

Kelly Carroll for NYPAP

Inspired by Grassroots Stories: Community Architectural Advocacy

Barbara Stronczer – Bedford Mosholu Community Association

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Kelly Carroll: Good afternoon, my name is Kelly Carroll and I'm conducting a series of community oral history projects for the New York Preservation Archive Project. This series is called Inspired by Grassroots Stories: Community Architectural Advocacy. I want to thank the New York State Council on the Arts and Pat Reisinger for making this program possible today.

I have the pleasure of meeting with and speaking with Barbara Stronczer this afternoon. She is a lifelong Bronx resident and is passionate about keeping the city clean. Over time, she's been involved from everything from organizing park cleanups to beautification projects, and simply helping people in the neighborhood. She currently serves as the President of the Bedford Mosholu Community Association and as chairperson of Bronx Community Board Seven's parks committee. Stronczer is also a member of the 52nd Precinct Community Council and is a board member of both the Bedford Park Multiservice Center and the West Bronx Housing and Resource Center.

So, thank you so much for being with us today, Barbara. So nice to see you after all this time. So, my first question for you is, you are a lifelong Bronx resident. Where exactly did you grow up in the Bronx?

Barbara Stronczer: Today it's called South Fordham, around 184th Street.

Kelly Carroll: And when, most of your community activism has centered around the Bedford Park Area neighborhood, Mosholu Parkway. When did you move to that area?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, I was still in school when we moved up here, to Mosholu Parkway.

Kelly Carroll: Okay, so in high school or...?

Barbara Stronczer: I think I was starting college.

Kelly Carroll: Starting college, yeah. Okay, so quite a while. You are the first person I got in touch with when I worked with the Historic Districts Council. You are always the first point of contact and it was immediate to me that your organization--the Bedford Mosholu Community Association--was quite strong within the community. And I know that it's nearly 50 years old--you'll be celebrating your 50th anniversary in 2025--and when I was preparing for today, I noticed that the year 1975 was a pivotal moment for your community. I understand that the community association was formed in '75 by about 300 residents that met at the Bedford Park Congregational Church. Were you involved when that was going on?

Barbara Stronczer: Yes, I went to their meeting. And that was really the first time we as a community got together to do anything. We were also very lucky to have at that time, the founding of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition. And what they did was to divide the Northwest Bronx into specific neighborhoods, and each neighborhood had what they called a community organizer. It's a paid position, they managed to get funding from banks and different corporations. And it was through the

first organizer in our area was John Riley--today he's still active in his role as a developer in the park--who organized us to get together and form an association, we started as five or six block associations and we started as a security patrol in the area. The neighborhood was changing, people were moving, whatever, and the feeling was that the community had to do a little more to establish security.

So, we started as a security patrol, but you know when you depend on volunteers to go out several nights a week with walkie talkies and whatever. In the beginning everybody was enthusiastic, after a couple of months people didn't want to do that anymore. So, rather than just disbanding we decided we were going to turn the association, which was then called Bedford Mosholu Community Association, as it is today, into a community group that would be more civic minded and work to improve the area. And we've been in existence since then. I was not--the first few years--I was not a member of their executive board, but after a while, whatever, I did join, and you know, whole different positions and whatever.

Kelly Carroll: So interesting. I have so many questions about how your mission has changed with the neighborhood over the years. So, to stay in 1975 for a moment. There was another thing that happened, which was, we talked about how people were leaving and anybody with a basic knowledge of New York, New York City history knows that 1970s, especially the late '70s, were not a great time for the city and the city was cutting a lot of services, especially in the Bronx. And I know that in 1975 the city was going to close the 52nd precinct and that the BMCA was instrumental in keeping it and keeping it open. Were you involved with that?

Barbara Stronczer: Yes, I was a member of the association at that time, as I said, I was not an officer. And I can recall some of our demonstrations. One of the families that lived in the neighborhood owned a funeral home and they provided us with an empty coffin and we got together and had a demonstration. We marched down Webster Avenue to Fordham Road. A few of our members carried the coffin on their shoulders and everybody else carried signs that, we lose the precinct and it's going to be the death of the neighborhood.

