the residents when they were introduced and volunteered to distribute food at their Valentine's Day meal. Some of them also returned to the Riis Center on their own, others attended a Tenants Association meeting (at which one student read an original poem), and a group visited for the Riis Center's Black History Month celebration.

The celebration was filled with performances, historical reenactments, dancing, singing, prayer and laughter. By meeting tenants repeatedly before asking people to be interviewed, the students and residents became more comfortable with each other. Students came to appreciate the Riis Center as a hub for residents to be together.





One student, Angela Rojas, shared,

> We were able to attend special events at the center, from spending Valentine's Day with them to seeing amazing performances for Black history month… It's safe to say that having the community center right in the middle of it all, truly brings everyone together in a way that is not so common anymore in this day and age.[3]

Gail Brown, Director of Senior Services at the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House, was crucial to forging a connection with the residents who attend the Center. It was their trust in her that enabled them to trust the LaGuardia students, faculty, and staff. Having a contact at the Riis Center who knew the residents so intimately was the key to building the trust needed for a successful oral history project.

The students continued to develop strategies for asking good questions and practiced interviewing with





each other. In a group, they went over the questions that they planned to ask the tenants.

The students asked tenants – most of whom had lived in the projects for decades – about issues they had learned about in the archival documents like maintenance, crime, community policing, and employment. One student, Channing Powers, saw what he had read confirmed in his some of his interviews, "Ms. Jones validated what the [student] team was shown in the archives, which was the effectiveness of keeping crime down while police were on-foot patrolling the grounds, and the ineffectiveness when they suddenly switched to policing from their vehicles." Channing initially stuck closely to his list of questions, but as he became a more confident interviewer, he realized he could trust that the tenant was a trove of information and would have things to say about the topics he had researched and beyond. Channing said, "If given the opportunity to interview again, I would give more space to each subject to reveal what those experiences were like..."[4] This was an important lesson for the students, that despite all their planning the most important thing they could do was listen and give the seniors space to expound

on their answers. This valuable lesson could only have been learned through practice.



Although the older tenants spoke frequently about the strength of their community and the importance of their neighbors and the Riis Center, the harsh realities of an underfunded public housing system consistently came to light during the interviews. Margaret Barnes told a student,

> I have to call constantly if I want something done. One thing that I'm trying to fight right now and trying to get a petition [for] is why we have to wait so long to get things fixed, if they fix the small things, it won't go into a bigger project. The intercoms. If you don't call them several times, there should be no reason or have someone explain to us what's going on if they are going to do it or not do it.[5]

These were issues that the students had encountered in their research and the archival record was now bolstered by first-hand reports of tenants' experiences.

The Film and Screenings

All of the interviews were filmed at the Riis Center by professional filmmakers. The interviews were edited into a short film about the project, which went through multiple drafts. The first version of the film included excerpts about different themes that the interviewees had touched on, such as maintenance, crime, community, and the reputation of public housing. This film was screened in June 2018 at LaGuardia Community College, with the seniors in attendance.





This experience was one of the most moving moments of the project. Before the screening, there were brief introductions by representatives of both LaGuardia Community College and Queensbridge Houses. In her introductory remarks Gail Brown shared that primary mission was to make sure the seniors felt at ease. At a screening of a preliminary cut of a film featuring the seniors' stories she shared with the crowd how protective she is of the community, "Sometimes I'm up at night wondering 'what else can I do to make sure that you all age in place comfortably?'"

After showing the film, the group held an intimate and powerful discussion about the project and the film. The residents and students shared what they've learned during the project and what it meant to them. Students expressed that they'd found pride in their own experiences living in public housing and the residents emphasized the importance of the communities they've built during both happy and challenging times.

A number of residents, too, expressed how significant this project was to them. One student, Mary Naughton, had interviewed Nellie Pettway, who

comes from a long and famous line of quilt makers in the South, and found out that, "some of her quilts were featured in the Whitney Museum." Mary gained an understanding of the rich, varied, and often underappreciated backgrounds of Queensbridge residents and Ms. Pettway shared that even though she had previously been invited to the White House to show her quilts, she had been unable to sleep the night before the screening because she was so excited.

Susan Boyce, a resident interviewed during the project, echoed this sentiment: "People think that people who live on NYCHA property are not well-educated, well-respected people. We have lot of people here who have meaningful jobs, blue collar or executive position, correctional officers, nurses, nurse's aides, teachers, teaching assistants, we have all kind of people here who do different work and they take pride in their home and where they live…"[6]

The film was edited according to the feedback the Archives received from the seniors at the screenings. When they felt it focused too much on stereotypes of public housing and stories that the media emphasizes too much, the film was edited to focus more on the project itself and the community that the residents







have created within the development. This process of revisions gave the seniors the opportunity to control their narratives and be a part of the filmmaking process.

When the final version of the film was screened in February, 2019, the seniors were thankful and excited by what they saw. Some of the seniors and students shared their thoughts to the audience of over 100 people.

Conclusion

These filmed interviews have been transcribed and are currently being added to the NYCHA collection at the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives. These recordings will begin to add tenant voices and perspectives to the NYCHA collection, and will provide researchers with information from the people who know Queensbridge most intimately.

Since this project, a number of students have presented their work at conferences within the College and elsewhere. Amanda Jones presented her work at the Oral History Association in Montreal. Through this she gained experience talking to peers, scholars, and a wider audience. She received feedback from experts in Oral History and could reflect on her own methodology as an oral historian.



The next phase of this project will focus on a younger demographic of tenants at Queensbridge Houses. A few new students have taken up the task

of researching at the archives and conducting interviews. Already, the perspectives that the younger generation are sharing with the students differs dramatically from the stories of their elders.

Throughout this project there have been many levels of learning that took place simultaneously – about content (what jobs people had, when they came to live at Queensbridge, etc.), about getting to know your neighbors, but also about the common misconceptions about public housing that these interviews were working to dispel.



Endnotes

1 Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Interview by Molly Rosner and Paul Lewis Anderson, September 18, 2018.

2 For more on these workshops see the accompanying essay, "The Craft and Pedagogy of Oral History in the Archives" by Molly Rosner in this volume.

3 Angela Rojas, Student, LaGuardia Community College, April 9, 2018.

4 Channing Powers, Student, interview with Molly Rosner, May 21, 2018.

5 Margaret Barnes, Resident, interview with Javon Sanders, March 23, 2018.

6 Susan Boyce, Resident, interview with Mary E. Naughton at Jacob A. Riis Settlement House, March 23, 2018.

Voices of Queensbridge



What follows are excerpts from the oral histories of Queensbridge residents. They discuss a range of topics, such as family, community, maintenance, crime, and gentrification. These particular residents regularly attend the Riis Senior Center for meals, classes, programs, and social events. They illustrate the diversity of Queensbridge, a mostly black and Latino public housing development. Some have roots in the South and are products of the Great Migration; others are immigrants from Latin America. Some arrived at Queensbridge as children or young adults. Others came later in life from other public housing complexes. Still others landed at Queensbridge following stints in private housing. All were in search of an affordable place to live. And they all found positive outlets at Queensbridge. The senior center in particular fosters social cohesion among them. These residents have a range of viewpoints. Their nuanced opinions reveal the rich texture of Queensbridge culture. Though Queensbridge housing is monolithic, the residents certainly are not. Most, for example, are concerned about the gentrification of Long Island City and view the pricey nearby condominiums as symptomatic of policies that benefit the upper-middle-class and leave them behind, while others see potential employment opportunities and enjoy a beautifully landscaped waterfront. Some discuss tense police relations while others credit law enforcement for the recent decrease in crime. Almost all express dismay about poor building maintenance. In sum, Queensbridge residents, to quote poet Walt Whitman, contain multitudes. Their reflections provide a snapshot of life at the nation's largest public housing development. These vignettes are part of lengthier oral histories conducted by LaGuardia Community College's Gardiner-Shenker student scholars. The full transcripts are part of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) Collection at LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.



April Simpson

April Simpson interview by Amanda Jones

On family history, crime, maintenance, police relations, gentrification

April Simpson: Both my parents were from Alabama. My mom was from Montgomery, my dad from Tuskegee. They had mutual friends, and my aunt introduced my uncle to my mother, and my mother liked him but she wound up with my father because my uncle looked at her like a friend. He introduced her to my father, his brother, so they got together.

Amanda Jones: Interesting. How did they move from Alabama to New York?

AS: My older sister was born in Alabama. As you know from history, Alabama was racially horrible. There were no opportunities there. My father had a 5th or 6th grade education. He was one of the providers for his family as well as his siblings. He had to work at an early age, same as my mom. She was a midwife. She was the second oldest of my grandmother's 16 children. My father's mother had 18 [children], they worked the fields, this and that. Then they had an opportunity to live in New York. There were relatives that were living here that invited them to come live here. There were more opportunities here for them.

AJ: Have you ever lived outside of Queensbridge?

AS: Only for a summer. I was in Alabama for the whole summer, basically that's it.

AJ: There is a perception that public housing has been riddled with [crime and drug] problems.

AS: First of all, that's a misconception. [Drugs don't affect] just public housing separately. It's even in the

suburbs. However, while it was here in public housing, or what they call low-income housing, there really wasn't any attention to it. They were giving attention to it when they find it's in the suburbs. And the rural areas, what they call non-urbanite. As long as [the drug problem] was in lower-income, people-of-color communities, it wasn't such a big deal. But when it started reaching out to more suburbanites and seeing their kids becoming strung out on drugs and doing things that weren't acceptable, then attention was brought to it. And now, there's a big drug war. We've been fighting that war.

AJ: So, it felt like a big deal here within the community?

AS: It was a big deal here. I have to say there were people that were strung out on drugs, but they were not bad people. They just made bad choices. A lot of the young men and women back in the heroin days they still stuck together. They weren't robbing each other out here. That came from outside people coming in. It wasn't within the community.

AJ: In that same line of questions, how about the community's relationship with the police department?

AS: Actually, when we were younger, the relationship was awesome. The officer, the beat cop, he knew you, he knew your parents, he knew who you belonged to. They walked this community, and they saw you and said, 'listen, don't do this, don't do that.' It was a close – I don't want to say close – it was a respectful relationship. But I also have to say, the police respected us as well as residents here. Today it's a little . . . it's getting better because of the NCO [Neighborhood Coordination Officers] program that Commissioner [Ray] Kelly has, and initiated the beat cop, the community police officer, so we are getting to know the police officers. He is a human being, too, just because he has on a blue uniform. . . . But they are getting to know the people in the community, what our needs are, we see them consistently on a daily basis, and knowing who

our officers are. That relationship is starting to mint. There are incidents where . . . we won't get away from that, but that is a whole other subject, where there are too many times . . . where young black men have lost their lives to a bullet from a police officer. . . . It's too many times this has happened, and nothing has been done.

AJ: Do you think NYCHA has done enough to maintain or fix the building entrances in regard to safety issues?

AS: Not in past times. Now they are. Things are getting better. Right here in Queensbridge we are getting intercom doors, key fob doors, the intercoms are breaking down. My only problem with NYCHA is stop putting Band-Aids on things. Fix it first the right way, and you won't have to keep spending money to repair it because it's good working stuff, not so much that it needs to be brand new, but don't buy cheap stuff from cheap vendors, and the things break down every time you turn around, and you wind up paying more money to repair that, and it's going to get broke again. The residents: you have to be more conscious of your home. We need to watch our kids and make sure they are not destroying property. And it's not only our kids, you have people coming from the outside that come in . . . and they don't have to be on drugs, it's not always a drug-infested situation and [they] feel it's ok to bang on the door, kick the door and things of that nature. We don't own this. We rent. It's home but it's not ours. It's ours without being ours. NYCHA is the landlord. We have to take care of what we have where we live.

AJ: You mentioned Mayor de Blasio. NYCHA for all intents and purposes is bankrupt. Mayor de Blasio has allocated money towards affordable housing. Of course affordable housing is not public housing. How do you feel about the way he is spending city funds?

AS: Long Island City was nothing but factories years ago, a waterfront area that wasn't really used, and this waterfront property. Now, it's prime real estate. They are building extensively over here. This is another fight of mine [as Queensbridge Tenant Association President]. They are not hiring people from this community in these new condos or hotels they're building up. We've protested, we've picketed. They don't hire anyone, not only from Queensbridge, but Astoria [Houses], Ravenswood [Houses], or Woodside [Houses]. They are not hiring any of the public housing residents in these communities. Even in the surrounding communities – you don't have to be living in public housing. You have young people living in private houses that live in Long Island City. They are not hiring them. So, who are they building this up for? And it's not affordable to any. It's affordable to the wealthy. Not even the middle class can afford it. So, it's definitely not for the poor people.

AJ: So, I want to start wrapping this up a bit. We can always came back and talk more. You have been so expressive, and giving so freely of your time and your information. Real quick, can you share with me your favorite or more profound experience having grown up here in Queensbridge?

