

1 The South Bronx

AN INTRODUCTION

Kathryn Speller has been a community activist and concerned citizen in the West Bronx for over sixty years. She is an interesting, outspoken, energetic eighty-six-year-old. Although slender, pretty, and only four feet eleven inches, she is imposing, her gray hair in an “Afro,” her mind active. In her living room, games stand ready for play when family or friends visit. At the end of one of our meetings, she calls a neighbor to remind her to take her medicine. Discussing her community’s past, present, and future, she told me:

My husband, my mom, and I bought a house in 1968 in the West Bronx. When we moved into the neighborhood, it was very nice, very multiethnic. When the area started getting rough, the African Americans and Hispanics stayed. My friends and I marched against the terrible hospital closings. I worked to organize tenants’ organizations. I advocated for many, many years for parks and services for youth and senior citizens. I was active with the precinct advisory council, which worked to promote better relationships between the police and the community.

Overall, I welcome the new immigrants but worry they might be less socially active than I and my friends were. I worry about the proposed rezoning of Jerome Avenue, and whether the rezoning will cause displacement. Will there be enough schools or will current schools become more



Kathryn Speller at home, discussing one of her favorite topics, the Bronx. An activist and outspoken observer of community life, she has lived in the West Bronx for sixty years, through the hard times and the rebuilding. Her mother was part of the Great Migration of African Americans to the north. Raised in Harlem, Ms. Speller moved to the Bronx as a young woman. Photo by author.

overcrowded? With taller buildings, are plans being made for open space? What will happen to neighborhood stores? I particularly worry about the effect that gentrification would have on the poor, although I welcome improvements to the area. I am afraid that the poor will be told, “Get out of here.”¹

THE SOUTH BRONX TODAY

So near and yet so far. The South Bronx, the poorest half of New York’s poorest borough, is separated from Manhattan’s wealthy Upper East Side

by a few subway stops, and yet these two areas couldn't be more different. The South Bronx grapples with New York's highest school dropout rates² while the Upper East Side boasts an average household income of \$311,000.³ The South Bronx is 1 percent white while the Upper East Side is 80 percent white.⁴ The South Bronx has blocks of aging, overcrowded housing with numerous violations while the Upper East Side contains posh Park Avenue high-rises and Prada, Gucci, and other luxury stores along Madison Avenue. Alluding to this kind of stark inequality that he is fighting, Mayor Bill de Blasio refers to New York as a "tale of two cities."⁵ In short, the South Bronx has been a place for the poor while the Upper East Side and areas like it are for the wealthy.

The Bronx is a world unto itself, covering over forty-two square miles, including the two largest parks and the only freshwater river in New York City. To the north stretch the primarily suburban areas, the City of Yonkers, and, further north, the cities of Albany, Syracuse, and Buffalo—all referred to generically as "upstate." Manhattan lies over small bridges to the south and west, and the borough of Queens on Long Island over major bridges to the east. To the people of the Bronx, the rapidly gentrifying borough of Brooklyn is somewhere on the other side of Manhattan. The fifth borough, Staten Island, is over that way too. The Bronx communicates mainly with Manhattan.

The Bronx contains cultural treasures, many of them highly touted. The Bronx Zoo, the sixth-largest zoo in the world, has four thousand animals; the New York Botanical Garden, with 250 beautiful acres, sponsors a Christmas train show and a yearly orchid spectacular; and the new Yankee Stadium, rebuilt in 2009 at a cost of \$1.6 billion,⁶ holds hopes for another World Series win. Near the zoo is Belmont, with its numerous, much-loved Italian restaurants.

Perhaps the Bronx's most outstanding treasure is its residents themselves. Over 1.4 million people call the Bronx home, more than live in the entire state of Alaska. And they are so diverse—this is the most diverse county in the United States. Any two people randomly meeting on the street have a 90 percent chance of being of different races or of different ethnic backgrounds. Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and European Americans mix with people from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Jamaica, and other countries in the Caribbean, West Africa, South America, and Asia.⁷ Most

amazingly, people generally get along. This diversity infuses the Bronx and New York City with energy and vitality.

