

Bronx River Rising

by Peter B. Fleischer

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For almost three decades, Ruth Anderberg was a leader in the struggle to clean up and restore the Bronx River, the city's only true free flowing river. Inspired by Earth Day and variously aided by Boy Scout troops, the National Guard Auxiliary, and the Bronx Chief of Police, Anderberg oversaw efforts that removed refrigerators and washing machines, planted trees and educated local children about the river.

Then, Anderberg retired. Last year, in her place, the Bronx River Alliance was created to lead the 60 corporate, governmental and community groups involved with the river's restoration. The river these groups focus on runs for roughly twenty miles, from a spring-fed marsh near Valhalla, New York through pristine parkland in Westchester before it meets up with the East River near Hunts Point.

Alexie Torres-Fleming, the chairperson for the Bronx River Alliance, notes how the river and the Bronx communities along its banks have been neglected, if not abused, for years, and cites as an example a cement plant on the river's western shore, that is representative of what happens when a community lacks political heft.

The hulking, abandoned plant is the focus of a campaign by the Youth Ministry for Peace and Justice, an organization that Torres-Fleming also directs. It calls for demolition of the cement plant, expansion of nearby Starlight Park and the construction of a bike and walking path that will literally and figuratively bridge three communities divided by the crisscrossing highways. Torres-Fleming sees the "blazed" but not yet officially opened trail between these communities as a connection to the water, a recreational resource and a link among people with shared aspirations and similar problems. She wants the shared enterprise of trail and park building to simultaneously empower the community's youth by giving them a stake and a rallying point.

And the river seems to be doing just that. Hernan Melara, 19, has volunteered for four years for the Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, knocking on doors, passing out leaflets, typing notes and pushing bureaucrats to do more, sooner for the river that runs through his community.

His waterfront involvement began when he traveled to the Westchester section of the Bronx River where he saw a "clean river with turtles and ducks". "Why can't we have this?" he asked himself. Soon thereafter, he was knocking on neighbor's doors. The response from some older citizens was "great idea, I used to swim or fish there". From younger residents, the response

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was all too often "There is a river there?"

Melara wanted to experience the river. He joined a canoe trip that led him down the river from 219th Street to its confluence with the East River. He describes a journey through forests, the Bronx Botanical Garden, the buffalo park in the Bronx Zoo, portaging around dams and waterfalls, passing under city streets and alongside derelict industry before reaching the waves, tides and sandbars that are nature's markers between natural places. "It was a great journey and we got something accomplished. I learned never to limit myself".

Ruth Anderberg should be very pleased.



Peter B. Fleischer, currently writing a book on the New York City waterfront, was formerly a transportation and environment policy advisor to New York City Mayors David Dinkins and Rudy Giuliani.