AS: I have several. So many! One that I shared with Mayor de Blasio, when Mayor Lindsay was mayor and he came to Queensbridge. My brother had a band, they were called Kenny and the Diamonds, and they formally entertained and played for Mayor Lindsay behind the Jacob Riis Community Center. I was in the front to see my brother play and sing, and Mayor Lindsay picked me up, he's tall. I was 8 or 9 years old he picked me up, kissed me on the cheek, put me back down, and I have motion sickness, afraid of heights. I threw up all over his shoes. *[Laughter]* All these secret service men came running trying to get his shoes all cleaned up. They didn't care about me, but my mother grabbed me, and he kept saying, 'Is she ok?' Cause I got a little sick. I didn't realize how tall he was. Mayor Lindsay was very tall, like Mayor de Blasio. I think that was a memorable moment. I have memories of when it snowed, and we used to have the makeshift carts.

They were sleds. We would slide down the hill on our carts. The basketball tournaments where Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Walt Frasier they used to play at the basketball court on 10th Street behind the community center that's being renovated. My brothers played on that court. Henry Hank Carter – they named two hospitals for him in Manhattan, the CEO and founder of Wheelchair Classics – he was my coach, and I played girls basketball when I was younger. Seeing those tournaments and seeing famous people. They are famous now, but when you are a kid, seeing them playing basketball on the court, you didn't think anything of it. I have so many memories. I love Queensbridge, this will always be my home. I don't care where I may travel, I've been to different countries, this will always be home, and it's the best place in the world, and there are great people that live here. There are great people that really deserve the best. Just because we live in public housing, we are human. We are great people. We are retired people. We are working-class people, we are law-abiding citizens, and we just want the best for our community.



Susan Boyce

Susan Boyce interview by Mary Naughton

On family history, demographic change, police relations, Riis Senior Center programs

Mary Naughton: Susan, tell us a little bit about your time here at Queensbridge.

Susan Boyce: Long story. I first moved to Queensbridge in 1969. I was 9 years old. We moved from Jamaica, Queens to here. I went to P.S. 76, which is not too far from here. Then I went to J.H.S. 204, then I graduated from Long Island City High School in 1977. From there I went to John Jay College for a while, and I worked part time at the U.S. Attorney's office Southern District. That was when Robert Fiske was the U.S. Attorney, and that was a good experience. I got the chance to meet a lot of lawyers and judges. President Carter was the president at that time. I continued to work a little bit and had my daughter, and now I am raising my own family here in Queensbridge, so I've been here for a long, long time.

SB: When I first moved into Queensbridge, first of all, you had to be married. No single person really lived here unless they were a widow. . . . The demographic of this area changed from mostly white people to now you had African-Americans moving in, and Latinos moving in. We used to have a mini police department right here in the center. It was community policing. We got to know a lot of the officers that were there, and they looked out for you. The center was here. There were activities here, and I came here to the community center, and gradually things began to change. The demographics of the neighborhood, the ethnicity of the neighborhood, we originally lived on the 40th side of Vernon, our apartment was on Vernon Boulevard. We were on the 6th floor. Unfortunately, it seemed every time we went grocery shopping, the elevator would break. Then, my parents got a larger apartment. They adopted two children that were in foster care, and so we needed a larger apartment, and we moved on to 10th Street, this block here where the center is, and we continued to live there, and the neighborhood basically stayed the same. It's a family unit here. People that

I first met when I moved here, I still know, went to school with a lot of them. They have gotten married, had children, like I have children. I wouldn't call it a community. I would say it's more like a village. The rules for eligibility for moving in did change. Now you have more single parents. The demand for housing increased greatly. You would find that a lot of the children that are raised here that are my age are now raising their families here. So, they didn't necessarily move away. If they go away to college, many come back. And they wind up residing here in their own apartment. I remember the 5 and 10 cent store we used to have here, you could go get all your school supplies and knitting needles, crochet needles, and little hardware things you might need. I remember the original drug store we had here. You got your medications but you could also buy perfume, and other little things. We had a mini boutique that was here. The name of the store was Herman's. But for some reason people were so embarrassed about going there to get stuff, but everybody went in there. I used to have to go in there to get stockings for church on Sunday. You go in get your items and come out, and kids were like 'oooh, I saw you at Herman's.' *[Laughter]* But it was all in fun. I don't know if I gave too much thought about leaving. I think before I had my children I thought about moving, and I think we all have dreams about that when we are young and in college and talking about moving away. A college friend and I used to talk about living in a loft. We were going to do this, and we were going to do that, but life has a way of changing things. I started my family, and that was my focus – my family.

MN: As you mentioned, Queensbridge is not only a community, it's similar to a village. It's really nice to hear that children as they are growing older they are still looking to stay here in the tight community. Tell us more about the community. Has it changed at all through the years?

SB: Yes. It has changed. Some people have moved away. We have more ethnic groups that have moved in. An Asian population has moved in, a Bangladesh population has moved in, an Indian population has moved in, and I believe some Pakistanis. I think we have some people from Mexico that have moved in, so gradu-

ally over the course of the years, you have seen the ethnicity of the people change drastically. I think part of it was during the Reagan era, where we had a housing crisis, and this was the first time we began to know anything or the word homeless was talked about. Growing up, I didn't know anything about anyone being homeless until I got into my late teens, early twenties, and homelessness became an issue. People needed housing. With that housing crisis that's when you really began to see the change. You began to see things change in the operation of management at NYCHA, which I have to say still needs improvement. It used to be when you put in for repairs, things were done right away, now things are not done right away. Everything is transferring over from paperwork to technology, computer, but it still doesn't speed up the progress of the service for the people in the community. We don't have the mini police department anymore. They've collaborated and put that into one unit, which is located in Ravenswood. But I am glad to see that de Blasio has brought back community policing because I think that community policing is key for young people feeling comfortable about talking to the police and relying on them and feeling safe with them. I'm glad that's back.

MN: As far as having the police department here, you mentioned you prefer have it here. To have that community involvement by police.

SB: They were sort of like a big brother. You knew their names. They took the time to get to know you and to get to know your parents. If they saw you doing anything wrong, 'hey, you cut that out.' Even with the females. They sat down, and they talked to the females. You just felt so safe, and you knew that they were there to protect you, also there to give guidance and support. As a teenager, I know I felt less safe going out of the community than opposed to being in the community. It was a whole little city of our own. You felt safe. A little crime but not too much. I can say things definitely got out of hand during the crack era, but we all know that because all neighborhoods were affected by that. The policing to try to get rid of the crack and the drugs was on point, and they managed to clean it up. Things are still in progress, but it's a whole lot

better than what it was before. . . . I'm definitely grateful for that. I still feel safe here.

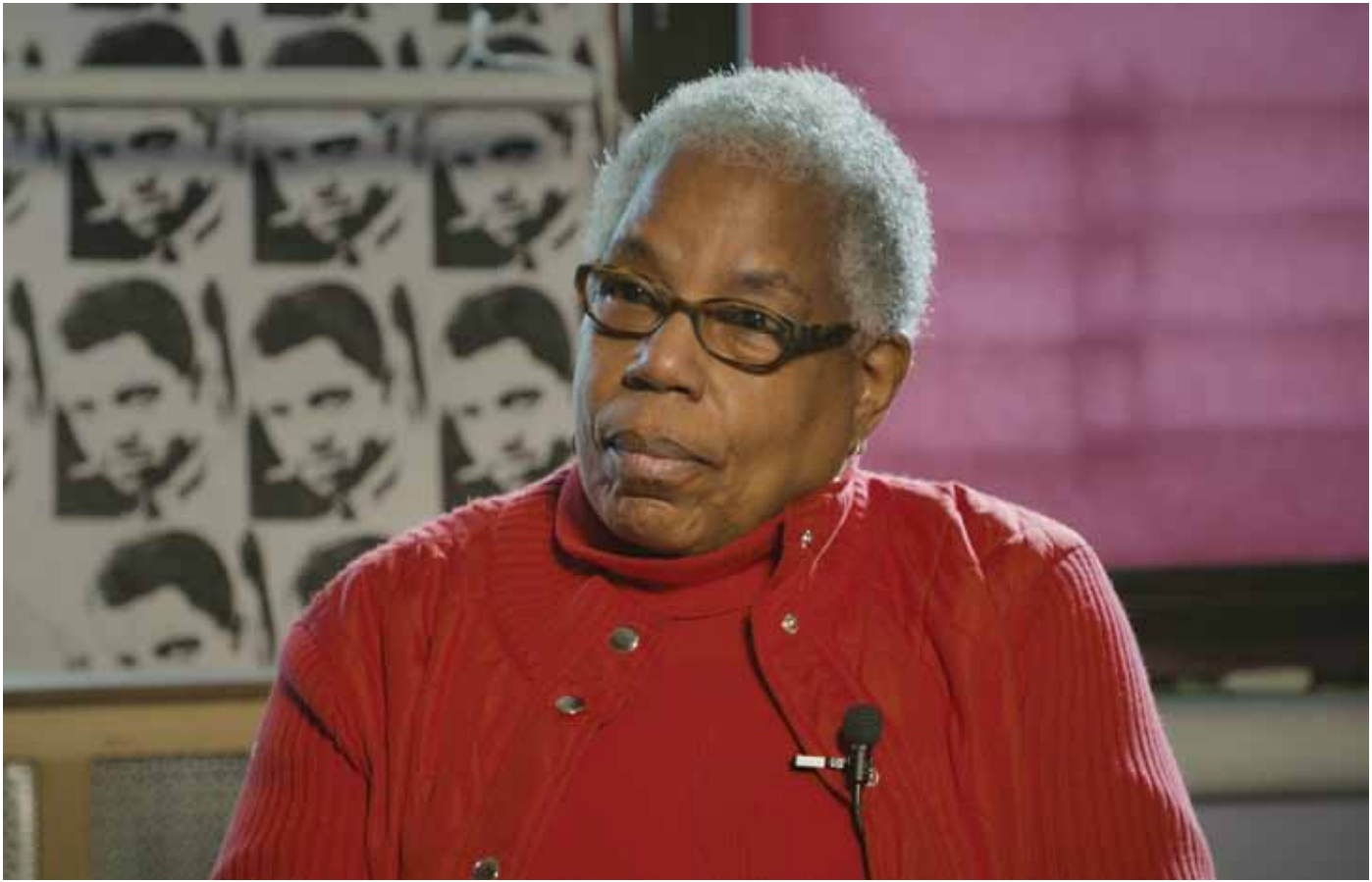
MN: You mentioned the programs here. I've spoken with some of the other Queensbridge residents, and I know that they're very beloved programs. I've heard of the art program and also the dance program.

SB: Yes, we have Movement Speaks, which is a dance program, which is in the fall definitely, and I believe we also do in the spring, where the seniors do dance movements in motion, which you could say is part of exercise, too. Then, at the end of those sessions they have a concert, dance performance that they put on. We also have an exercise program that is run by one of our seniors, Ms. Jefferies. She is also the leader of our *Senior Shakers*, which is a dance group, that not only dance here, but they go out and do performances in the community. We have Senior Planet, which is our computer program. It's an awesome program. We reached out to so many people in the community that didn't even come to the center, and now we are getting even more people to enroll. We have people from around the community enrolled in it. We have it in an Asian and Spanish language in addition to English. So, there is something for everybody. We have the basic activities, bingo, special celebrations like Easter, the 4th of July, Memorial Day, Mother's day, Father's Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. In November, we have the big community feast festival for the entire family, which is run by Citibank. It's done here. They feed everybody in the community, especially the homebound. They get to have a Thanksgiving dinner. The community comes together and sits down and has a meal and talks. You might see friends you haven't seen a in a long time, because they are working, or busy with the family, whatever the situation may be. It's great. Absolutely wonderful that we have those programs that go on. We have ESL programs for our non-English speaking residents. Those classes are packed. Immigration resources for our seniors and residents who are concerned with their immigration status. DACA students, we are dealing with all of those things across the board. We have attorneys that are working with us and advising our staff on how to help our residents who are concerned about green cards

and being deported. This place is a sanctuary. We were asked one time would we consider expanding or moving. The idea is there, but the concern is this is the base of the community. You don't want to move the base of the community.

MN: Thank you so much, Ms. Boyce. I want to thank you for your time. This was wonderful. Is there anything else that you would like to leave us with?

SB: I just want to congratulate all of you for coming up with this idea. Acknowledging the residents of Queensbridge and Jacob Riis and wanting to hear our stories. I hope that your interviews that you learn and some of your information resonates with you. I hope whoever you have to bring it to who sees these videos will take heart and really listen and feel our plight and what we're going through and how we're staying strong and staying relevant in the process.



Marilyn Jones

Marilyn Jones interview by Channing Powers

On crime, police relations, gentrification

Marilyn Jones: My name is Marilyn Jones. I moved to Queensbridge houses on March 27th, 1970. I was born in Flushing, New York and lived in Queensbridge for 48 or 49 years.

Channing Powers: So, you were a young girl when you moved here?

