From banker to the Bronx’s humble humanitarian

By COURtenay Brown
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Sometimes those who are the most deserving of praise are the least willing to have their accomplishments acknowledged. Jean Smith is one of those people.

For years, BronxWorks, a nonprofit organization that works to provide resources to Bronx residents, has asked to honor the 75-year-old for her outstanding commitment to the organization as one of its volunteer board members. She was reluctant, but this year, she agreed to be one of the honorees recognized at the organization’s annual gala.

"I think they should really be honoring the BronxWorks staff, not me," said Smith, who was born in Harlem and raised in the Bronx.

Smith’s humility stems back to her work at Chase Manhattan Bank, where, over the course of 50 years, she worked her way up from an entry-level position to vice president and senior executive officer. At one point, she oversaw nine out of the 10 branches of Chase bank in the Bronx.

It was in this position that she became familiar with many of the nonprofit organizations in her hometown. She met Carolyn McLaughlin, executive director of BronxWorks, who convinced her to join its board more than 20 years ago.

"She's a special person," McLaughlin said of Smith. "She's an example of hard work, tenacity and drive."

Though she retired from Chase six years ago, Smith still utilizes her connections to garner support for BronxWorks. Under her leadership, proceeds from the annual gala have increased from $35,000 to at least $100,000 per year since 1997.

BronxWorks offers numerous social services, including teaching kids how to cook nutritional meals, eviction prevention programs and food stamp registration, in an effort to build a strong community. Between 2005 and 2012, BronxWorks has managed to decrease the homeless population in the Bronx by more than 70 percent.

Of course, programs like these require a large amount of support. Smith’s outreach has contributed to big financial supporters, including companies such as Chase, Goldman Sachs and IBM.

Still, Smith brushes off the spotlight, refusing to take credit for what she says are other people’s accomplishments. "I just make the calls to help raise money," Smith said. "It’s the staff that makes it all work. I’m impressed with the people who worked on all these programs."

Outside of her work with BronxWorks, she is also one of the founding trustees of Excelsior College, an institution committed to focusing on adult learners. Her commitment to nonprofit organizations and public service has been honored previously with NAACP’s Roy Wilkins Humanitarian Award, the 100 Black Women Leadership Award and the New York state Black and Puerto Rican Legislators Leadership Award.

Smith also takes care of her two older brothers, who both have suffered from health problems.

"I was always the baby, and they have always looked out for me," she said. "Now, it’s my turn." It’s far from a burden for her; Smith remains dedicated to her family while also staying committed to helping Bronx residents thrive.

"We are helping folks in the Bronx reach the level where they can do better," Smith said.