Unemployed in the Bronx: The Hunt for Work

By JEANMARIE EVELLY

Editor’s Note: This is the second story in a series exploring the issue of rampant unemployment in the Bronx.

The line of people waiting outside the Bronx Educational Opportunity Center last Wednesday ran the length of the entire building, snaked down a short flight of concrete steps and into the parking lot. Those queued up stood fidgeting in the mild April sun, many of them dressed in their best outfits, their shoes polished and their hair combed.

The center was hosting a job fair, and every one on line was there with the same goal: to find work, to set themselves apart from the other hundreds of applicants who were waiting alongside them.

“I didn’t think the line would be this long,” said Osvaldo Martinez, sharply dressed in a navy blue suit and tie. He’d lost his security job three months ago, he said, and since then he’s been making the rounds at job fairs, following leads on the advice of friends, sending out resumes.

“I haven’t gotten called back yet,” he said.

Osvaldo is one of approximately 75,000 Bronx residents who are unemployed, according to the latest statistics from the State Department of Labor — what the government calls “actively looking” for work.

The borough’s unemployment rate in March, at 13.6 percent, dropped slightly from 14.1 percent in February, when it hit its highest peak in nearly two decades. But the Bronx continues to carry the highest unemployment rate of all the counties in New York State, a fact that job seekers here are acutely aware of.

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But the job hunt has been harder than Quinones expected. She took a home health aide certification program, but said the pay in that field is still too low to get by; she’s scoured job postings on Craigslist and applied for retail positions at stores like Target and TJ Maxx. Employers say they’ll be in touch, Quinones said, but she never hears back.

“When you do find work, it’s minimum wage, or you need a master’s degree just to wash the floors,” she said.

Walton Softball Steps Up Its Game

By DESTINY DEJESUS

The Walton High School Campus girls softball team dominated its B Division opponents last year. This year, after a jump up to the A Division, the Wildcats are working overtime to keep up with the higher level of competition.

“We asked to be moved up, no one offered it,” said Coach Tom Hall.

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“When you play in the A Division you get more opportunities to play better teams, and that’s what the girls need.”

Back in 2004-2005, Walton was under a different coach and was known as one of the best teams in city playing in the top division. When the coach left, the team struggled and was moved down to B Division.

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Many Involved in Merchants Association Building

In the April 19-May 2, 2012 issue of the Norwood News, your Business Beat section did a fair job highlighting some of the great things happening with merchant associations in the northwest Bronx, specifically along Kingsbridge Road (Grand Concourse west to Sedgwick Avenue), and along 204th Street and Bainbridge Avenue (Van Cortland Avenue south to Webster Avenue).

A great deal of momentum exists as these two merchant corridors position themselves to improve the economic standing of their respective neighborhoods. I want to take this opportunity to recognize all of the people, organizations and elected officials who are putting in the hard work and resources to make it happen.

The Kingsbridge Road Merchants Association (KBMA), led by President Nancy Fernandez of Divine Pharmacy, Vice President Christian Ramos of El Chu Shoe Store, Treasurer Carlos Rodriguez of Flowers by Carlos, and Secretary Carmen Valdez of Twin Brothers Day Care, is becoming an organized voice around the various issues facing the community along Kingsbridge Road.

Further north, the 204th Street and Bainbridge Avenue Merchants Association (204th &BAMA), which has existed since 1986, is also again coming together for the economic benefit of the Norwood neighborhood it serves. The 204th&BAMA leadership includes President, Eli Garcia, of the Beso Lounge, long term past President and current Vice President, Alan Freilich, of Freilich Jewelers, former Vice President and current Treasurer Bill Curran, of McKean and Son Funeral Home, and Secretary Hamlet Aquino, of Metro PCS.

Both merchant associations have been the beneficiaries of support from several key partners who have provided resources in the form of funding, technical assistance, marketing, and promotional opportunities. The Mosholu Preservation Corporation (MPC), a community support affiliate of Montefiore Medical Center (and publisher of the Norwood News), with support from the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, whose website is used to organize events for the community. Also included in the support are the Small Business Services, which is led by Commissioner Rob Walsh, has for the past two years provided significant resources to the organizing efforts in both areas. Similarly, MPC has for many years worked with City Council Member Oliver Koppell, who has provided resources to this small business community during difficult economic times.