That was very effective, needless to say, we got a lot of press and all and then we followed that up with a sit-in at the 52nd precinct. The 52nd was a much smaller precinct at that time. I don't mean physically, I mean by the number of police officers that were assigned. And we decided we were going to have one Friday night, a sleepover in the precinct. Needless to say, the officers at the precinct did not mind, because we were supporting them. And I can remember the next morning, then-Congressman Biaggi coming, and he always was dressed neatly. Suit and tie, the whole bit. He comes in, he says, "I want to be here when the cameras are coming" and whatever. So, he came, and he says "I'm going to look like", he says "I'll sit here on a chaise lounge like I slept overnight also." Well, needless to say, he looked too together to say that he slept. So, they rumbled them up a little bit, took his jacket and tie off, messed his hair up and whatever, and he was there for the cameras and with all this publicity, the city finally changed its mind.

Kelly Carroll: Yeah, and your neighborhood, this area of the Bronx, it didn't it didn't suffer the same fate as some other areas in the borough. Would you attribute this to the community's, like, involvement and activism?

Barbara Stronczer: Yes, to an extent, however, we did see a lot of changes. I can remember when I first moved into this neighborhood, we had a lot of local fires. Stores, and we had Bedford Park Casino on Bedford Park Boulevard—fire. Our train station, our Metronorth station here, the old station was

burned down. We lost two small walk-up apartments a block away from me--another casualty of a fire. So, you know, things were changing.

Kelly Carroll: Understood. So, you are the fifth and longest serving president from the association. When did you become an officer and what are--I also know you have a passion for green spaces--what would you say the organization has accomplished under your leadership, and when did you get involved—as an officer?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, when the organization was put together and, as I said, not the role as an officer, but I was an active participant, and since then, and looking back on the years that I've served as president. Well, most recently we managed to stop a homeless shelter from going into a building opposite our local school, PS 20. That was about three years ago. There was a large industrial building where I guess, one could go and buy carpeting and whatever, and that was sold. And evidently the developer who bought it was going to use it for a homeless shelter and we went out and we rallied at the public school right after school, which the school was right across the street. And we were able, with the help of our council person, to get the developer to change his mind about the future of that building. So, we were able to do that.

We've had more than a few meetings regarding housing in the area--Botanical Square certainly was one of them—we, you know, worked to get a committee together in the buildings to solve some of their own problems and to work with their landlords. I'm trying to remember what else we've done in the past. Needless to say, we make sure we have a police officer at each one of our meetings, so if people have any concerns or issues they're brought up at that time.

As far as the park is concerned, we put a lot of time in with forming what we call our little garden, we have a garden along Webster Avenue, we've had it really for years and we, in addition to the cleanups that we have, we also do plantings there, both spring and fall and try to maintain the area and keep in contact with our park workers, both locally and their supervisors, if there are any problems.

Kelly Carroll: This area of the Bronx has been called leafy. The 52nd precinct building which actually was designated as a landmark in 1974, one year before the city tried to close it. Even in the designation report it describes the neighborhood as still retaining of bucolic feel, despite it being in the Bronx. And you have Frisch Field, you have Mosholu Parkway, you have the New York Botanical Gardens, would you say that despite some of the changes that are coming to the neighborhood, that greenery persists? Or do you feel that there's been an erosion of that green feel.

Barbara Stronczer: Well, the greenery has persisted...we were able to, with the help of other organizations in the area to get our council person to allot \$5 million to renovate Frisch Field. In fact, we have a parks meeting tomorrow night where they're going to present the plans to us, so that's a plus for the neighborhood. As you say, times change. It used to always be baseball or softball, but now the outfield is being used by the soccer league, so we're hoping that with the diagrams that are brought to us that we will be able to accommodate more than one sport, so that's a plus.

What our major problem is right now is we're losing a lot of our private homes. We were always a great mixture of apartment buildings, co-ops and private homes. And the developers have just hit this area, one after another up on two-second, two-third street they wiped out, I would say about eight to ten private homes and they're putting up two huge structures. And you know, by the time it gets to us

there's very little we can do, because it's as of right. And that today seems to be our major problem and a lot of people are throwing their hands up and saying, "Oh, the neighborhood is going to be so crowded!" Of course, parking is a major problem now, with all the new buildings going up, even though we seem to have all these bikes all over the neighborhood--Citi bike, Citi bike--most people are still driving and will continue to drive.

Kelly Carroll: Yeah, you're exactly right. I'm very close with some folks who live on Sedgwick Avenue just across the reservoir and parking is, it's nonexistent and it's a very troubling aspect and quality of life issue.