MJ: I was 22, when I moved in here.

CP: Where did you move from?

MJ: I moved from the Bland Houses in Flushing.

CP: Under what circumstances did you move here?

MJ: I was living with my parents. My husband and I and our two children applied for city housing, and this is the development they placed us in. So, we could have our own apartment, let my parents have theirs, let me have mine.

CP: You and your family, prior to moving here, were there any particular things you were hoping for? Things you were looking forward to or things you were expecting in living here?

MJ: Just someplace nice and pleasant, a nice place to raise our children. Nice neighbors, peace of mind.

But it didn't turn out that way.

MJ: In the beginning for about the first 2 or 3 years it was fine, but then all of a sudden, crime started, people running around with guns, shooting everybody, people throwing people off the rooftops, police all over the place everywhere. I remember one New Year's my husband and I went out and when we came back we had to literally crawl on the ground from where we got out of the car on 10th street and 41st Avenue into the building by Vernon . . . and we literally had to crawl because they were firing guns. We didn't want to get hit. Then, as the years passed, it got better. It got much better.

CP: When that crime wave started it was around?

MJ: In the 70s.

CP: When you say it was really dangerous what conditions do you think made it safer here? How did it become better?

MJ: We had more police presence. We had tenant patrol, and I was supervisor of the NYCHA tenant patrol for Queensbridge houses, and people would sit in their building, to monitor traffic in and out, pick particular hours, sometimes they set it in daytime in some buildings, some in the evenings in some buildings and that deterred the traffic back and forth in and out of the buildings, and the police presence deterred the traffic outside around the grounds.

MJ: I joined the Tenant Association first. I was on that on the executive board, and then I joined the Tenant Patrol, and I was supervisor for the Tenant Patrol.

MJ: We used to have housing patrol. The police were all over the place. And their office was – we call it 'the Hill,' across the street on 41 side of 10th street – and the police would patrol the grounds, patrol the buildings, and then all of a sudden, boom! They were gone. They just took them away. And crime got a little bad again, but then they started having patrols around with cars. But that really didn't do much. As long as the police were in the cars, whatever people were out there doing what they wanted to do out there and knew they couldn't out run a car, but they would run in the buildings, and you could go from – I live on Vernon Boulevard – you could go from the building next to me at that time all the way down to 10th street, all the way down to Vernon Boulevard on our block just by going over the roofs running away from the police. And you could run in and out of any building or any apartment.

MJ: I'm involved in a program called Activate. It's helping the seniors get involved. And to teach us how to be leaders and to fight for our rights. We went to Albany in January/February and spoke to some of the council people. And telling them what we expected of them in an election year. Everyone was all for what we were asking for. So, now we have to see what happens, and if it doesn't happen, then we are gonna go back again and present our issues again and going to have protests and boycotts and do whatever we can to make our voices heard for the seniors. There are many seniors out here with many concerns. We are not being treated fairly. We deserve . . . we have come a long way. If you live to be 80 or 90 years old then they should have some consideration for us. I am not there yet but . . . I will be there *[laughter]* God willing.

CP: There's a lot of respect and dignity that comes with age . . .

MJ: Exactly. I participated in the iPad class. They taught us how to use iPads. I had one and the only thing I used it for was just games, but now I can do and go anywhere and do anything I want with it. It was fantastic. Unlimited. I also participated in a gym class. We were in Planet Fitness for a while, and then they moved to

a different gym. I had to stop that because of medical reasons but they still have that class, and they have photography, but I'm not into photography. I didn't take that class, but there is a photography class, which is really nice.

CP: Many of these programs are up and running?

MJ: Oh, yeah. We are having a graduation as a matter of fact on Wednesday. From the OATS program. All of the classes.

CP: I wanted to know more about some of the concerns tenants were bringing to Albany, and just in general what are some other concerns?

MJ: Social Security, housing, re-zoning. They are trying to put that silly rail thing that is happening on Vernon Boulevard [Brooklyn-Queens Connector, abbreviated BQX, a proposed streetcar line], lack of protection in the housing developments.

CP: And how you see the changes unfolding here? Anything you would like to share?

MJ: There's a rumor going around that they're going to be selling the city housing developments. They are trying to lead us to believe that all the beautifications and fixing up around our development is for our benefit. I don't believe it. I've been here since 1970, and you would walk outside, and sometimes the street lights were broken out, and you couldn't see you hand in front of your face. Now, after dark, you can walk outside, and it's almost like noon. All this lighting, fixing up the grounds, we had trees that were laying down, falling all over the place, no all of a sudden the dead trees are gone, and they are putting in pretty trees to grow…

No, this is not for us. It's not for the ones living here. . . . I think that they really are trying to move us out, and I think that's terrible. That's horrible. We have seniors here who have dementia, and early Alzheimer's. Why would you move them from their surroundings? What are they going to do? Where are you going to put them? If they can't afford to stay here, then they are out. I think that's horrible. Attacking the seniors. That to me is the most disgusting thing you could do.



Karen Alston

Karen Alston interview by Amanda Jones

On family history, crime, police relations

Amanda Jones: Would you please tell me a little bit about yourself? Where and when you were born? How long you've lived at Queensbridge Houses?

Karen Alston: Sure. I was born in 1960. I've been in Queensbridge houses for the last 57 years. I was born in June, so this coming June I will be 58. Queensbridge, I love Queensbridge, there's no place like it. People talk about Queensbridge, we get a bad rap for being the biggest housing project in the neighborhood, and it's understandably so because there is a lot of negativity going on in the neighborhood, and a lot of it wasn't from people who were born and raised in Queensbridge. A lot of it came from outsiders, and, as a result, that gave us a bad name. This is the largest public housing in New York City, 96 buildings, and 6 blocks, that says a lot. In the beginning, my life was just different from what it is today. When they talk about it takes a village to raise a child, that's truly the way it was back in the day. Everybody looked out. Nobody had locked doors. Windows were open. Doors were unlocked. Everybody fed everybody. It was one serious community. I don't know what happened.

AJ: So, you were born here?

KA: Yes.

AJ: And how long had your parents lived here before?

KA: My mother was one of the first African-American families that moved into the projects. I have a broth-

er, who is 10 years older than me. He passed away. When I was born, we lived we lived on the 41st side of Vernon. Me and my sister were premature. We moved to the 40th side of Vernon when we came home from the hospital. We moved. We were originally on the 40th side of 12th street. We lived basically on every block in this project. One of the most iconic things about Queensbridge doesn't even have anything to do with Queensbridge. It's right outside across the street form Queensbridge, and that's Con Edison. And it's the iconic smoke stacks. We used to have so many programs in the projects. We had roller-skating in this very building at Jacob Riis. We had after-school programs. There was no such thing as disrespecting an adult. That never happened. If you disrespected an adult, not only did you get told by your parents, but you got told by every other parent that heard about it. You got chastised by them.

AJ: Just to follow up, you said that you were born here, I assume your parents passed away?

KA: No. My mother's still living. My mother is 88. In fact, she is a senior here. She comes here every day for lunch. She's a member or Friends of Queensbridge Park. If you ask anyone about my mother, the whole projects will tell you about my mother. For the most part, a lot of people say that's the first person they met. She more or less took them in. Everybody can say they either spent the day at our house or had a meal at my mother's house at one point or another.

AJ: So there was quite a sense of community.

KA: Big time.

AJ: And are you still within the Queensbridge neighborhood?

KA: Yes. My mother and I live on the same block. My twin sister lives with me. I have a brother on 12th Street. We are all scattered in Queensbridge. Most of us are still in Queensbridge. My baby sister is in Virginia, my older sister is in Jersey, and my son just moved to D.C. He just got married not too long ago, but they are all here. There is a lot of us here.

AJ: So, when you said that there were a bunch of Alston's here, that's what you were referring to?

KA: Yes. I have at least 100 nieces and nephews. I had to stop counting after 50!

AJ: So, you didn't think that the Tenants Patrol was successful?

KA: In the beginning it was. But after a while when the drug dealers started taking over, and the disrespect came, the fear came. People were just afraid. Now they have community watch. Nobody's gonna squeal on one of these people. People are afraid.

AJ: In regard to the Tenants Patrol, and what you are speaking of about the police, the Housing Authority Police Department HAPD was the primary source of community policing in NYCHA until 1995 when it then merged with the NYPD. Most of the Housing Authority Police Department were minorities and could identify with residents, and some actually lived on site. Some residents recall close relationships between the Housing Authority Cops and residents. How do you recall this relationship? Does that sound accurate at all?

KA: Yes. There was this one cop, Steve, he was really nice. Every holiday my brother would get in trouble, and Steve would tell my mother whatever happened, and he was always supportive, and he was a white cop,

too. Back then it was different. The rapport we had with the cops back then compared with the cops now it's like pulling teeth trying to build a rapport with the cops. And we have to rebuild it, come to the table. They come to the Tenant Association meetings. When they show up, the communities tease them, that's how we interact, and as a result, they see our children. . . . They stopped my son because he had a red coat on. They said they were looking for a black man with a red coat. He just held his hands up, and when he took out his ID, it said 'Howard University,' the whole conversation changed. They were surprised that he was actually in law school. The whole demeanor against him changed. He spoke at a symposium at Howard University, my sister was working there, and he spoke there on how to interact with the police when you are being questioned, being approached by the police, and how to interact. It came off pretty well.



Gail A. Brown

Gail A. Brown interview by Amanda Jones and Channing Powers

On work as Director of Senior Services at Queensbridge

Amanda Jones: Did you have family here?

Gail A. Brown: I didn't. I had friends here. My father lived on Roosevelt Island. My mother lived in East Elmhurst, so I would kind of hide here. Say 'oh, I'm going to dad's,' you know? *[Laughter]* and never make it there and say 'oh, dad I'm going home,' and I would end up right here where my friend Angela lived.

AJ: As the Director of Senior Services what kind of programs do you oversee?

GB: I oversee the NNORC program, which is our Neighborhood Naturally Occurring Retirement Community, which houses all of the seniors who may be homebound or have some difficulties coming down to the center. They are able to get services in their home, which include Social Work services or home visits, Meals on Wheels, nursing visits. It hasn't expanded yet to friendly visiting or anything but those core services where people can get their benefits taken care of without coming out of their house because they can't – those things are the NNORC. And I also oversee the Queensbridge Senior Center Programs, which is activities, Case Managers or I should say Case Assistants, trips, obviously we do meals. We have a huge meals program, our breakfast and lunch, and also the collaboration with the outside partners, Department for the Aging, or NYCHA we consider them a community partner, VNS, a myriad of community partners that come in with programming for the seniors that I oversee. And we welcome everybody because they serve a function to improve the lives of the seniors.

Channing Powers: You mentioned the seniors feel their homes are being encroached on, that's their feel-

ing on it. What is your opinion on how the new developments [in Long Island City] are impacting Queensbridge?

GB: There is always room for growth. People have to be more open to it, because it's going to happen. Whoever was the first people to settle here, it doesn't look like that anymore. It's changed. Everything is going to change. I think there should be an embracing of what's here as well, as best as can happen. It is a concern when your whole knowledge of your community is wiped away because somebody else wants to make it look different. And that's what they are saying. Where's our place? We are still here. Include us in the planning. Include us in the openness. Make it affordable for us. The whole idea of public housing is that it helps people who couldn't afford market value housing, couldn't afford to buy a home. So, what you're doing in your coming in, but there is nothing available, or there is little available for us to take advantage of.

AJ: I know that Riis opens its doors to a lot of different people in the community, a lot of different groups. Would you care to tell us a little bit about who you entertain?

GB: Mostly, we spend a lot of time defending the immigrants. We already have the services. Nobody is touching the senior services. What's happening because of our current [presidential] administration, they're living in fear, and it's sad, and it's disheartening that people are living and afraid to go to the post office, the DMV to get a license or something, because they don't know if ICE [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement] is going to snatch them up or something like that. So, I think the most vulnerable people we entertain are the immigrant population that's not sure about their status because of the fact that it's in limbo - or here today and gone tomorrow. It's not fair because a lot of these older adults do care for the children for various reasons, and why should anyone live in fear? The other population, I don't entertain them so much but I know they are a great part in Jacob A. Riis is the at-risk youth. That's another population where so much

has to be put into them so that their futures are realized because they are also under attack. It's sad. Who wants to live in fear? Can I go to this party? Can I go to the ball park? Is somebody going to gun me down based on the color shirt I wear? Who wants to live in that fear? So, those two populations as far as the ones we serve right now are to me the most vulnerable and the ones in need of whatever funding we can bring in related to enhanced services. I think they're the most fragile. The seniors have programs, and we catch them, but the youth and the immigrant population sometimes the two populations cross. I think they are the most vulnerable and need the most attention and funding.

CP: Can you talk about some of the events you have posted at the Riis Settlement?