The people of the South Bronx work at rates comparable to the rest of New York State, at all kinds of jobs, though too many of them are very low-paid service jobs, contributing to the high poverty rate. But not everyone is poor: while 38 percent of the people of the South Bronx meet the official definition of poverty, 62 percent do not.⁸

In the mornings, the subways are packed with people commuting to work in Manhattan: civil servants, teachers, office workers, security guards, and construction workers. Many others find work in the Bronx. A surprising 45 percent of the people who work in the Bronx work for non-profits, including hospitals and other health-related facilities.⁹ Many others work in mom-and-pop businesses, such as hair salons and retail stores, or drive taxis.

The Bronx's residential landscape is dense and full of life. In older sections of the South Bronx, many of the apartment buildings appear tired and worn, despite the flow of young mothers and children in and out of their front doors. Barbed wire remains atop some fences, a reminder of the high crime of years past. Residences for people who are homeless appear well kept from the street and blend in with the neighborhood. In once devastated areas, attractive, renovated five-story apartment buildings mingle with two- and three-family houses that allow for home ownership.

The commercial landscape in the South Bronx is also busy, offering a range of stores, from "99 cent" and inexpensive clothing stores to restaurants, check-cashing and money-transfer services, beauty and barber shops, and laundromats, all with colorful signs. Bodegas—little grocery stores whose signs usually say "Deli" but that everyone refers to as bodegas—liven many corners, offering snacks and essentials such as bread, bananas, milk, beer, and coffee. Full-scale grocery stores can be hard to find, contributing to the epidemic of obesity and diabetes.

An abundance of churches and mosques reflect the religious passion of South Bronx residents. The edifices range from traditional, steepled stone Catholic and Protestant churches built over 120 years ago to large Pentecostal churches, often in converted movie theaters and catering halls, to a profusion of other churches, sometimes in transformed houses

and storefronts. Mosques number about thirty, and the members often spill out the storefronts onto the sidewalks for prayer.

In sharp contrast to the South Bronx, Riverdale is a middle-class to wealthy area in the northwest Bronx. With co-op apartments, multimillion-dollar houses, and three exclusive private schools, it is physically and economically separate from the rest of the Bronx. The northeast Bronx, with its many private houses, is home to a large Jamaican community. Throughout this book, I will distinguish whether I am talking about the South Bronx or the entire Bronx, which includes several middle-income areas and, in the case of Riverdale, upper-middle-class and wealthy areas.

The old industrial areas lie near the waterfront. Many of the factories that once employed large numbers of people closed years ago, but waste transfer facilities remain, as do companies such as the *New York Post*, Coca-Cola, and Jetro Cash & Carry (a supplier of bodegas). Other commercial ventures such as FreshDirect (online grocery delivery) have recently built new facilities.

The huge Hunts Point produce, meat, and fish markets, through which most of the food for New York City passes, have annual revenues of more than \$2 billion a year and employ thousands of unionized workers, many from the Bronx.¹⁰ But like so many things in life, it is a mixed blessing. Residents of Hunts Point have the highest rates of asthma in New York City, which they attribute to the market's very heavy truck traffic rumbling through their neighborhood.

New hotels, ritzy market-rate housing along the Harlem River, and plans for the world's largest ice-skating complex indicate profound change. Big money is investing in the Bronx. Add in the Trump Golf Links, a few craft breweries, and new shopping malls, and a picture of a different kind of Bronx starts appearing, one that appeals to people with resources. Gentrification is on the horizon.

MY LIFE IN THE SOUTH BRONX

I came to the Bronx as a naive but determined idealist in 1968, accompanied by my Kenyan husband, David Karanja, and my infant son, Kamau

Karanja. I arrived from small-town America and found an urgently needed job working as a caseworker in the Bronx for the welfare department. It was a good fit with my evolving interest in social justice, which had started when I was in high school and increased in college when I was an exchange student at Fisk University, a historically black college. The welfare job, which I kept for three years, required making frequent home visits (and climbing lots of stairs in old apartment buildings) and determining clients' eligibility for benefits. I divorced at the age of twenty-four. At various times, I lived in Highbridge, near Bronx Lebanon Hospital, and near Fordham Road. After earning a master's degree in social work with a concentration in community organizing, marrying Jim McLaughlin, and having another son, Jimmy, I organized activities in senior citizen centers in the Bronx for six years. Then I settled into my life's work.