Barbara Stronczer: And many spots, they had the nerve to put the bike racks in and not on the sidewalk, but in the road where people normally park.

Kelly Carroll: I know that a lot of this development has come because of there was a 2009 rezoning of Webster Avenue. But you're seeing development outside the rezoning area. Do you think that the two are connected? Or how has the neighborhood changed since the rezoning?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, it started on Webster, and little did we know that the side streets were zoned for eight to ten, eight to twelve story buildings, all right? We always--because our apartment buildings were all six stories--felt that that's what the zoning was in the neighborhood. And when we found out that that was not the zoning in the neighborhood and these developers seemed to have found this out too and were taking advantage of the area...I know Community Board Seven tried to stop it by hiring a consultant, and also trying to get a plan together, whereby we can change the zoning. Needless to say, city planning would not touch it because of course they had gotten directives from the mayor's office who was looking to bring in all these developers.

So, at this point...our schools were overcrowded before the development began, so I'm sure they'll be more than overcrowded now with these buildings going up. And as I said, the parking, certainly recreational space is limited. The last two summers we've had people we've never seen before come to Mosholu Parkway and you know, do things that were never allowed on the parkway. So, it's been a big change and there's more than a few groups of us from residents in the area, who are trying to keep a certain amount of stability in the area.

Kelly Carroll: You once you know, described the Bronx as the stepchild of the city. Would you like to extrapolate on that, like what you mean by that?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, certainly when it comes to enforcement. We certainly don't get the enforcement of rules and regulations. A major problem in the summertime has been illegal barbecuing along Mosholu Parkway. People get very upset. First, the coals from the barbecue ruin the grass when people just dump them at the end of their session, and a lot of our buildings face out right on the parkway. Who needs that type of smoke coming through your air conditioner, or your screens or whatever.

And we still have several co-ops along the parkway, and people invest in their apartments and they want the area around them kept clean and neat, and it's been a problem. I mean, people have parties without getting permits. By the time we get the pep squad over here it's you know, the party is all set up and whatever. It's not easy. I mean, we've had people bring ponies on to the parkway to have some type of entertainment for the kids and giving them pony rides and whatever and it's just been out of hand.

And then, in addition to the park, certainly sanitation has been a major problem, since Covid. The mayor reduced street cleaning in this neighborhood to once a week, alright? So, we used to have it twice a week. He reduces it, and enforcement really is nonexistent. Cars don't move. In fact, I noticed there was an article in yesterday's New York news about this, that people just ignore it, they don't move, they don't get ticketed, and the trash is just out there. I've been in this neighborhood a long time, and I have never seen it as dirty as it is now.

Kelly Carroll: Yeah. So, your organization Bedford Mosholu Community Association has a very simple mission statement, which is to preserve the quality of life there. So, it sounds like the quality of life issues over its nearly 50 years have changed from what they initially were. Do you think, do you think overall these quality of life issues will get better or how do you think that--do you think if it weren't for your association that things would be worse, possibly as another way?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, I feel, the only way you get some attention is to bring it before these agencies--the problems before the agencies--we try to invite somebody from each agency each month, and also to bring the issues before your elected officials. I mean, if we didn't exist, I don't know, you know what would be done in what wouldn't be done. I have people you know, I walk the street and people come up to me, "Can you do something about this? Can you find out what is happening here?" whatever. And I feel the association has served the community over the years. There's a lot more that I hope gets done but considering we're all volunteers, we have no paid staff, that we try our best.

Kelly Carroll: Yeah, and I, I have been to a few of your monthly meetings, and I was always impressed with the people who would show up to each meeting every month, and I think it's so smart to invite city stakeholders and to let everyone know that your organization is a presence in the community. And the fact that people do come up to you on the street is remarkable that they know that you're someone that they can come to.

I want to go back to the development quickly, because I know that your association in the past had been interested in pursuing historic preservation or landmarking as a strategy to help maybe mitigate some of this rampant development that you've experienced in the neighborhood. Can you--I know I've heard about parking and some other quality of life issues--but what exactly about preservation would help preserve the quality of life for you? Is it how the place looks and feels?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, I think it's a little more than that. What we were able to do is, we worked more than a few years ago to get a strip of houses along Perry Ave. just south of two-first declared landmarks. And actually, several of them were sold in the last year, but the prices that the people who sold them got were just astronomical for the area. And also, the people who bought them are living there, which is something you know, we wanted to make sure happened and not people buying homes and then renting them and whatever. So, that is a plus and I think the fact that they have been declared landmarks encouraged that. We have a couple of landmarks a church, the precinct, a few other places in the area, and I think it's you know, from a historic point of view, people like that, and hopefully we'll be able to save some of these buildings by doing that.