GB: The idea with the Settlement House model is to have them more proactive. At other senior centers that I've worked at, they are used to being entertained upon. Like, bring the entertainment to us, and we will sit and clap. That's not the mindset of the settlement. The model is to get them involved. Not just in the choosing of it, but in the doing of it. We want them to be more active in their participating. We may set up the calendar. We have the planning committees, because you have to have committees for everything to get people to say what they want to do. In doing the planning committee, there are certain things we put on the calendar that obviously . . . we cannot have a calendar without February being health month, or Black History Month, or Asian Lunar New Year, because those are the populations we serve, so that month is never going to be without those three things. The different planning committees might say 'so, why don't we do this?' We service a lot of Asian participants. But they don't always come into the center. Our idea was to have the New York Chinese Cultural Center come in. We had so many from all over. And I'm thinking, why don't you come to the senior center? They go to Flushing because the language is easier and the meals . . . so that's something we need to work on, too.



Margaret Barnes

Margaret Barnes interview by Javon Sanders

On Riis Senior Center programs, transformation of Long Island City, gentrification

Margaret Barnes: My name is Margaret Barnes. I've been at Queensbridge since 1993. I always tell them I came to be a blessing to the community, not a problem. To try to straighten out the problems that we have here. I didn't think I was going to stay here. I ended up being here. I'm almost here 25 years now. I'm in the Parks Committee. I've been on all the committees, TA – Tenant Association – Tenant Patrol, PSA 9, police council. That's something we get together every month but for the last couple of months, last couple of years, I've stepped down for a while. So, that's my story here. I love Queensbridge. I try to be involved with everything that's in our community, so we can keep our community together to find out what we need. I work with [local City Councilman] Jimmy Van Bramer, most all the leaders. I work with them to make sure we have what we are supposed to have in our communities. I love my senior center. . . . It's not only a place to come to, but a place to grow. We have computer and arts classes. In the summer, we do swimming at the Astoria pool. They have exercise and things there. We have a lot of programs here that I'm involved with. I love every minute of it. I had one son, my son passed away about a year ago. I have six grandchildren, and I have a mom that's 94 years old. That's my hero. So, you have a little proportion of me.

Javon Sanders: That's a blessing, your mom.

MB: It's a blessing

JS: What is the TA committee about?

MB: The Tenant Association, they have that once a month. They talk about the things in the community

and what we need and what we try to get together to hold on in our community, different things that we might need as far as the children, youth, movies to get the families to come in once a month. Every 3rd Saturday we try to keep the families together. We do family things. That's what I like about it.

JS: What about the Parks Committee?

MB: The Parks Committee is very interesting because we have a family day that you bring all the different generations to the park with your families, and we make picnics, games. We also have a parade with bicycles. Children come and give out hats, the caps for the park, and we also give out the bicycle helmets. We do quite a lot of things for the summer. All winter I can come here and do things. All summer we have different things for the community, family day. We do a performance for the day, we do franks, hot dogs, make the kids have fun, music. We have games out there for the children, and for the seniors. We love our seniors, which I am a senior, too. We do a lot of things for them and try to keep our community as close knit as we can.

JS: You said in 1993 you weren't planning on staying. So, how long were you planning on staying? When you originally came?

MB: I had no idea. Only the master, only God knows. I got real sick, and then I had to come out on disability. I fell and twisted my spine in three places, and they said I would never walk again. But I told them I was going to trust in God. That's how I came to the center. I started having exercise, and I did different things in the program. And I started walking. I have some good days and bad days now. Now, I have diabetes, and I have nerve pains in my hands and my feet. But it's all right because I make it work. For the day. Every day I go out, I come here. It's a blessing for me to come here because I can have lunch. I call bingo for the seniors.

There is always something to be done.

JS: Do you feel safe in Queensbridge?

MB: Sure. . . . Now we have a lot of new people. Some people been here 50 or 60 years even if their children left, but every year we have a reunion, a year to two years we have a reunion. And we have a picnic in the park, our park down on Vernon, and then they have a big dinner party, for everybody and the children, and people come back and tell stories about how they were raised here and what it was all about. Very interesting. When I first moved here, I walked around just to see the different generations. It is so awesome. You want to see something? Come out here the 4th of July. That park is amazing! Each family gets their spot. There is a cook-out. Everyone going to each other's table. They are still doing it. And I've been here 22 years. So, if they have been doing this, and they been here 50 and 60 years, can you imagine? It's amazing.

JS: What about the community outside of Queensbridge? How has that changed since you moved in in the 90s?

MB: Long Island City has come a long way. I remember when I was a kid I used to work out here, Silvercup [bread factory]. All the plants that was out here. The [Chiclets] gum factory . . . a lot of that's gone. A lot of banks are gone, and now they are really building up a lot. Hotels and townhouses, and co-ops, so, it's really built up. We are going to be strangers in our own community. There is going to be so many people. It's picked up a lot. I understand they are going to put a mall over here. Silvercup [Studios] is planning to build a mall. We've been talking about that since the 90s, so, I don't know if they came to a conclusion. They showed us a blueprint that they are going to build up in the back there where the park is, going down Vernon [Boulevard]. There's a lot of new hotels. Before over here were private houses.



Stanley Kline

Stanley Kline interview by Amanda Jones

On crime and safety, family history

Stanley Kline: I was born in a place called Corona, New York. It's not far from here. I went to Flushing High School. I graduated from Flushing High School and went right into the Marine Corps, in 1968. I did 13 months in Vietnam.

Amanda Jones: How old are you?

SK: Now? 70.

AJ: 70. From the Marine Corp you moved back to New York?

SK: Yeah, I came back to New York.

AJ: And where did you move to when you came back?

SK: Same place in Corona.

AJ: Did you think at one point you would move back to Corona or somewhere else?

SK: Yeah, somewhere else. I figured I would move somewhere else. I never got the opportunity. Not the opportunity, I didn't really try. I didn't want to.

AJ: So, you're comfortable here then?

SK: Yeah. Pretty comfortable.

AJ: I heard from some of the other residents there is a strong sense of community here. Do you agree?

SK: Yeah.

AJ: Would you say that you have a lot of friends here?

SK: Not friends. I have a lot of associates.

AJ: Are you active here at the community center? I feel like I've seen you around.

SK: Yeah, I do things here. I'm on the planning committee. As you see when you came in, I was serving lunch to the seniors and all of that. I do all that I can for us, you know.

AJ: Back to a little bit to when you moved in. You said you had children, correct?

SK: Yeah. I had one child at that time.

AJ: Did your children ever live here with you?

SK: No.

AJ: When you moved in here, what was the ethnic background like?

SK: Basically, a little Spanish and blacks. Not like it is now. We have a lot of Chinese now, a lot of Arabs. Then, it was basically black and Spanish.

AJ: And when do you think that changed?

SK: I'm not really sure. Maybe in the late '90s. Yeah.

AJ: And has that changed the community here?

SK: Of course.

AJ: Do you think it's a change in a good way or not so good way?

SK: I don't know.

AJ: Has it affected your everyday life?

SK: No.

AJ: So, you moved in here in the '80s, so, there's a perception of public housing as being crime ridden, with a lot of drug activity, violence and stuff like that. Would you care to speak on that?

SK: Well, all of that is true. There is a lot of that here. You have poor people that aren't used to anything, that don't really want to take care of anything, and we all live here. Together. So, that brings violence.

AJ: From what I understand the late '70s and '80s, there was a heroin epidemic here.

SK: Yeah.

AJ: And turned into a crack epidemic.

SK: Yeah.

AJ: Did that affect you or your family personally?

SK: No.

AJ: Did you have any friends or neighbors that were affected?

SK: I had friends . . . yeah.

AJ: Were you affected by any of the violence at all?

SK: Not really. Not really, I mean I seen a lot of violence, but it didn't affect me too much.

AJ: Did you ever feel unsafe?

SK: Oh, yeah.

AJ: Do you feel unsafe now?

SK: No. As you notice, there's a large police presence here now. And that's not just here. That's in all the projects citywide.

AJ: And you believe the increase police presence made the projects safer?

SK: Much safer. There's still violence, but it's much safer. I mean, you feel better walking and going to the store and . . .

AJ: Do you know any of the local beat police officers? The NCO [Neighborhood Coordination Officers]?

SK: Yeah, there is two that come here a lot.

AJ: You feel…are you friendly with them?

SK: Yeah. We speak.

AJ: Does their presence help to provide a sense of community?

SK: Yeah.

AJ: Safer?

SK: Safer. Yeah.

AJ: I'm sure you've heard of NYCHA and their financial problems?

SK: *[shakes head yes]*

AJ: And the issue with public housing, in general? Have you heard about any of the talk about privatization?

SK: Yeah, that goes around every now and again. It never occurs. They started that ten years ago, but nothing comes of it. Nothing has come of it yet.

AJ: Do you have any fears about what it would mean for Queensbridge?

SK: No.

AJ: Have you heard of the BQX?

SK: The who?

AJ: It's the light rail that they want to install running from Astoria to Brooklyn.

SK: Oh, I heard of it, yeah.

AJ: So, I've just been asking if people what they think of it.

SK: It's a good thing, like the ferry that they have. It's a good thing. I've rode on that ferry.

AJ: I haven't ridden on it yet, how is it?

SK: It's beautiful in the summertime. I'm a veteran. I go to the Veteran's Hospital. So, instead of going across the 59th Street Bridge and all that, I go down and get on the ferry, get across, and I get a bus to 23rd. It's faster and it's cheaper.

AJ: What is your favorite memory of being here?

SK: When my mother was living – my mother is deceased – when my mother was alive, my mother and her family were from North Carolina. She lived on Vernon [Boulevard]. And in the back, she had a big garden. And the people next door to us were from North Carolina, and she had a big garden, and I used to go out in the morning and help out and turn the dirt over and all that. And I used to love that. I loved doing that. She grew vegetables in the garden.



Nora Reyes

Nora Reyes interview by Ambar Castillo

On diversity, bilingualism, police relations, family

Ambar Castillo: What were some of the ethnicities and religions that you encountered when you first moved in here?

Nora Reyes: There are many religions here. Many Chinese have come recently. The Chinese are very well-mannered, and you have to respect everyone.

AC: And which are the other ethnicities and religions that you encountered for the first time in your life when you first came here?

NR: Hindus, Baptists, Evangelicals. . . . I am Catholic, but even in this very room you find people from all those groups.

AC: And how was that experience of living here and socializing with people from so many different ethnicities?

NR: Well, you have to respect them all. They are there, and I am here.

AC: And how do you interact with them? Do you participate together in classes and other activities?

NR: Yes, people here tell you from the start that you have to respect each other. There is a lady who is a Baptist, and sometimes she brings sandwiches to sell for her church, but I told her I won't buy her sandwiches.

The church will have to figure out how to raise their money, but I don't like those sandwiches.

AC: How have these experiences with diversity enriched your life?

NR: Well, I respect everyone. We live in a different world. This is no longer my homeland, where most people were Catholic. But in the United States, and especially in New York, there is a great diversity of people, not only from different religions, but also from different countries, and you have to deal with all these different people. I learned not to have problems with anybody. That's the role of everyone here: to get along quietly.

AC: You spoke earlier about the way the police had helped with the issue of noise and all that. Can you tell us about the relationship between the police and the community?

NR: Well, I have had few problems because I rarely go out. Therefore, I don't get in trouble. I go from here to my home, and from my home back here, and I go to my doctors. I'm not the kind of person who just sits around. I stay indoors, and sometimes I see things, but I try not to get involved in anything. And since I live alone, I don't like to go looking for trouble. My children tell me, 'Mami, don't get involved!'

AC: In general, how does the community get along with the police, or don't they have a lot of interaction?

NR: The community members who get involved with the police are the ones who are in some kind of trouble.

AC: Do you remember any instance when the police came to the community just to check if everything was going well?

NR: Yes, yes. A policeman once knocked on my door. I love music, and sometimes I play music when I'm doing things around the house, like cleaning, and I play it very loud. So, someone knocked on my door, and the policeman asked me to lower the volume. And I told him: 'No problem, I just like to listen to music when I'm mopping the floor.' So, he laughed and left, and said: 'Just lower it a little.' That's the only problem I ever had with the police.

AC: What were you listening to?

NR: Music from my homeland, Colombian music. Joe Arroyo, cumbia and things like that.

NR: Look, formerly the people who came to fix problems with lights, leaks or clogged drains were employees from the housing complex, and they were Colombian, Ecuadoran, all kinds. But in the past three years there are contractors, not housing employees, and they all speak English. I have to call them because my sink is clogged, but I don't know what to do because they only speak English, and I cannot explain in detail what's wrong, because they say 'I don't understand.' That's the problem we have right now.

AC: When did you notice that change?

NR: In the past two years. For example, the bathroom lights went off. I can't have the lights out because I live alone. I won't have an attack because I take my medications, but I have to feel my way in the dark, and that's not good. So, I have to use hand signals to tell the man 'No lights.' In the end, he installed all new fixtures, but what if it had been a more elaborate problem? I told the administrators, send somebody who speaks Spanish so you can communicate with the worker. But they ignore the problem. The same thing happened with telephone workers. They no longer have their own employees and work with contractors. It

must be that it's cheaper for them that way.

