Carolyn McLaughlin, BronxWorks’ executive director for the past 34 years, is stepping down at the end of this year, with the organization as strong as ever. (Photo by Hugh Thornhill)

For four decades, the organization now known as BronxWorks has assisted the people of the borough with their most basic needs and problems. As it celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, the jack-of-all-needs nonprofit is saying good-bye to its longtime leader and hello to an exciting future.

Earlier this summer, BronxWorks held its annual gala as part of its 40th Anniversary Celebration, where Executive Director Carolyn McLaughlin was honored for her 34 years of service stewardship.

Under McLaughlin’s leadership, BronxWorks expanded to include more than 600 staff members, 20 locations, and a budget of approximately $36 million per year. All while serving 35,000 Bronxites annually in seven of the borough’s community districts.
Though the 40th anniversary celebrates BronxWorks’ achievements, it also marks the end of McLaughlin’s time with the organization. She is set to retire at the end of the year.

“It was with mixed emotions both personal and professional, that I concluded this was the best time for me to retire,” McLaughlin wrote in a letter to BronxWorks supporters.

Though McLaughlin is leaving BronxWorks, she feels confident it’s in a good place.

The organization was founded in 1972 in Morris Heights. Originally called the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), the organization was modeled after a similar service established in Great Britain. The British CABs were established to offer free guidance to people facing financial, legal, or personal problems.

The CAB was renamed BronxWorks in 2009 to better fit its goals and do away with some negative connotations.

“The word “bureau” conjured up all sort of things that don’t align with how BronxWorks likes to be perceived,” said Ken Small, BronxWorks’ development director. “‘Bureau’ resembles ‘bureaucratic,’ which suggests an organization that is impersonal.”

The heart of BronxWorks is its community center, located at 1130 Grand Concourse, near the Bronx Museum. The building was built in 1926 and was originally home to the Bronx Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. After a handful of reincarnations, BronxWorks obtained the building in 1993 when the organization merged with the Girls Club of New York.

The center was renamed the Citizens Advice Bureau Community Center (renamed Bronxworks Community Center after the name change), where it continues to be the headquarters for many of their programs, including a college readiness program called CAFÉ (Center for Achieving Future Education), an early childhood center, a pool offering swimming lessons and a swim team, a Single Stop Program that helps low-income families with food stamps and other services, and a summer camp program, just to name a few.

This August, the organization launched a massive fundraising effort to renovate the 87-year-old building and has already raised more than $1.3 million toward the effort.

Transitioning youth from one station in life to the next is a big part of BronxWorks.

The CAFÉ program provides college readiness assistance to high school students and help for elementary school students transitioning into middle school. It provides counseling, workshops, field trips to colleges outside of the city, and assistance to students during their first two years of college.

Since the program began in 2004, it has helped over 2,000 students with their transition into middle school and college. They also have helped secure over $3,000,000 in grant or scholarship assistance.

The Early Childhood Center, which opened its doors in 2004, has helped more than 300 preschool children transition into kindergarten. Since almost 60 percent of the 55 families who send their children to the ECC do not speak English as a first language, the program provides kids with ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction.

“By the time the children leave us, they are ready for kindergarten,” says the program’s director Marcia Lawrence. “The feedbacks we get from the schools tell us how they are doing, and a lot of the parents come back telling us how well their kids are doing.”

BronxWorks gets about more than 90 percent of its funding from government contracts, while the rest
comes from various foundations, funding federations, and funding collaborations. The New York Community Trust has funded BronxWorks for over two decades.

“We’re proud to be a longtime supporter of BronxWorks, a leader in improving life for everyone in the Bronx,” said Patricia White, a senior program officer at New York Community Trust.

Still, budget cuts are always a potential risk.

“When there are cuts at the city, state, or federal level, it affects some very specific and particular programs,” Small said. “One of the concerns that we have in terms of the talk about funding cuts is what may happen to the walk-in offices we have.”

“There’s a major dialogue going on in this country about the role of the government, and there are people who think that the government should not play a role in delivering and funding human services,” McLaughlin said.

She believes that those in need not only benefit, but as a society we benefit as well.

“I think as a society we all benefit from having children who graduate from high school and can go to college, which helps us all,” McLaughlin said. “I think that eliminating street homelessness helps us all, I think helping immigrants to become citizens and learn English helps us all, I think having places for seniors with low-income to have healthy meals and keep them stimulated physically and mentally helps us all, and I think that we all benefit from our workforce programs.”

http://www.norwoodnews.org/id=12850&story=at-40-years-old-group-keeps-working-for-the-bronx/