For thirty-four years, I worked on the ground, building BronxWorks (originally called the Citizens Advice Bureau, or CAB), an organization that helps tens of thousands of low-income Bronx residents improve their lives. Initially, working from a one-room office on the Grand Concourse and Burnside Avenue with one other employee and two interns, I saw people in crisis, families without food or on the verge of being evicted, children with the odds stacked against them, and seniors in untenable situations. Slowly, but with determination and high standards, we resolved individuals' problems and found resources to build programs to help greater numbers of people—including senior citizen centers, shelters for the homeless, early childhood education, after-school programs, job placement, homelessness prevention, and support for people with AIDS and other major illnesses. We helped families stabilize their lives and take steps to move out of poverty. In the course of doing so, I built a highly regarded organization. When I retired in 2013, BronxWorks was helping thirty-five thousand people a year, with a skilled and dedicated staff of six hundred who worked at twenty-seven locations in the South Bronx.

During the course of my career, I witnessed the South Bronx at its most desperate, when blocks and blocks of abandoned buildings were interspersed with rubble-filled lots where apartment buildings once stood. The devastation spread north and the definition of the South Bronx expanded from 138th to 149th to 161st Street, to the Cross Bronx Expressway, and finally all the way to Fordham Road, subsuming the West Bronx and most

of the Grand Concourse. I participated in the South Bronx's rebirth, the rebuilding of both the physical structures and the social infrastructure. I worked closely with four city administrations, with mayors and commissioners, and with local community leaders and residents. I struggled for funding and learned how to manage government contracts, solicit foundations and individuals for money, and develop a board of directors. Over the years, CAB made significant progress in learning how to resolve many of the problems that plague poor people. We developed expertise in entitlements and housing, youth development, gerontology, workforce development, immigration, and mental health. I saw families move up economically and leave the Bronx, to be replaced with new immigrants, bringing cultural diversity and new energy to the borough. The South Bronx changed dramatically, yet it remains a place that cares about low-income people. Hopefully, it will remain a place for low-income families far into the future.

I was blessed with the opportunity to have an extremely meaningful career that actually changed lives, working in a place that I love with people I admire. I did so while raising three children with my husband, a remarkable daughter, Johnicka, having joined our family along the way.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS

The journey described in this book demonstrates that the South Bronx's revitalization is a great American success story. Far from being a desperate no-man's-land, the South Bronx, to me, represents the future of American cities as sites of struggle, immigration, innovation, and mobility. In these chapters, I show how the Bronx's embrace and support of the poor and immigrants makes it a national model as an essential urban haven.

Based on my nearly five decades of working in the Bronx for social change, I've been compelled to write an insider oral history of this misunderstood, understudied, and undervalued slice of New York City. As a social worker and as someone who lived in the Bronx for twenty years during the hard times, I've penned a work of journalism, not a scholarly volume, that draws upon a range of primary and secondary sources, including interviews of longtime residents, published and unpublished reports, oral histories, and newspapers and books. I write as a participant observer who has

the perspective of a social worker and a community activist. My aim is to provide a broad overview of the decline and resurrection of this borough, with a focus on lower-income residents of the South Bronx, using my experiences and those of my informants to provide a visceral guidance through the narrative. I have drawn upon people I worked with for decades, including community residents, service providers, artists, environmental activists, academic experts, and policymakers, as well as more recent contacts. By bringing together these multiple points of view, I hope to give the reader a feel for the people of the South Bronx, their accomplishments and challenges. Some people are quoted many times at various points in the book when their experience relates to the topic being discussed. Many other people and organizations that I was unable to include in this book have made remarkable contributions and have compelling stories as well.

This book seeks to fill a gap in writings about the South Bronx by focusing on problems residents face and the response from communities, government, and human services agencies. It does not attempt to be a comprehensive history of the Bronx, but rather features selected issues I think are important, based on my experiences and on conversations with people whose opinions I value. In sections of several chapters, I describe the progress of CAB/BronxWorks in developing comprehensive programs to support families as one example of the positive role that social services can play in a low-income community. Other social service agencies have their own histories and achievements, but I focus on the organization that I know best. Not enough has been written about the evolution and impact of human services on communities.

