

Ms. Speller – Retiring from work, not her passions

BronxWorks Administration; Clerical Aide

As her 80th birthday approached, Kathryn Speller decided to retire from the part-time position she held at BronxWorks for 16 years. However, she wants everyone to know that she is retiring from the job but not from her passions for her community.

Born in Harlem, Ms. Speller moved her family to the Bronx in 1968 so her children would have the opportunity for a better education. Desegregation was finally taking hold in NYC public schools but her kids were still picketed when they got off the subway on their way to school. This experience, combined with growing-up in a segregated society, contributed to what became her lifelong passion for advocacy and fighting for fairness.



She learned what advocacy meant when she took a job at the New York City's Department of Health Bureau of Pest Control under Mayor John V. Lindsay. After she went into the field and saw the dangerous conditions her colleagues endured, Ms. Speller became their union representative, advocating for better working conditions.

Ms. Speller found her next advocacy role working at her community board, CB#5, under the first district manager, Lorraine Holtz. Ms. Holtz would take Kathryn to every meeting and she credits this experience with expanding her advocacy knowledge and negotiating skills. Her first retirement was from this job after 15 years but not surprisingly, she found retired life boring. She reached out to Carolyn McLaughlin, Executive Director for BronxWorks (formerly the Citizens Advice Bureau), who she knew from their work together on several local initiatives. Carolyn suggested she join the BronxWorks staff which Ms. Speller did, knowing it would continue to fulfill her desire to help the Bronx. She focused on fundraising and public relations activities, utilizing her broad network of connections and many years of community involvement.

Boredom will not be a factor in her second retirement. Ms. Speller can now devote more time to two issues that have deep personal meaning for her. The first is a desire to help young women create a better future for themselves through education and exposure to positive role models who have overcome challenges such as addiction, dependency on welfare and other barriers to success.

The second is children and youth. She fulfills this passion as a member of CB#5's board and the Parks & Recreation committee. Ms. Speller believes one of the key elements of a happy childhood is having parks that are safe, clean and well-maintained, paired with engaging and lively activities for children and young adults. She knows she can continue to count on her equally passionate friends at BronxWorks as a partner in these vital neighborhood-strengthening efforts.

Ms. Speller says the most important things she's learned about advocacy are: patience and persistence. Her tenacity, combined with many years of advocacy on behalf of her community and the Bronx, guarantees that her neighbors' voices will be heard. With the support of our many wonderful friends and donors, Ms. Speller and BronxWorks will continue to lift lives and build futures.

BronxWorks helps 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.