AC: So, you see a big change?

NR: Yes, and I don't like that change. You should be able to communicate with workers. They should be bilingual. The Mayor has said it: 'New York is a bilingual city' and he himself is bilingual. This is a bilingual city. I have told them, but they don't listen. It's mostly women, and I prefer to deal with men. It's strange. Many of us complained. I was not the only one. I told them to their faces: you should have bilingual workers because New York is a bilingual city. The Mayor has said it. I went and told them and one of them said to me: 'That's why you don't learn English,' trying to score points. But I told her, 'Look, child, New York is a bilingual city. The mayor is bilingual. He speaks Spanish.' She was trying to put me down. They think they are better because they speak English only. But New York is a bilingual city. Mayor de Blasio speaks Spanish.

AC: And the governor speaks Spanish, too, a little.

NR: Yes, the governor, too. That's why they say that New York is a bilingual city because it is a city of many ethnicities. We have everything: Hindus, Chinese, everything, my child, and that's what gives it distinction and prestige.

AC: And Queensbridge illustrates that, too.

NR: Of course. I love New York. I arrived here. I made it here. Everything is here. I adore my city . . . the summer activities, because with the cold nothing is fun. There are many parks around here. There's a little park around here next to the East River, where we go with all the residents, and have a barbecue. I really like

that. I get together with a group of girls—I mean, ladies. Everyone brings some food, sodas, ice. We try to do that every summer. It's very nice.

AC: Speaking of parks, I read in the newspaper that there are repairs under way for a building that was abandoned for 77 years, and it's going to be demolished to create a more energy-efficient one, with an area to be used as open space where people can sit.

NR: Yes, that is being done. There are many projects. See, for example, that little park around here? It's enclosed because it's being rebuilt.

NR: I'm happy here, and my children knock at my door and say, 'Mom, you are all alone here.' And they come and spend time with me, but I tell them, 'You are leaving your wives by themselves, why don't you bring them, too?' A lifetime with my children. They know I'm alone and for them that's a big tragedy, but I don't want to live with them, and they know it. Married couples should live by themselves. I visit them often.

AC: How often?

NR: Very often. They call me. I'm going next May because one of my grandchildren is graduating in Georgia, and I take my little trips here and there. They send me the ticket themselves. Because I am alone and that's unheard of, but I want them to be happy, and they need to solve their own problems because I can't do that for them.



Clovia Thomas

Clovia Thomas interview by Telijah Patterson

On volunteer work, Riis Senior Center programs, crime

Telijah Patterson: How do you feel about the community? You say you like it here. What kind of things do you like?

Clovia Thomas: I like the community. A lot of things changed. It's not like it used to be. We all get along here. I feel around a lot of people are respectable, some disrespectable. I love doing volunteer work, and we can all get along. I love it here. I like it more here than Brooklyn. I always had problems in Brooklyn.

TP: So, you say you do a lot of things here like volunteering. What kind of activities do you enjoy the most, and can you tell me about a time where you really had a good time at that event?

CT: Most of the things that I like is computer class and helping out here. Volunteer work. . . . I love working with people. I love working with the seniors. I love serving. I love doing acting, performing, singing. I love singing.

TP: Can you tell me what you like most about singing or a song you really like singing?

CT: Singing runs in my family. My daughter sings. My husband is a singer, piano player, grandkids love to sing, dancing. I just have it in me. I love to sing.

TP: What kind of music do you like to sing?

CT: All kinds. Jazz, classic music, soul music, old school *[laughter]*.

TP: There's a lot of talent here in Queensbridge. Have you found that there is a lot of talent? Can you tell me a little bit about the talent you see around you here?

CT: I see a lot of kids singing, dancing. They have programs here. They let us sing.

TP: Do you see any other kind of talent here at Queensbridge?

CT: Dancing, poem reading, acting. We do a lot of exercising. That's about it.

TP: That's a lot.

CT: It's a lot, yes. Say since the time I have been here a lot of things changed. Good things. They are trying to get more stuff in for us.

TP: Can you give me an example of a good thing that has changed?

CT: Now we are able to have more trips, go on nice trips, computer class. We are learning more about the computer, basic training, money. I like that class. A lot of exercising now different ones come in, dancing, movement. I'm in a movement exercise class. And it's nice. You ever heard of the movements?

TP: No, tell me about it.

CT: In movement, we do a lot of movements *[dance pose gesture]*. I have to show you the sign outside. We do that every Monday. We are getting ready to perform on the stage in June. She is going to work us hard, but I love it. It's fun. Before I didn't want to get into exercise. But this particular one, I love it.

TP: What makes it different?

CT: If it wasn't for Ms. Robbin to get me back with the center, I would have never come back. It was just a lot of things weren't going on, it was bored, but now things change. A lot of things are happening, and I love it. I'm happy here. I'd rather be here than be home. They will have to put me out! 'Ms. Thomas, you aren't going home?' I don't want to go home. I'm bored at home. . . . We play bingo. That's another thing we do. Get involved with the community planning board. I'm trying to learn more things. To know how to plan trips, plan things for the seniors. I just started. That's why I told you I have a meeting soon. Later on.

TP: What kind of work do you do with the children?

CT: I like to work with the children when they have family day, serving the kids, play games and talk with them. Most of them you can talk to. That's working with the kids. I love children.

TP: Do you think people outside of Queensbridge know that? Before you came to Queensbridge did you expect you would receive this amount of love?

CT: No. I didn't expect it to be like this here. When I was living in Brooklyn, I didn't socialize with nobody. I didn't go to the community center. I always stayed in the house. Or without doing work I was taking care of my daughter. I didn't bother nobody, everybody spoke but it just wasn't comfortable there. I wanted to

move out of Tompkins Houses. It was more like killing over there than there is here. . . . But things are changing. There is nobody standing on the corners like they used to, selling drugs, and I see a lot of change since I've been here. I'm not saying there is not violence here. I wish they would stop killing each other. I write about it. 'Stop killing one another, children!' I don't have no problem with Queensbridge. I love it here. My daughter says she wants to move me out of the projects. I told her I don't want to move! I don't. . . . Not down South. I think I would die.

TP: You've worked so close with the community but you also mentioned that you see a lot of crime. Why do you think young people might turn to crime here in Queensbridge?

CT: A lot of kids need a father figure. They are just with their moms. Moms try to do the best they can, and I don't know what'd going on in a kid's life. They need love, too, like we need love. They need someone to talk to them instead of putting them down all the time. Maybe they have problems. Maybe they need to speak to someone. I wish I could help them. Put the guns – I wrote about this. I have a poem. *Stop killing kids / Stop / Put the guns down / Let these children live to be 21.* That's what I wrote in that poem. I would like to bring it to you to let you see what I wrote. That's a serious poem, and I want to get it published.



Evarista Soto

Evarista Soto interview by Angela Rojas

On community, Riis Senior Center programs

Angela Rojas: Could you tell us the story about your arrival at Queensbridge?

Evarista Soto: Yes. I arrived legally. I went to stay with my daughter. I was going to start working taking care of children at home. I was pre-diabetic, but it got worse after I came here, from sitting down for long periods of time. The diabetes would go up and down, but then it went up to 555. It never overwhelmed me, thank God. My blood pressure also shot up to 200, and my cholesterol, too. I couldn't do anything. I was unable to work. My daughter had to take care of me. At the time, I didn't even have health insurance yet. But I was taken care of, thank God. They took care of me. First, they cut off two of my toes, when it hit me hard. Then they performed surgery on my leg again. I had two amputations. Twenty-one days later I had an amputation. I couldn't sleep from the pain. They gave me a painkiller that made me crazy. After they cut off my leg, I had to be admitted to the hospital several times for therapy. I did exercises and had to learn to walk all over again. But I never lost courage. I was always strong. I have transportation, everything. I have a walker, but I manage with my cane. And I thank God because I feel very positive.

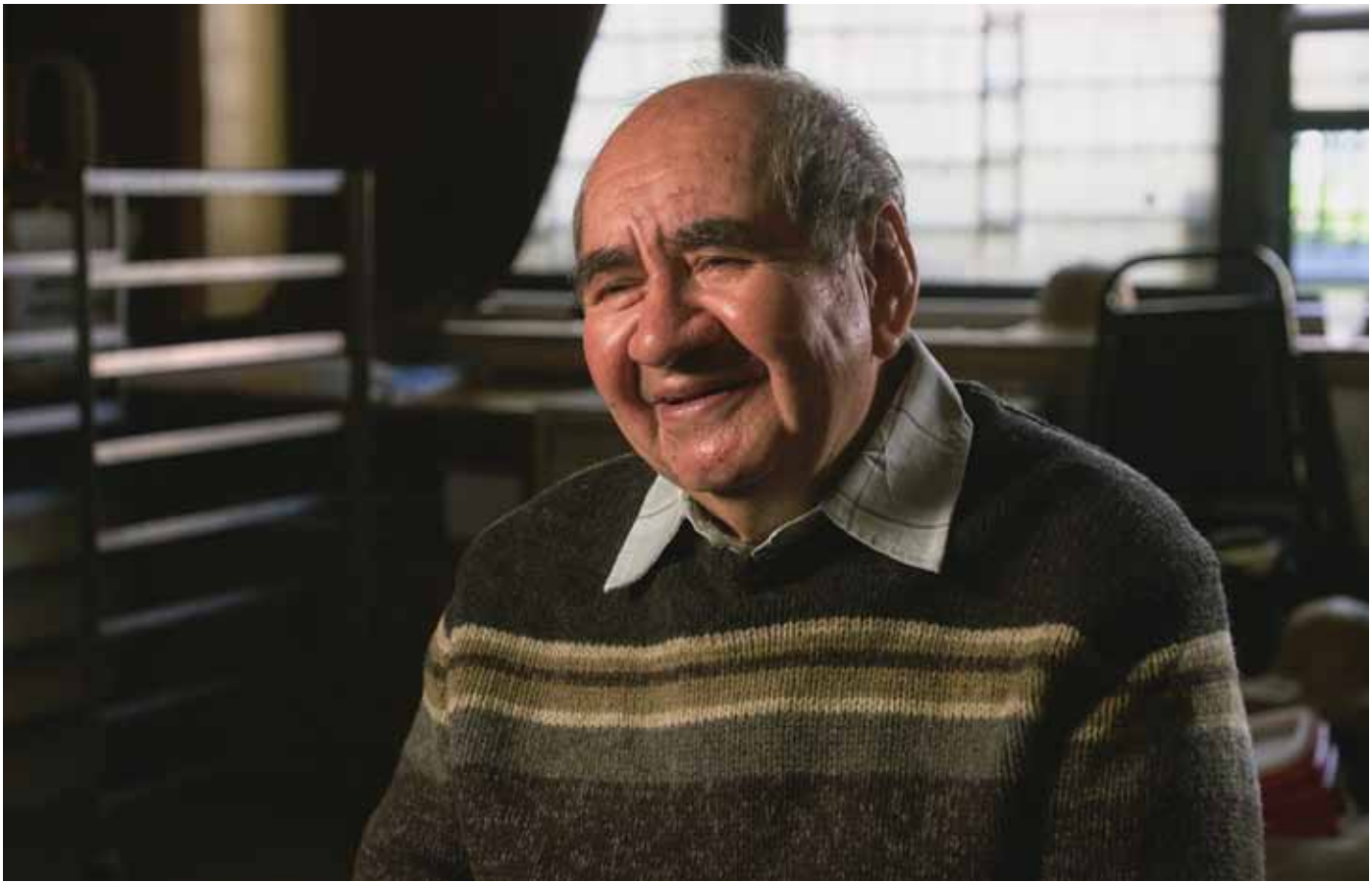
AR: Do you feel that there are neighbors here in the community who also help you?

ES: As I told you, I came here in 2009. I retired because of illness. I got here about ten months ago. They have a lot of activities here. We dance. We exercise on Tuesdays, Thursdays and today Monday. There is a young lady who starts urging me to move saying 'Evarista, Evarista!' as soon as she arrives. I feel great that I was able to come here, and I have no negative perceptions about anything here. Robin is a very nice person. I don't know English, but she understands me. She makes sure that I get milk. Sometimes other friends

here notice that I get a lot of attention, but I am a very positive person, and I always tell them 'Yes, you can.'

ES: There's a lot of art. If you don't participate it's because you don't want to. There's drawing, computers, English, all that. I don't do more because of my age. I think I can't learn English anymore. There are people who have been here for forty years and still have not learned it.

ES: I feel positive because I was sitting home watching TV all day, and I said, let's go to the center because there they take good care of you. I have a friend who said, 'Come, let's go!' and until now I have no complaints. There have been small things, like sometimes you don't like the food. But if you tell them 'Please don't add salt tomorrow' or 'Don't put fat in it, because I'm diabetic,' then they take care of it.



