Jean Smith retired from JPMorgan Chase (JPM) six years ago, but that hasn't stopped her from continuing to serve the community that she and the bank call home.

Smith, who spent 50 years with JPMorgan Chase, will be honored Monday by BronxWorks, a nonprofit group that provides social services to residents of New York City's poorest borough, at its annual gala.

BronxWorks will pay tribute to Smith for her service on its board, which she has used as a perch to help BronxWorks boost its financial support. Under Smith's leadership, the group turned the gala into a major fundraiser, going from $35,000 in 1997 to at least $100,000 a year since 2009.

Smith, 75, was born in Harlem but as a girl moved with her family to the Bronx, where she graduated from Evander Childs High School and later raised two sons.

She joined the then Chase Manhattan Bank in 1957 as a block clerk, a job that, in the days before computers, required Smith and her fellow workers to sort checks manually by routing number. She graduated from Fordham University and the executive management program at Smith College, and rose to division executive in charge of five branches in the South Bronx.

It was there Smith met Carolyn McLaughlin, the executive director of BronxWorks, who persuaded Smith to join its board. "I tried to help them develop a way to raise money outside of government financing, to get banks to provide grants that were unrestricted, to help them grow," Smith says.

Smith eventually left the Bronx professionally — she managed JPMorgan Chase's flagship branch at One Chase Manhattan Plaza, and later oversaw nearly two dozen branches in Brooklyn and Staten Island — but her commitment to the community (where she still lives) remained.
She says the secret to garnering support for BronxWorks, which had a budget last year of about $36 million, is to show donors all that BronxWorks does.

"When people see the kind of work, and the breadth of it, from cradle to grave, for immigrants, for children in day care, for substance abusers, for seniors - it's a wonderful organization," she says. "I could go on forever."

One of the programs that Smith likes to tout is a program that teaches children to swim. "We have a swimming team now and some of the kids have gone on to be lifeguards," Smith says. BronxWorks also serves more than 350,000 meals a year, and runs a weekly farmers market where "the neighborhood can buy decent food."

Smith also points to BronxWorks' efforts to combat homelessness. "We have the fewest amount of homeless people on the street ever, because of the staff," says Smith, who notes it can take months of sustained work to persuade some people to come in off the streets. "These folks wouldn't have a fireman's chance in hell if our guys hadn't gone out there on a regular basis and found them, fed them and brought them in."

BronxWorks also offers classes in nutrition and fitness classes, literacy training, day care, help with homework and career counseling on behalf of the community. The programs demand financial support, which is where Smith has been instrumental, according to Ken Small, BronxWorks' development director. "Under Jean's guidance, net proceeds have grown steadily," Small said in an email.

Thanks in part to outreach by Smith, JPMorgan is a financial supporter of the group. So are Citigroup (NYSE:C), Goldman Sachs (GS), IBM (IBM) and about 40 other companies. The list is a who's who of the city's business scene.

For each of the past five years, the group's annual gala has raised more than $100,000 annually, "a major feat for a Bronx-based organization known for generating support via government contracts and foundation grants," Small says.

Smith also has been honored by the NAACP and Excelsior College, an academic institution that is dedicated to educating adults that Smith served as a trustee.

As much as Smith loves BronxWorks, she disdains the spotlight. "It's the people, the staff, who do all the work," Smith says. "I'm not comfortable being honored for something everyone else is doing."

"You go to meetings, you give money, you try to get your friends to give money, but the real people to be honored are the people who go there every day," she adds.