My adult life has been spent working to improve the lives of the people of the Bronx, and I write as a determined community activist who cares deeply about what happens to this storied and complicated borough and its residents. I also write as someone who is concerned about the tendency to blame society's ills on poor people, rather than seeing these people as assets who contribute greatly to our communities. The resilience and strength that the people of the South Bronx showed in living through the hard times—and their contributions toward its rebuilding—should be widely acknowledged and respected. The same resilience and strength resides in people living in other poor areas, and they can, if nurtured with resources and opportunity, contribute substantially to reclaiming their communities.

In this work, I take a hard but empathetic look at the South Bronx, chronicling its fall and rise since the 1960s. I look at factors that caused the collapse of residential real estate, as well as the barriers faced by Puerto Ricans and African Americans as they moved to the Bronx. The stories in this book describe the role residents played in reclaiming their neighborhoods, including the many contributions of immigrants. The Bronx, in turn, provided a route to upward mobility for many. The mixing of people from many backgrounds created music and culture that had worldwide impact.

Based on my years of experience developing and leading a major social service nonprofit and serving on the boards of directors for several other Bronx nonprofits, I make a case that the Bronx plays an important role in New York City, offering less costly housing to low-income native-born residents and immigrants who are priced out of the rest of the city. Indeed, the South Bronx is poor and, in many ways, needs to stay so in order to remain an affordable home for over six hundred thousand New Yorkers. This is not to say that individuals who are poor should remain so—quite the contrary. My whole career was devoted to helping people move out of poverty. This is also not to say that we don't need to improve the Bronx, from schools to housing to basic infrastructure. Poor communities need and deserve an investment of resources available to residents in higher-income areas. As an activist, I've worked day in and day out to improve education for children and adults, prevent homelessness, increase job options, lower crime rates, and offer resources for healthier lives, and I will show how current initiatives in these areas are essential urban projects. This is also not to say that everyone in the South Bronx is poor (the majority are not) or that the South Bronx should be home primarily to low-income people.

Rather, I want to raise a clarion warning about the danger of the "Brooklynization" of the Bronx, an incipient phenomenon rapidly gaining momentum especially in the South Bronx. Thousands of units of luxury and affordable housing targeted to families with significantly higher incomes than those who now live in the area are being constructed, raising concerns about displacement. People in the Bronx want a community that includes diversity of income as well as ethnicity, but only up to a point. That point arrives when people who move in are wealthy enough to change the economics of the area, to rapidly drive up residential and commercial rents. The Bronx should not become unaffordable for its current residents.

This book is a plea to keep the Bronx moving forward as a diverse area full of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Nigeria, Mexico, Sierra Leone, and dozens of other countries while sustaining important African American and Puerto Rican communities. These latter two groups, who suffered the most during the Bronx's worst years and played leading roles in building the new Bronx, are vulnerable to displacement along with the new immigrants.

And it is not just the families that meet the official federal definition of poverty that are vulnerable to displacement. Close to 60 percent of Bronx residents pay over a third of their income for rent, and a third pay over half of their incomes.¹¹ These high rent burdens, the worst in New York State, make it very hard for families to have enough money for their other essential expenses, food, utilities, transportation, and clothing. High rent burdens also make families susceptible to loss of their housing. Displacement has huge social costs, for the families who lose their homes and jobs and for the city as a whole.

Yes, the South Bronx is the poorest urban county in the country.¹² But this does not mean that low-income people in the South Bronx are poorer or worse off than those in other parts of the country. It just means that there are more people who are poor. Many people think poor areas are bad areas that need to be radically fixed, usually by people of wealth and influence. But poor neighborhoods are not necessarily bad neighborhoods. The Bronx has many assets that are particularly crucial to low-income people, such as good public transportation, basically sound housing stock, comparatively low crime, accessible health care, higher educational opportunities, improving parks, relatively high life expectancy,¹³ and a robust social service support system. These assets make the Bronx, although far from perfect, a place that low-income families want to continue to call home.

The South Bronx was poor forty years ago and is still poor, but many of the current residents are not the same people who lived here in past decades. For most of its history and continuing to this day, the Bronx has been a place where families work to build futures that are better than their pasts. As they join the middle class, they decide to stay or they move to a higher-income area. If they stay, they are likely to invest in the community and help family, friends, and neighbors who are still struggling economically. If they move, their apartment is likely to be re-rented to an immigrant family