Jesús Merchan

Jesús Merchan interview by Manuel Arbelaez

On Riis Senior Center programs, community, religion

Manuel Arbelaez: How many years have you been coming to the senior center?

Jesús Merchan: My name is Jesús Merchán, and I have been living in this housing complex for seven years.

MA: Where are you from, what is your country of origin?

JM: My country of origin is Ecuador, South America.

MA: You have lived in Queensbridge Houses for seven years. Where did you live before?

JM: I lived in Corona, Queens.

MA: And what happened in Corona that made you leave?

JM: The rent was higher there. I had the opportunity to move here. I applied, and it took a little long, but they finally gave me a place here.

MA: Life in New York is very expensive, so living in public housing is a great opportunity. What other opportunities have you found in Queensbridge?

JM: Many. Now that I am in Queensbridge Houses and go to the senior center I have more friends, more

social interaction. I don't feel alone. There are many programs that help aging people. I also took a course on how to control my diabetes. They gave me a diploma and a beautiful book with recipes about what you should eat and drink. I have medical insurance. It's like I'm living in heaven, really. They treat me very well.

MA: It's very important to talk about these services because there are many people who don't even know about them. You said you came to Queensbridge by chance. Could you tell us more about that?

JM: The first time I heard about this, it was from a form letter that was sent from here about help with taxes. So, I called to ask how to get here, and they told me to take the F [train] and get off at 21st, and walk to 13th Street and 40th Avenue. I came, and I saw all the houses, and I said, 'These houses don't have fire escapes.' I was surprised. And then I noticed that they were made with fireproof reinforced concrete. . . . They told me I had to apply in Manhattan. I don't remember the address—I think it was downtown Broadway, near Chinatown. So, I went there. Since I like to ride the trains, I never get lost. I went and filled my application. When they called me, they had assigned me to Far Rockaway, but I said I like this sector better. So I waited a little longer, and then they called me at work—I was working at the time—and the secretary called me at home, telling me I had to go quickly for an interview. So, I went and asked them to give me a little time, but they said it had to be done right away, that I had to bring the rent and the security deposit. So, I went right away, and they gave me the place immediately. It was incredible. The whole thing was done in one week, including the move. I had a problem because I had a lease in Corona, and they told me I would lose the deposit unless I found a person to sublease. So, I firmly said I had to leave because I was going into public housing. I became stronger and firmer. So, I became more independent. I am halfway to the church, and halfway to my job.

JM: I haven't been coming [to the center] for too long. I didn't know about it. God creates things for you.

One day I came here, and they told me that they would give me food, and classes on any topic I wanted. So, I started coming a few times, and I liked it. There is a lot of social contact. They took me for an outing to Washington, the capital. They have taken me to the movies, to see shows. It makes me very happy, because the managers are very good, and the other participants, too.

MA: Did you know they had all those services?

JM: I didn't know that. I found out little by little. I have been coming for more than a year now. The food is also good. There's variety, and I like it because I'm Catholic and on Fridays they don't serve meat during Lent. They serve fish on Fridays every week. This is good, according to my religion. They also include prayer groups in the program, and I like that. There's a prayer group every month in Spanish. You give a contribution of $5 to participate, and it stays on your record. It's fantastic.

JM: The police are always around helping people. I go to church early in the morning at 6:30am. I live on Vernon Boulevard and 40th Street, and I walk to take the F train, or I take the 103 bus, or walk on Vernon Boulevard to take the #7 train. I always see the patrol cars circling around.

MA: Everywhere?

JM: Everywhere around the places I frequent. I always see one or two patrol cars.

MA: Do you think that helps? Does it make you feel safe?

JM: Yes, you feel protected. You are not afraid to look behind you.

MA: Were there times when you felt you had to look behind you?

JM: Yes, when I first moved in, but nothing ever happened to me, thank God.

JM: As a way of ending the interview, I just want to repeat and will always say that first I thank God and the Holiest Virgin, and then all the rest follows. You receive blessings and grace. Money is not happiness—happiness is having conversations like this, and having friends who appreciate you. And always be fair, never lie, only say the truth because that helps you to sleep well when you lie down, and talk to your conscience. Your conscience is happy with the things you have done, and so are you. It is very important for humans. And keep moving forward, God willing.

MA: Thank you.

JM: Many thanks to you, sir, for the interview, and I thank you because sometimes you need to talk, and you gave me the chance to share everything that I was keeping here in my heart. Let this conversation be helpful to others.



Janie Edwards-Barnes

Janie Edwards–Barnes interview by Channing Powers

On family life, Riis Senior Center programs, work, safety

Channing Powers: How do you stay busy? Activities?

Janie Edwards-Barnes: I do a lot of walking. I come here, participate in a lot of stuff here. So, that makes my day. It's enough. They have a lot of good things here. A lot of people don't want to come out, 'I don't want to stay with that crowd,' you know how we get. I was always out from a young child. I was in the project. Some people, they don't go out, and they don't participate in none of the stuff that goes on around here, so they don't really get to know the people, so they don't want to come out. I've been here all my life. I played here. I did everything here. My kids played here. They did everything here . . . and then there are some people that just don't participate. But they don't know what they are missing. I know what I'm missing. . . . I do exercise. I got sick in December, so I had to sit out this term. I had blood on my brain. I was bleeding from the brain. So, I had to be really careful for the next three months. I'm okay now. I don't have to take another cat scan, but I was bleeding from the brain, and I couldn't participate in a lot of stuff. So, I had to be cool a little bit. But now they are graduating, so here comes another term. So now, I'll be in photography, exercise, computers.

CP: Did you work in the neighborhood?

JEB: I worked not too far from here on Jackson Ave. 21st Street at ADT, the alarm company. I worked there for 40 years. I retired in '14. Kind of kicked out, but everything worked out. I'm pretty comfortable. I wouldn't even know where to go. Even though there is all this stuff around here, I still feel safe. I don't know if I would feel safe if I went somewhere else. I don't know. I could never live in a house. I'm not getting in a house by myself.



Jeffrey Stanley

Jeffrey Stanley interview by Amanda Jones

On community, race

Amanda Jones: When you first moved in, was there a sense of community?

Jeffrey Stanley: Yeah, I would say so. It was nice. I had no problems. The people were very open with me, and I get along with everybody.

AJ: How did you meet your neighbors?

JS: Knocking on the doors and helping them. . . . I have on my wife's side, her parents always giving me a lot of food, frozen. Sometimes I can't fit it in my freezer so I'll knock on the neighbor's door and say, 'yo, here's a pound of chicken,' or something. I always give something to them. I take care of my friends.

AJ: Would you say that is common amongst the residents here?

JS: We share. We got to learn to share. But most of the time people mind their own business. But the elderlies here will work with each other. But the younger crowds don't work with each other yet. They haven't reached that level.

AJ: What do you do for fun?

JS: I'm a musician. I play music. It's my savior. I don't do drugs. I'm not into any of that, strictly into my music. I give time to DMS Daniel's Music Foundation. I do time for FAO Schwarz Foundation. I raise money

for kids, for scholarships. I take care of animals. I rescue animals. I have veterinarian friends. I rescue a lot of animals. In fact, I have a dog now that I rescued. His name is Paulie. He's a rescue. He was thrown into pit-bull rings.

AJ: What were some of the factors that influenced your decision to stay?

JS: To stay? Well, there's nothing wrong. I'm close to the city, there's nothing really wrong with the projects. It's more the people sometimes – the younger generation – they don't respect a lot of things. They have to learn the hard way, that's all. I find the projects great. I have no problem. Got heat, got electric, I never had no problems. No trouble with HUD, no trouble with none of the agencies, I never had problems with. I can call today; they will be here tomorrow. Queensbridge is pretty well kept up.

JS: But I have no fear. I don't do anything wrong. . . . Play my music, hang out socialize with people, talk to them. We had Black History Month last month. I put a little music in the system for them.

AJ: Did you perform for them?

JS: Well, I did. They weren't expecting me to, but I did a little history on Martin Luther King, and I found out there's a black anthem as well. You know that, right?

AJ: I did not.

JS: Oh, yes, the black anthem, just like we have the Pledge of Allegiance, they have theirs. And I put it through my Bluetooth. I put it on the table, and they put the cordless mic, and put it there, because they

didn't have anything going on that day. I always like to teach here. I put everything together for them in a matter of seconds, and it blew them away. They weren't expecting it. I only live across the street from here. So, it's not far.

AJ: Do you think your role as a musician or as a performer has changed your experience?

JS: I'm a role model. For a lot of these kids, I'm professional. I get a lot of equipment and give it to the kids. If I'm not using something, I give it to the kids. Beat boxes, drum machines, a lot of stuff I give away. I have too much. I have my own private studio, recording studio.

AJ: Here at Queensbridge?

JS: In my apartment, I do everything, yes. I work with the kids. I give more to them. When the kids were like 'yeah, hi' *[makes gesture with hand]*, they always reminded me that their grandparents loved me. I was the guy if you had a problem with your light switch or something, a lamp, I fixed it for you, and you wanted to give me money, and I said just give me a prayer. Say a prayer for me. I don't need the money. And the kids grew up, and they all remembered who I am. They always say, give a little, get a lot. And it really works. Just got to be respectful. I use the phrase, I'm colorblind. I don't see color in terms of speaking. We all come out the same way. We should learn to love and respect each other, understand. And that's what's wrong sometimes people are misjudged . . . You got people in here that are from down South that had crosses burnt on their lawns, the racists. I told them that I couldn't participate on Black History Month because I know from the Italian experience that's it's not going to change. Martin Luther King, his dream is still pushing for it. We still ain't there.



Lillian Muller

Lillian Muller interview by Manuel Arbelaez

On maintenance

Lillian Muller: My name is Muller right now. Seeing as how I was I married 25 years and went from Aby to Muller, and I've been on my own 20 years already. Until I broke my foot, I got 14 steel pins in my foot and chips off the spine.

Manuel Arbelaez: And you're still walking.

LM: I have a heart condition, high blood pressure, asthma, diabetes. I had my eyes operated on, implants. I got my third ear. And when I broke this foot, I killed the circulation. I have to depend on this side. That's why the doctor has me walking with this [walker].

MA: You are absolutely incredible. Oh, man, you are tough!

LM: And I do everything myself other than the doctor's son when I go shopping, he pushes the cart and lifts the groceries and carries what I have. But other than that, I do everything myself.

MA: Do you feel that the services at Queensbridge Houses provides, helps you, or aids you as independent as you are?

LM: I don't ask for nothin'. Other than I really have to. But other than that, these hands can work. I figure while I can use my hands, I'm going to do it. If I'm not able, I'll stay on the side.

MA: So, while being a resident here at Queensbridge, what sort of occupations, jobs did you do?

LM: Well, I worked where they make suitcases.

MA: Around here?

LM: Not here. In Brooklyn, where they make dresses. I can do a little of everything. Especially when my mouth goes. If I see something I don't think is right, I open my mouth if I don't think it's right. They call me "big mouth." But Bob here and Robbin, they call me girl number one. Cause I'm only right across the street. I'm at the gate before they even open it.

MA: So, do you feel that if residents don't speak up for these services?

LM: That's the main thing. They leave it to one person to do all the talk. Where they all should get together. There're about four or five ladies in my building, which is 409. We all get together and complain, and we go to the office and tell them about it. Alright, they make us wait two or three days but finally they come over and I say, 'gee, it's about time!' they say, 'oh, stop your complaining.' We yell, 'why should we?' we pay rent. We want the protection that we're supposed to get. But to me, it goes in one ear and out the other.

MA: What is the biggest difference that you've noticed in Queensbridge in all aspects as far as from when you first moved in to present day?

LM: No difference whatsoever. It's the same thing, day in and day out. Half the time what they write in that paper, that certain buildings are doing this, buildings doing that, they are not doing a darn thing!

MA: At this time is there anything else you would like to comment on?

LM: Like I said, nothing's being done for the place. You go and complain about something, you're lucky if you get service, about a week or two weeks later. And that's not right.



Nellie Pettway

Nellie Pettway interview by Mary Naughton

On family history and traditions, Riis Senior Center programs, community

Nellie Pettway: When I moved over here in Queensbridge 20 years ago, I started working on this quilt, and I didn't finish it until six years ago. I was waiting to finish this piece of binding that goes around. See over there? That part there will blend in with these pieces that I quilt. I bought this piece of material because I had a problem holding the two pieces of material together. So, I bought a piece with the Panama Red in it, and I quilted it in the ditch that's what you call quilting in the ditch, when you quilt into the piece of material that's already with the Panama on there. This quilt been to SoHo with a fundraiser with Mr. Newman that was here before, five years ago. This is the quilt that really helped me a whole lot because I was so stressed out. The ceiling was coming down on me. The floor was just coming up, and I was so squished up because I'm not used to living in big buildings like this, you know? And I was so afraid to go out, so, I said, let me take this and finish this and put everything in it that I need. I'll bind myself with this and down at the bottom part you can see when I get to the door, it's quilted out like this *[spreads hands out wide]*. I can go to the right, and I can go to the left. And that feel kind of when away. Just like today is one of those days I would take it and wrap myself up in it because I am under the weather. This means more to me than any of the other one I've worked on. I have the one with pig in a pen, it's a red and a white one. It's in this book.

