

# Brownsville

## Stephanie Samuels

My community is Brownsville. Up until September 24, 2013, I have to admit that it was not a community which I would say I was proud to claim. It's dirty, and aside from learning what it means to grow up struggling and always looking over your shoulder, hoping you weren't going to be the victim of the next violent attack, or a case of "wrong place, wrong time," I couldn't really see what it has to offer anyone. It's what any urban society would call the ghetto. I don't mean to sound shallow, but to me, Brownsville was like the half-way house. It was the place you stop in to get your life together until you can do bigger and better things. Well, boy was I wrong. On this particular Tuesday evening of September 24, 2013, I attended my first Brownsville Community Board meeting. I went there with no intention of learning anything; it was just a class assignment I had to get done. As I sat there, I looked around and saw that the community knew and recognized each other. It seemed clear they realized how important this meeting was. The place was packed and people were even standing because the place ran out of seats. The meeting began.

The chairperson, Mrs. Bettie Kollock-Wallace, began by taking attendance. She proceeded to welcome everyone back in hopes that they had a good summer. As she introduced the speakers of the night, people looked as though they had plenty on their mind. These people meant business. What was most interesting was how informed my community was. They knew their rights, rights I had no idea even existed. At this meeting I learned that when outsiders come into our neighborhoods to work (such as to construct buildings or open new businesses), they are required to hire a certain percentage of the workers from the community. For instance, Pacific Houses are currently being built in Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Crown Heights, but there hasn't been anyone from these communities hired to work on these buildings even though, as one contractor currently working put it, many people in the community do pass through and show interest in jobs for these companies. This point was mentioned at the meeting, and neither the New York City Housing Authority nor the New York City Human Resources Administration could seem to explain to us why this was.

Another point I found intriguing was raised by a community member. The question was posed, "Why can't they build more shelters in Manhattan? Why is it that every time we turn our heads, another shelter is being built in Brooklyn?" I had never even paid any attention to this fact, but it's absolutely true. Every time I turn a corner, I see a new building being built. When I finally wonder what this new building is, I come to learn that it is another shelter. But when you go to

Manhattan, if there is a new building being built, you learn that it is new, unaffordable, luxury housing. In Brooklyn hospitals are being closed down and shelters are being put up. It used to be schools were being closed and more prisons were being built (again, in Brooklyn). How can we do better if even the government is doing what is in its power to keep us down?

This Community Board meeting opened my eyes to things in a way that I never thought about before. I realized that Brownsville is a diamond mine. You don't just find a few diamonds here and there hidden around the neighborhood. They're everywhere—you don't really even have to look. At this meeting, there were so many educated people. These people included parents, teachers, retired people, business people, and even other college students. I didn't realize that so many people took such an active role in the attempt to live in and create a "better Brooklyn." Until I attended this Community Board meeting, I think that though I lived in Brownsville, I was just like any other outsider looking in. And as the chairperson, Mrs. Bettie Kollock-Wallace, closed on that night, I will now end by saying "Peace-Out."

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