Overview

Carolyn McLaughlin, who is retiring as executive director of BronxWorks, almost became a teacher instead of embarking on the social service career that led to the steady growth of the organization, which started in 1972 as Citizens Advice Bureau. She became executive director in 1979.

Under her direction, BronxWorks grew rapidly into the multi-faceted operation it is today. Over the years BronxWorks helped more than 50,000 families at risk of eviction or entry into the shelter system remain in permanent housing. The 72% reduction in street homelessness in the Bronx is largely the result of a continuum of care model spearheaded by BronxWorks. Last year alone BronxWorks provided over 325,000 meals to Bronx residents most vulnerable to hunger. A network of walk-in offices in locations that span a service area with over 500,000 persons helped thousands obtain government benefits, resolve consumer inquiry matters, and obtain health insurance.

But all this was far in the future. First came the early years. As she tells it, as a young woman who had just graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree, she needed to get a job right away. She applied for two jobs, one as a substitute teacher and one as a case worker. The latter came through and she joined the city’s Human Resources Administration. There she worked for three years as a case worker making home visits. Deciding she liked the work, Carolyn went on to earn a master’s degree in social work from Columbia University in 1973.

Mulling a New Job

She was ready for the next step in her career. After a stint working at a senior center, she joined Visions, an organization which provides services for the blind and visually impaired. While working there, a friend suggested she apply for a job at a start-up non-profit serving the South Bronx called the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), then a part of the Community Council of Greater New York. At first she wasn’t interested, but at her friend’s persistence, she eventually decided she might as well apply.

Carolyn soon found herself working with a colleague at 2050 Grand Concourse in space rented to CAB at the old Elks Club. She recalls the space as being cold in the winter, when staff often had to work wearing
coats hats and gloves. They had to cross what had once been the “grand ballroom” to use the one very old and impossible to clean unisex bathroom.

Clients with Many Problems

Carolyn remembers the earliest years of CAB very well. “We took our responsibility seriously as an advocate for the people,” she recalls. She and her co-worker were constantly on the phone, negotiating with landlords and engaging city bureaucracies on behalf of clients. “We saw people with low literacy, people coming in with paperwork they needed help with, and always a good number of seniors. There were always a lot of housing issues to resolve, such as rent overcharges and trying to get needed repairs made.” She also spent a great deal of time applying for funding, one year sending out 30 proposals.

Many of the seniors who came to the office were repeat clients. These included, Carolyn remembered, an elderly couple. The husband was blind and hard of hearing; the woman was deaf. Every two years, it seemed, they asked CAB to obtain them new hearing aids through Medicaid.

CAB had to arrange home care for an elderly woman who had been hospitalized for a heart attack. First they had to arrange for her apartment to be cleaned -- which turned out to be quite a job. The woman was a hoarder and the apartment was piled from floor to ceiling with her possessions. Once the apartment was cleaned out, the woman didn't want to stay in it, claiming it wasn't her place.

A Borough in Decline

The early years of CAB coincided with the deterioration of many Bronx neighborhoods, as documented on television, including an hour-long report on CBS by Bill Moyers and a special report by the BBC.

For many of CAB’s walk-in clients back then, the decline was a terrible reality. “One senior complained to us that ‘people are walking through my walls,’” Carolyn recalls. “I didn’t know if he was hallucinating or not. Some of these apartments had holes that looked big enough for someone to really walk through!”

“These people, especially seniors, were bewildered by all the changes and wanted to cling to the homes they knew all their lives,” said Carolyn. Because of the fires and building abandonment, people were forced out of the apartments and neighborhoods they had lived in all their lives. One man, who had been the victim of frequent muggings and was the last remaining person in his building, refused an apartment Carolyn found for him in a good neighborhood because he said he had always lived in the front of the building and this apartment was in the back. He subsequently moved.

CAB left the Community Council of Greater New York in 1984 to become an independent agency. “For 15 years, CAB remained small in size in terms of locations, and then we started to expand by opening the Bedford Park, Avenue St. John, and Townsend Avenue walk-in offices,” she said. Over the same period, CAB’S budgets multiplied because of ever-increasing demand for our services, from under $50,000 to about $575,000 by 1988.

In the 80’s, CAB also opened a walk-in office for seniors which led to establishing four senior centers, minor repair services, and other programs for the elderly. A walk-in office for the homeless led to CAB’s HIV/AIDS programs, the establishment of shelters for homeless families, and eventually to the street outreach and to the Living Room/Safe Haven drop-in center for street homeless persons.

The walk-in experience, which emphasized friendly and caring frontline help in a familiar neighborhood setting, became the foundation for the multi-service organization that has assisted so many Bronx residents over time, including eviction prevention, transitional housing services and programs for children and youth.
In its early years, CAB did a great deal of community outreach and organizing work to complement its walk-in services. As the organization evolved and grew, so did Carolyn’s role and responsibilities. She acquired new skills, including analyzing financial statements, negotiating government contracts, recruiting and retaining staff, and overseeing capital projects, including the acquisition of the Main Community Center at 1130 Grand Concourse in 1993 and the construction of the administration office in 2009.

Bouncing Back

Eventually, starting in the mid to late 1980s, the Bronx began a recovery that has been sustained with the help of organizations like BronxWorks and city-sponsored programs to build new housing, often through conversions of rehabilitated buildings. Reflecting the return to good times, BronxWorks added many other programs to help the community, including children and youth services, workforce development and support services for the chronically ill.

A Change in Name and Carolyn’s Family

After 37 years of unprecedented growth as a service provider, in 2009 the CAB board changed the organization’s name to BronxWorks. Carolyn welcomed the name change. “We are deeply rooted in the Bronx and our new name captures the depth of our work and the success we’ve had in transforming individuals, families, and communities.”

Carolyn’s commitment to community service is shared by her family. Her husband, Jim, was a caseworker for many years. Kamau, her oldest son, is a physician and medical director of a health center in Boston. Her son Jimmy is head of the math department and assistant swim coach at a high school in that city. Her daughter Johnicka is a special education supervisor in St. Louis.

Conclusion

“I’ve had the wonderful experience of associating with a dedicated group of long-term staffers who have chosen to make their careers at BronxWorks,” Ms. McLaughlin summed up. “Many of them have been here over 20 years, a lot of hard-working, smart people who love the Bronx as I do. We have also greatly benefited from the support and counsel of a dedicated board of directors.”

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Founded in 1972 as the Citizens Advice Bureau, the mission of BronxWorks is to help individuals and families improve their economic and social well-being. From toddlers to seniors, we feed, shelter, teach, and support our neighbors to build a stronger community. To learn more about BronxWorks, visit our website at www.bronxworks.org.