Mary Naughton: What else do you have in this book?

NP: Just my quilt is in there but the most important thing about this, to have my mom, and to have something working with her, to show with her, that means a whole lot to me. Is it okay if I open it up?

MN: Yes.

NP: *[opens book and grunts]* And it's heavy. And I don't have my glasses. This is my quilt here *[flipping through and showing the book]*. This is my mom, and this is me, and this is my mom's quilt. There's four generations. We are the first black generation with the four in there, and this is my quilt here. The pig in the pen. It was in a Christmas card. Would you believe?! Only two of us in this book had a card to come out for Christmas. This is the Christmas color, and this is my niece's quilt, and this is her daughter's. This is the four generations together.

MN: So, this has been in your family for a very long time.

NP: So, this is what I'm all involved in and stuff like that, and it makes me very happy. You don't know the meaning of this. And I get so excited and I was happy enough. I call [this quilt] "Rags to the White House." I was invited to the White House with Mrs. [Laura] Bush. I have my letter someplace in here.

MN: Oh, wow! Tell us about that.

NP: Oh my God! Let me tell you. I had to get surgery. And when I got the call to come there I forgot all about I was sick. I dressed to kill, and I went there it was beautiful. We had lunch with her and the museum in Washington. She didn't get to the White House when we were there, she came in a little bit later. We went to the Green Room. It was something! It was just beautiful I had a picture taken with her, and that's what's hurting me so bad. I had a flood in my house, and I'm still looking for that picture. I want that picture. . . . Do you know when the quilts were at the Whitney Museum? . . . I always knew some of my stuff would be shown.

MN: What does a typical day look like for you here at Queensbridge?

NP: To me, what it looks like to me, it looks like there is a little bit more hope. And not to just stay in the house. And to get out and be around people. I need to know how other people are doing. It seem to me . . . the sicker you are, the better I can deal with you. It makes me forget about what's wrong with me. So, that's the reason why I come through that door. Most times they say, 'oh, here come Nellie, here come Nellie' and the main thing that help me about coming here, I got into an exercise class here. . . . We have the best exercise class they say in Queensbridge. We just finished the other day, and I'm one of the dancers, one of the *Senior Shakers*. I put my walker down, and I was on the floor yesterday. We do Tai-Chi here, so this is good. This helped me to get out. And you can even go to the gym, but I don't go, just a whole lot of stuff and what I like about it the lunch is good for a dollar. Whether I want it or not . . . A lady told me . . . 'Come to this center, and I guarantee you, you will be better.' And I try to be because I love getting involved with everything. And across there in the senior room there we used to have the books. I asked them to bring books so people who don't want to be out there can just be in here and reading a book, and they had a couple of bibles in there and that's what I would do. I would go over there and read the bible before I come out of the room, and I just feel good, and I like getting in contact with most of the people that's here. To see what's what.



Gene Golden

Gene Golden interview by Channing Powers

On community

Channing Powers: Would you say Queensbridge still has that [sense of community]?

Gene Golden: Of course they have to! You know why they have to? Because there are people older than me here. I try to talk to the older people all the time. Like Mr. James. God rest him, he just passed away. We used to talk about military things here together. There's another lady here, Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Washington, these people are well into their nineties that I talk to. We get along very well. And I'm learning. Don't stop learning. Every day you are learning something. Every day. And I didn't find that out until I was half my age. I didn't really believe into that. I was fifty something until I believed in that.

CP: I would like to ask you a question about this neighborhood. What do you think about the neighborhood changing around you?

GG: Well, I think the parking is a little bit horrific. That does not do anything for morale among the elders. If they can ease things for the remaining people meaning seniors citizens it would make it easier to motivate themselves and get around, I think they would be more productive because they would feel like doing something. . . . It's a little tight with that, but that's something that in a city that's being built up, it's a little difficult to do. . . . There is crime, things everywhere, so you can't say, 'Queensbridge is this, Queensbridge is that way.' I heard people talk. I say, 'Well, you don't know.' I say, 'Did you just read the news today? Where was all of that taken at? What happened where was that at? It's nothing I heard about Queensbridge today.' So, I defend here because I know what's here. I live here, and I know what's here.



Rita Frazier and Ray Normandeau

Ray Normandeau and Rita Frazier, husband and wife, interview by Amanda Jones

On family history, tenant activism, maintenance

Rita Frazier: I was originally born in Virginia. I came up here when I was 8 years old, many moons ago, like in 1955, so I was raised in Brooklyn, New York.

Ray Normandeau: And I was born in Canada. I speak English as a second language, which explains why I speak it as badly as I do. I never finished high school. I have a 9th grade education but I wrote part of a high school textbook called *Careers and Computer Sales*, published by Rosen Publishing. I'm credited three times in the book. So, that takes care of my educational level. However, when I speak to doctors and lawyers, I feel very much at ease almost as if I'm talking to a peer because I learned a lot on my own with reading and listening.

Amanda Jones: Sure. You said English is your second language. What is your first language?

RN: My first language is French. And I speak French in the movie *Light Sleeper* with Susan Sarandon and Willem Dafoe. If you rent it, I make money. *[laughter]* We both get residuals on things we've been in. So, please rent it often, at least once a week.

AJ: How did you guys meet?

RN: I was demonstrating a product in a store I worked for many, many years as a pitch man and a talker. I also travel with carnivals. And Rita was a customer in the store in A&S in Brooklyn, and I won't say that as a pitchman I did a bait and switch, but I tricked her into bringing me home instead of the product she wanted!

Years later she complained at A&S's that she wasn't happy, and they said sorry no refunds you've had him too long *[laughter]*. I've been used and abused *[laughter]*.

RN: Things have changed over the years. When we first moved in here, I remember a few went to the office to complain about the leaky faucets, and you better hurry home or else the maintenance man would get in your apartment before you got there and say you weren't home. Now, we've had a non-working intercom system since November of last year. Well, somebody came and said, 'oh, you're right. It doesn't work. We'll schedule.' That was November 28th [of 2017] I think. Schedule of repairs still has not been done [as of May 7, 2018].

AJ: So, when you first moved in here did you encounter these kinds of safety concerns and health and . . .

RF: No, because if you wanted something fixed, they would fix it right away.

RN: And safety. . . . Yes, that was her because she said we had to have these gates, these bars [points in direction] in our windows. Said everyone had to have them. I said, no, the law says if you have children under 11, living or visiting, and she said no, everyone has to have them. Well, I contacted the legal department. The legal department and I have seen eye to eye on a few things, including the mouse tales. Which I'll tell you about in a moment. But, anyhow, I contacted them and said our housing assistant says we must have them, it's the law, please send me a copy of the law. We have no one under 11 ever visiting or lives with us. And they told us we didn't need the gates or bars and the Housing Authority assistant said I didn't know you were going to contact the legal department. Maybe that's a threat. Then she was moved to another housing project that was convenient. Okay, now the mouse with the legal department, we had mice. We don't anymore. And I had to ask permission to get a pet. I said, if we got a cat, to catch the mice, would we still need

permission because the cat would not be a pet? It's really a service animal. They wrote back to me. I think I have the letter. Saying if the cat is certified as a mouse catcher, you would not otherwise need permission. I wrote back to them, and I said, well, if the cat caught a mouse, and ate most of the mouse, except the tail, would you be satisfied with just a piece of tail *[laughter]*?

AJ: Very clever, very clever. Speaking of animals, you have this title, *[reads from the Normandeau newsletter]* 'NYCHA tenants rabid about new dog policy.' Do you care to expand on that a little bit?

RF: What was that?

AJ: Queensbridge Houses, the largest public housing development in North America, and as far as the tenants are concerned, quote, unquote, 'there's enough bitches in Queensbridge Houses as it is.'

RN: Oh, that's right! I said that in a meeting, and ugh! A bitch is a female dog. One time at a meeting, I only found out about such and such a thing, when I was in bed with the vice president last night! Of course, the vice president is my wife! Everyone was like 'ugh!' and the president said, 'well, they are married!'

AJ: So, you guys like to start a little trouble.

RN: Maybe. I like to be a bit provocative. Make it interesting. You get tired of the same old shit all the time! *[laughter]*

The Craft and Pedagogy of Oral History in the Archives

By Molly Rosner

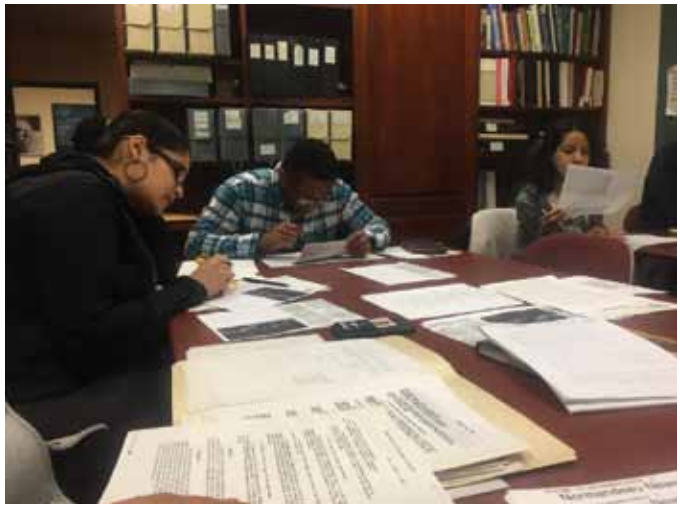


There are two common misconceptions about conducting oral history interviews that lie on opposite ends of a spectrum. The first is that interviews are easy – that they require little preparation and are the same as a conversation. The second is that the act of asking people about their lives necessitates deep preparation and intensive research to preclude unforeseen scenarios. Both of these notions can produce poor interviews. The challenge when training students to conduct interviews is to help them maintain the delicate balance between careful listening and adherence to research in order to avoid either carelessness or over-caution. This was the primary challenge the staff faced in preparing a group of nine students to conduct their first oral history interviews.

The LaGuardia and Wagner Archives provided abundant resources for students to learn about public housing in New York City. As the repository for the NYCHA papers, which contains over 30,000 photographs and over 180,000 documents, the Archives provided students with the opportunity to study one of our most popular collections.

The students' investigation focused on the Queensbridge Houses, which are located in Long Island City near the college. As the largest public housing complex in the nation, this project houses nearly 7,000 people in 96 buildings and 3,142 apartments. The complex provided students with the opportunity to learn about

one of the more famous public housing projects in New York City, which is sitting in the midst of the rapidly developing waterfront of Queens.



This oral history project was important not only for the students' education but also because it fills in a gap in the NYCHA collection. The NYCHA collection contains documents that outline the agency's perspective and the government's plans but holds little documentation of tenants' experiences other than a few flyers from tenant association meetings and a newspaper called *Normandeau News* written by current and long-time resident Ray Normandeau (who was interviewed by a student during this project). The students were tasked with helping to fill part of that void. They were presented with the opportunity to learn a new historical methodology and contribute work that would assist researchers in our archives for years to come.

To this day, oral history as a practice is met with skepticism in many academic institutions. Despite documentation of rich and informative oral history projects coming out of universities and other organizations, critics still doubt the value of a source that is "subjective," fallible, and in flux, as people and stories tend to be. The social history movement that began in the 1970s helped overhaul some of the assumptions about which sources were and were not trustworthy or valuable and questioned the superiority attributed to written sources. The movement "called archival neutrality into question" and historians "turned their attention from studying prominent political leaders and organizations to focusing on understanding society through the experiences of groups under-documented by 'mainstream' repositories." In fact, as women, people of

color, and other marginalized communities became the focal point of historical studies, "historians needed materials about these subjects that the archives did not contain."[1] Even Oral History repositories (like that of Columbia University) did not always value the audio – and the emotions and subtleties that audio conveys – and reused cassette tapes after the interviews had been transcribed, erasing the recording forever.

This debate over historical methodologies and archival collection priorities played out within our project as well. Students were first introduced to written and photographic sources in the Archives including photographs of community events at Queensbridge, tenant association newsletters, charts and blueprints about the building and demographic makeup of the development, and NYCHA reports.

The students were tasked with identifying gaps in knowledge about the Queensbridge development, to fill in the silences and holes in our archival sources and to document perspectives that weren't represented in their reading. This felt contradictory to them at times, since after doing so much reading they were asked to consider what was being left out. The premise was that there is value in the unheard narratives of the people who lived in the Queensbridge Houses. Alessandro Portelli, possibly the foremost living oral historian, states,

> Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did. Oral sources may not add much to what we know, for instance, of the material cost of a strike to the workers involved; but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs.[2]

Throughout their work students had to confront their own biases and preconceptions about public housing. The interviews they conducted introduced them to stories that both reinforced and undermined those preconceptions and they came out of the project with a more nuanced and human understanding of Queensbridge and its residents. The oral histories they produced with Queensbridge residents greatly en-



Two students practice interviewing each other during a workshop at the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.

riched the understanding of public housing through their use of other methodologies like gathering information from primary sources, group discussion of sources, and watching documentary films.