Kelly Carroll: Do you have any buildings or any more blocks in mind that would be, that you think being like longtime resident, knowing the neighborhood probably better than anyone else that should be preserved?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, certainly the two-first street area from Perry to Bainbridge Avenue has more than a few private homes, and at the corner, right at Bainbridge is the Congregationalist Church, which is a landmark already. And I know if we could get those private homes declared landmarks it will be helpful to keep that bucolic feeling in the area and whatever. Because what's happening with these developers, you know, you never know. They knock on your next-door neighbor's door and all of a sudden they're selling to a developer and they just can't resist the money that's presented to them.

Kelly Carroll: Right, and this year, this is an area of the Bronx that has very, very few landmarks. Actually, the Bronx as a borough, hopefully we'll be getting some new landmarks there soon. But you are fortunate enough to have Perry Avenue, which is very beautiful and the houses work with the topography of the neighborhood, you're in a very hilly area. I know that there had been some discussion before of even designating Mosholu Parkway as a Scenic Landmark. Is that something you want to talk about?

Barbara Stronczer: I would love to be able to do that. Of course, we would need some help with that whole process. I know the Friends of Mosholu spoke about it and, of course, Bedford Mosholu would support it, but you know, it's hard to get people who are going to give up their time to develop these issues and whatever has to be done. The process I'm sure would take some time. But it would be great if we could get that because certainly we would hate to see any development on Mosholu and I know there's a state law that they cannot develop on parkland. However, you know, there are ways of getting around this, too.

Kelly Carroll: Very, very true. People can get things done, if they want it bad enough or if they have the resources.

Barbara Stronczer: Right?

Kelly Carroll: Exactly. So, that's a very good point because it's such a wonderful part of the Bronx that just connects so many different green spaces in the borough between the Botanic Garden up to Van Cortlandt Park and all the little niches of parks in between.

Barbara Stronczer: One thing that we lost--I guess it's the last four or eight years--was, we used to have what we called the quad. The four institutions in the Bronx: Montefiore Hospital, Botanical Gardens, Bronx Zoo and Fordham University. When Bloomberg was our mayor they used to meet once a month downtown and you know, discuss issues for the area. And granted, you know the community didn't always agree with some things they wanted to do, but they were able to come up with some very good ideas also. And then, once we changed the candidate in the mayor's office, it was disbanded and of course Covid hasn't helped because the institutions themselves are hurting with you know, the lack of being open full time and people going there, and whatever. So, you know, we do have these great institutions, but as far as reaching out it's limited at this point.

Kelly Carroll: Yeah, Covid has disrupted everything, and New York was as the epicenter of the outbreak, we're still recovering. Every neighborhood I speak to, every institution--even NYU, who I work for--things have not, even in September of 2021--now--things have not fully gone back to the way they were and may not. So, my last question for you is, what does--it's a hopeful question--what does the future for your organization look like, as you approach your 50th year?

Barbara Stronczer: Well, I hope to continue to move on. We have a lot of new people in the neighborhood now with all these new buildings and we're hoping to reach out to many of them who would be interested in joining, and whatever. And we hope that they too will support us in our fight for the improvement and quality of life in Bedford Park and on Mosholu.

Kelly Carroll: I hope so, too. And maybe, just like with the organizing for the precinct, leaflets will help get the job done.

Barbara Stronczer: Yes, yes, hopefully. I mean, once we start meeting in person, we flyer the buildings in the area whenever we're having a meeting. We haven't done that...we've you know, everything went out via email. So, unless we had your email address you didn't know that was a meeting. And we're trying. You know, we work very hard to keep your organization going during Covid.

Kelly Carroll: And I think you've done a great job.

Barbara Stronczer: Thank you.

Kelly Carroll: You're welcome. I want to talk to you about one thing after this so hang on after I stop recording. But, I want to thank you so much for your time today and your commitment to your neighborhood and community, that certainly wouldn't be the same without you, thank you very much for your service Barbara.

Barbara Stronczer: Okay well, you're welcome.