Both merchant corridors have received guidance and assistance with forging relationships and creating neighborhood based programming from Community Board 7 District Manager Fernando Tira-do (Bronx CB7), as well as direct grant support for improvements to small businesses within each merchants association from the Hispanic Serving Institutions-Community Development Corporation (HSIAC) Program of Lehman College. Until the grant ended in 2011, the HSIAC Program, federally-funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development and led by Dr. Ellie Lundeen, provided thousands of dollars in grant funding for business improvement projects to members of both associations.

I want to thank the Norwood News for its coverage, but I would be remiss not to recognize the leadership and other key partners who have helped to re-energize these two important northwest Bronx merchant corridors.

Thank you.

Michael Lambert, Deputy Director Mosholu Preservation Corporation

It’s Official: MS 80 To Close This Summer

(continued from p. 1 )

funding. Meanwhile parents, teachers and students are scrambling just to figure out what’s going on.

Simply determining who is running the school on a weekly basis represents a challenge.

“We did not get to say thank you and farewell to the original principal, Ms. Rivera, then we get an interim principal, now a permanent one,” said MS 80 parent Annette Melendez in an e-mail. “The kids are confused by all the changes, especially now when state testing is going on.”

Last week, a meet-and-greet was held for new principal Emmanuel Polanco who became the third principal at the school in less than two months. At the beginning of March, before the turn-around plan was approved, the DOE replaced longtime principal, Lovey Mazaque-Rivera, with Lauren Reiss, who was previously at the helm of another school that was closed due to poor performance.

Polanco, a Bronx resident who worked as an assistant principal at Urban Assembly Bronx Studio School for Writers and Artists before taking the job at MS 80, will stick around and become the leader of the new school that replaces MS 80, according to the DOE.

Unlike other schools slated for turnaround, the MS 80 community organized very little opposition to the proposal.

Though the Mosholu Parkway School, as it’s officially known, has been around since 1924 and boasts famous alumni, including fashion mavens Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein, as well as actors/director Pernell Marshall and model/dancer Nigel Barker, the MS 80 community was shocked. The school, which was closed in 1995, was opened in less than two months. At the DOE hearing at the Bronx’s Herbert Lehman High School, some 800 people showed up and many of them testified against the school’s inclusion in the turnaround program. More than 1,500 people signed a petition opposing the school’s closure. And at the panel meeting last week, about 19 teachers and someone dressed up as the Lehman Lion mascot attended and voiced their opposition.

In the end, Lehman suffered the same fate as MS 80.

In the coming weeks, a hiring committee will be created that will include Polanco, two representatives appointed by the DOE and two representatives from the teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). That committee will come up with a set of criteria for new faculty at the new school and then go about interviewing and hiring new teachers. According to turnaround guidelines, only 50 percent of the old faculty can be re-hired.

It was the failure of the DOE and the UFT to come to an agreement that led MS 80 to the point of closure.

Going into the year, MS 80 was trying to improve its test scores, which were among the bottom five percent in the state, through an improvement model called re-start, which paired the school with an Educational Partnership Organization (EPO) called the Abyssinian Development Corporation and infused it with extra state money for additional programming.

But the extra funding was suspended when the UFT and DOE could not come to an agreement on teacher evaluations by the end of 2011. The DOE says putting MS 80 into the turnaround program was the only way for the school to continue receiving the state funding, which amounted to about $800,000 a year for three years.

Parents and teachers say the school wasn’t given enough of a chance to improve before the DOE took the step of placing MS 80 into the turnaround program and closing down a school that first opened nearly nine decades ago.

We love, welcome and encourage letters to the editor and opinion articles from readers. Write to: Editor, Norwood News, 3400 Reservoir Oval East, Bronx, NY 10467. Fax: (718) 324-2917; or e-mail: norwoodnews@norwoodnews.org.