As the group continued to research at the archives, the students began to generate questions for their interviews. The students designed open-ended interview questions based on what they had read. The narrators varied in age and experience, it was clear that it'd be difficult to stick to a set list of questions. The students began to see firsthand that, "the importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge," as Portelli observes.[3]

Oral History Workshops

The students participated in an interactive workshop on conducting oral history interviews at the LaGuardia and Wagner Archives. They discussed attire, etiquette, and the types of questions they planned to as. Workshops have long been a standard practice for preparing people to conduct interviews in the field of oral history. They give people a chance to experience some of the nuances of interviewing before they begin officially collecting stories. During the workshops, each student took time to be interviewed and to be the interviewer. The goal of the training was, in part, to put students at ease about their interviews by providing them with tangible skills and techniques. The students recorded their practice interviews on their phones,

and then listened to them as a group and reflected on what was challenging and what was exciting about interviewing their peers. The group worked through the questions they'd drafted during their archival research to make them more open-ended. They were encouraged to continue practicing with their friends and family before their Queensbridge interviews.

It was important students learned to create open-ended and clear questioning techniques, but in terms of content, as Portelli writes, "Often, indeed, the most important information lies outside what both the historian and the narrator think of as historically relevant."[4]

Challenges and Opportunities

One challenging question about interviewing came up repeatedly among the students: how does someone balance listening to the narratives of the tenants whose stories will range in topics, while finding answers to the questions their research had raised for them? Because students felt nervous about conducting their interviews and because of the emphasis in the project on archival records, they had to learn to appreciate the value of the historical background they had come to understand but simultaneously resist relying too heavily on scripted questions. They had to learn that research, while crucial, should not be a crutch that precludes careful listening.

The goal of oral history is not to replicate the story that the documents in the archives have already told. Archival research can provide historical context but likely will not answer all the questions about human experience that need answering. Sometimes students felt they received mixed messages from the staff, hearing that they should follow their script exactly and know what questions to ask, but then learning that interviews are unpredictable and they should follow the lead of the person they are interviewing. Portelli notes that "rigidly structured interviews may exclude elements whose existence or relevance were previously unknown to the interviewer… Such interviews tend to confirm the historian's previous frame of reference."[5] Often, a workshop must focus on getting students to find security in the uncomfortable place of



A student cringes as she attempts to interview her peer during a workshop.

the unknown and to rely *less* on their list of questions than they would like.

The experience of interviewing taught Juan Cabrera, one of our student interviewers, a different lesson, "[The program] has taught me that conducting an interview can be a difficult task but has also shown me that it's an awesome learning experience. You learn how to think on your feet but also you see what kind of people you can interview later on."[6] Giving students the authority to guide an interview, and showing them that there is power (for the interviewer and interviewee) in less structured questioning is a valuable lesson in itself.

The logistics of the interview inside the room were fairly simple, recorders were not a hurdle we had to deal with because a filmmaker accompanied each student to their interview and focused on the recording. Filming, rather than audio recording, initially drew some resistance from the seniors. A few residents were nervous about being filmed on camera and asked to postpone or cancel their interview. Over time, as they got to know our students and filmmaker, they grew more comfortable with the camera. Once the interview began they often forgot about the camera as they would an audio recorder.

The Interviews

Over the course of three months, the students conducted about twenty interviews with Queensbridge residents. Scheduling was a particular challenge because there was no guarantee that residents to be inter-



A student interviews a tenant in front of the cameras and lights at the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement.

viewed would come to the Riis Center on any given day. Still, there was a general understanding that these oral histories were important, and residents continued to show up. One resident, Gene Golden, noted, "Everybody here is a library, so when we pass, we have lost the library, and nobody is going to the library these days… If you have something somebody needs, share it."[7]

The interviews for this project held specific challenges as well. There wasn't an opportunity to conduct any kind of pre-interview with the narrators, because both the students and tenants had varying schedules and they were matched up on the day-of the interview. A pre-interview, during which the interviewer and interviewee get to know each other and go over the parameters of a project, is an important tool for building trust. It is an opportunity to sketch a brief outline of the subject's life, so that the interviewer might conduct additional research about events that may come up in the interview. It will help the interviewer generate an appropriate list of questions specific to the subject, and serves as a more casual introduction for the two than the filmed oral history interview itself. This is particularly important when conducting life story interviews, which may cover much longer periods of time than an interview focused on a particular life event.

The students' visits to the Riis Center – volunteering, participating in meetings, and eating meals together – substituted for the pre-interview experience. For the Queensbridge interviews, many subjects have lived their whole lives in the housing project so a life history interview approach is appropriate in that it is

all at least peripherally related to the experience of growing up and living in public housing. The students relied on archival documents that, for the most part, did not include the perspective of tenants and therefore, the events they encountered in the documented in the archival record were not always the primary concerns of the tenants they interviewed. Gaining tenants' perspectives on the events they read about was truly important, though not the complete story. In their training, students needed to be cognizant of this disjuncture between their research and their interviews. This disconnect was not only acceptable, it is expected and, in fact, useful.

After the Interview

With increasingly accessible technological tools for sharing interviews, editing audio, and publishing work comes a set of ethical and legal questions that we had to confront with this project. The Oral History Association's description of Best Practices states that "the repository should comply to the extent to which it is aware with the letter and spirit of the interviewee's agreement with the interviewer and sponsoring institution."[8] The Archives' release form technically gave us permission to use the interviews online and in media beyond the walls of the archives. Nonetheless, because tenants and students may not have had the same understanding of the myriad uses of the oral history interviews, we decided to keep the full interview audio recordings of the interviews for internal use only by visitors to the archives who made an appointment. Only excerpts which would not jeopardize the narrators' legal status, personal relationships, or private information would be used in our mini-documentary. We felt this was the most responsible decision we could make, while still sharing pertinent pieces of the narratives with the public and making the interviews accessible to those with scholarly interests.

The nature of a community college is that students' move on to other colleges and careers almost as soon as they have established themselves at LaGuardia. The end of the school year meant that there was not enough time for students to carefully review their interviews and return to the Riis Center for follow



ups. They did not get the (at times excruciating) experience of hearing their own questions and revising how they might approach a topic if given a second opportunity. However, they finished the project having had an experience often reserved for graduate students.

It is only once the interviews begin that the important stories really become clear. Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack write in their essay *Learning to Listen*, "The shift of focus from data gathering to interactive process affects what the researcher regards as valuable information."[9] The lessons shift as the interviews take place. Students learn about how stories solidify and shift upon deep reflection. Portelli writes, "Memory, in fact, is not a mere depository of information, but rather an ongoing process of elaboration and reconstruction of meaning."[10]

Conclusion

As is often the case, this oral history project continues to grow and change in its "afterlife." In October, 2018, myself and Amanda Jones, a student from the project who had conducted six oral history interviews, attended the Oral History Association Annual meeting in Montreal, Canada and presented the project at the Poster Session. Among scholars and students, Amanda learned about the wider world of oral history projects and came to understand more fully the responsibility that comes with using interviews as documentation.

At the conference, her work was treated with respect. She shared, "I have limited formal academic experience, so this conference was a foray into a whole new world. The opportunity to meet and connect with people — many of whom were academics — and whose work revolves around their expertise and passions, challenged my presumptions that academic life is methodical and boring." Oral history methodology proves that the personal is, indeed, academic and academia and empathy are not mutually exclusive.



Amanda came to understand the weight of handling someone's story with respect and mutual ownership. She wrote that,

> During a panel, a conversation regarding best practices discussed informed consent. I've understood the importance of obtaining a signature, a release that says it's okay for me to record you talking. But informed consent is so much more: it's an agreement between two people, a contract that obligates the interviewer to honor and respect the interviewee by making sure both know exactly who is giving consent and for what. As the person asking the questions, the consent must be explicit.

She learned how much trust is involved in caring for someone's life story. As she put it, "I've now become morally responsible for making sure they are treated carefully and respectfully, and to honor my side of the contract." The post-interview responsibilities are indeed crucial to maintaining trust with those who have shared their stories and the students saw that they needed to become a part of the community in order to

effectively collect and preserve these narratives.

The stories about Queensbridge Houses told in this project will continue to grow and change depending on their particular moment in Queens history. Just as the first phase of this project wound down Amazon announced that it would be setting up its new headquarters "HQ2" in Long Island City, directly next door to Queensbridge Houses.[11] Suddenly, Queensbridge found itself situated amidst a historical change for the city. April Simpson, President of the Tenants Association and one of the people interviewed by our students for this project, was repeatedly interviewed about the announcement for news outlets. Simpson asked what Amazon would do for the residents of Queensbridge and worried that "they're not going to have opportunities for people. Not just people from Queensbridge but other lower-and middle-income people in this area."[12] Amidst this pushback from residents of the city, Amazon abruptly canceled its plans to build a campus in Long Island City. But students who participated in this project learned about the importance of community engagement and were well-versed in the concerns of Queensbridge tenants before and after this saga unfolded.

What many students took away from the project was a new appreciation for the accounts of lower and middle income people. Oral History, according to Paul Thompson, "… can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history … it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place."[13] Both the students and tenant grew from this experience and saw firsthand how empowering and meaningful an intergenerational life history interview can be. As Mary Naughton, a student in the project put it, "The people of Queensbridge come from various backgrounds and paths, though the common thread is the sense of community they find here. The best way to look at Queensbridge is through the eyes of its residents where we see exactly what Queensbridge means to them: everything."[14]

Telijah Patterson, who grew up in public housing but was always warned by her mother not to talk with her neighbors, reflected, "it was really interesting because I feel like the project really brought to light the more positive aspects of Queensbridge and public housing. I've lived most of my life in the projects. I was even able to change my own perception on public housing." Manuel Arbelnez had a similar revelation after doing interviews at Queensbridge housing, and he began playing basketball and making use of the courts in the housing project that he lives in.[15] As Portelli states, "Thus, the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context."[16] The students' experiences of their own surroundings were altered by their encounters with the residents of Queensbridge.

A new group of students will continue to conduct interviews with residents of Queensbridge – with a focus on a younger generation of voices. Gail Brown, Director of Senior Services, says more and more members of the community are asking to have their stories recorded for this project. The LaGuardia and Wagner Archives will continue to collect and preserve their stories.

Endnotes

1 Ellen D. Swain, "Oral History and the Archive," *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., New York: Routledge, Eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, p. 347.

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3 Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," *The Oral History Reader*, p. 37.

4 Portelli, *A Dialogical Relationship: An Approach to Oral History*, 1.

5 Portelli, "What Makes Oral history Different," p. 39.

6 Juan Cabrera, LaGuardia Community College Student, April 20, 2018.

7 Gene Golden, Resident, interview with Channing Powers at the Jacob A. Riis Settlement House, April 17, 2018.

8 "Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History," Oral History Association, Adopted October, 2009, https://

www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/. Accessed Fall 2018.

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10 Portelli, *A Dialogical Relationship: An Approach to Oral History*, p. 5.

11 This plan for the new headquarters has since been cancelled due to community resistance.

12 Amazon's New Neighbor: The Nation's Largest Housing Project, *The New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/nyregion/amazon-queens-queensbridge-houses.html

13 Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past," *Oral History Reader*, 26.

14 Mary Naughton, Student, March 23, 2018.

15 Interviews with Telijah Patterson and Manuel Arbelaez by Molly Rosner, May 21st, 2018.

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Editors' Biographies



Stephen Petrus is a twentieth-century U.S. urban and cultural historian at LaGuardia and Wagner Archives at LaGuardia Community College. At the Museum of the City of New York in 2015, he curated the exhibition F*olk City: New York and the Folk Music Revival* and was co-author of the accompanying book, published by Oxford University Press. At LaGuardia, he helped organize in 2017 the Queens Museum exhibition *The Lavender Line: Coming Out in Queens* and was co-editor of the accompanying book. His essays have been published in *Studies in Popular Culture, New York History*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and his research has been supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Pew Foundation. His next book will be a cultural history of Greenwich Village in the 1950s and 60s.

Molly Rosner is Assistant Director of Education Programs at LaGuardia and Wagner Archives at LaGuardia Community College. She received her Ph.D. in American Studies from Rutgers University-Newark and her MA in Oral History from Columbia University. Her dissertation is a cultural study of historically-focused children's amusements. She has worked in education at the Museum of the City of New York, the Apollo Theater, the Brooklyn Museum and the Brooklyn Navy Yard BLDG92 and serves on the editorial board of the Oral History Review and Gotham Center Blog. Her writing has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Salon*, *Huffington Post*, the *Brooklyn Navy Yard Blog*, and *Jeunesse*.

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