

# CB12M Youth and Education Committee

Meeting #4

Monday, April 12, 2021

Minutes

LOCATION: VIRTUAL MEETING

**Committee Members Present:** Fe Florimon, Chair; Waldys Cruz, Assist Chair; Gabriela Estrella; Maria Luna Miriam James.

**Board Members:** Marielle Ali.

**Committee Member(s) Excused:** Glennis Aquino-Gil; Christina Richiez.

**Absent:** Jonathan Nunez-Frometa; and Paradise Phoenix.

**Public Member(s) Absent:** Guillermo Perez.

**Guests:** Yolanda Rodriguez, Outreach Director, Josephine Herrick Photography; Angela Abreu, Founder/Creative Director, Dominican Writers Assoc; Anastasia Galkowski, North Park Outreach Coordinator - Volunteer Projects in Riverside Park/ft. Washington Park.

**Public Attendance:** Rebecca Alicea, Family Leadership Coordinator for SD6; Blanca Battino, RTI Specialist & Fromer D6's School Principal; Gabriela Biel, Parent from PS 278 ;David Thom, Parent from PS 278; Jenny Hernandez, Parent MS05 Mellisa Williams, Parent from P.S. 278; Elisa Vanderlinde, Parent from PS 278; Yanilda Rodriguez, Parent from PS 18; Johanna Garcia, Representative from Senator Robert Jackson's Office. Ashley Del Valle, CEC6's Member.

The meeting was called to order by Chair Fe Florimon at approximately 7:06 pm.

## Discussions that took place as indicated below:

Chair welcomed and thanked members, guests, and general public present. Part of the new goals of the committee is to give members the opportunity to exercise leadership by co-chairing meetings. For this meeting, member Aquino-Gil was expected to direct today's meeting, but it was not able to attend, and the Chair proceeded to direct the meeting.

Chair asked for committee and board members to introduce them-selves for the record. She discussed the unfolding of the agenda followed by the introduction of the guests/presenters.

First guest - Yolanda Rodriguez, Outreach Director, Josephine Herrick Photography initiated the presentation by thanking the committee for inviting her to the meeting. According to Ms. Rodriguez, the "Josephine Herrick Photography" is a not-for-profit organization that offers photography classes to underrepresented communities throughout the city. Josephine Herrick was a real person who lived during WWII and used to photograph soldiers as they headed to war. Later, she would give the photographs to their respective families as mementos. She did this with a group of other volunteer photographers and her work got the attention of Dr. Howard Rusk, known for the Rusk Institute. He told Herrick that what she was doing was great, and that if she was interested she could join him in using photography as a way to help wounded soldiers heal as they returned from the war. This became tradition for the past 80 years, and it evolved into not only working with veterans, but also with seniors who have children who are physically and developmentally handicapped and are in public schools. It also extended working with the LGBT community. In general, the program encourages participants not only to learn a new craft but to use it as a medium in which they can tell their own authentic stories about their communities, their lives and about whatever it is they would like to take photos of. Ms. Rodriguez also indicated that she would appreciate the committee's help with her organization to connect with other organizations that are working with youths, or who might be interested in their services.

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She explained that since the organization works specifically with community-based organizations, individuals interested in joining the program have to apply through a partner organization that provides the program. A video for the program was also shared with the committee. Questions were asked by members James, Marielle Ali, and Florimon.

The second guest, Ms. Angela Abreu, Founder/Creative Director of the Dominican Writers Association, was introduced. Ms. Abreu thanked the committee for inviting her to the meeting and immediately proceeded with her presentation. According to her, the Dominican Writers Association was founded six years ago (2015) in the community of Washington Heights. The founder is of Dominican descent and was inspired to create this organization based on her personal experience as a resident growing up in a community predominantly Dominican. As a young college student, she was never exposed to books written by Latino authors let alone Dominican ones. As an avid reader spending so much time in public libraries, she couldn't comprehend how it was possible that no one ever shared books where she can see herself reflected as a woman/child of color, where she could see her brown face and on a book cover, or read about characters that she could relate to. This situation is what prompted Ms. Abreu to do research and find the existence of prominent authors like Angie Cruz and Juno Diaz. However, during her Google research, she only found about four Dominican-American authors that were active in the in the creative genre in United States.

At a young age, Ms. Abreu become a poet and writer and established the initiative of "Poetry Collective" to host open mics from her apartment and local businesses. Through this idea, she had the opportunity to meet, and connect with many Dominican writers who are unknown to many folks in the community. But, after she founded the Dominican Writers Association, she wanted to make sure that the work and talent of these unknown writers would be exposed. Elizabeth Acevedo, an award-winning Poet, and Dominican-American young woman was an example of these writers she helped expose. Ever since this accomplishment, DWA has made it its mission to share the works of the Dominican-American authors. DWA has started several community initiatives. For example, they are currently working with two schools in the community, Juan Pablo Duarte and Community Health School. They have established two book clubs for the Community Health's middle school and high school students. They are exposing them to Dominican and other diverse authors that they should be reading.

As part of the new initiative, authors have been invited to Juan Pablo Duarte School to read to the students. They are also setting up another initiative in 12 libraries and 12 classrooms with Dominican authors called "Little Dominican Readers." The mission of the initiative is to create as many Dominican libraries as possible in uptown schools so Dominican students may have access to their own stories, feel inspired and see themselves reflected in their stories. Since the organization has a small press, the DWA help students publish their books; for example, students from the Juan Pablo Duarte School were able to publish their poetry book called "I am" with the help of the organization. They also provide writing workshops for kids in partnership with schools. Currently, because of the pandemic, these programs are hosting virtually.

According to the presenter in 2019, DWA celebrated their first Dominican Writers conference in City College in honor of writer Josefina Baez. The event was sponsored by the college's MFA program. Over 300 people attended the event including, authors, writers, CUNY's representatives, and elected officials. This was an opportunity for DWA to show the community how many Dominicans were in the field of screenwriting, graphic novels, and every aspect of writing.

Dominican Studies Book Club is another program hosted by DWA every month. The objective of this initiative is to share with the Dominican generation books about their history so they can learn. Additional programs and general information can be found on their website <https://www.dominicanwriters.com>.

The Chair opened the floor for questions. Member Luna asked if the DWA has been in contact with the Word Up Community Book Shop? Ms. Abreu responded yes and also confirmed that the founder Veronica Santiago Liu is on their board, and they do lots of work together in partnership.

Guest Yolanda Rodriguez offered a comment in regards to Ms. Abreu's report. She stated that as a publisher and producer playwright she could well understand when Ms. Abreu when she spoke about the lack of knowledge about

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this writer. She also used to work in publishing, and she feels that there still exists systemic racism within these walls that makes it so difficult for someone to get published. You can name the number of playwrights of color who have appeared on Broadway with one hand, or you can name how many people of color have been able to publish in the last two or three years by a major publishing house on one, or maybe two, hands. She has heard stories where a publisher held up a manuscript written by a person of color, who happened to be Mexican-American, and ask “why do we have this here?” This is the kind of racism that unfortunately still exists, whether it’s in book publishing, or a motion picture, or screenwriting, or television. People talk about increasing diversity in these areas, but it’s so difficult. Ms. Rodriguez also has met people who worked for television, and have been struggling to get just one sentence, perhaps, included somewhere. Unfortunately, this is something we’re still struggling with. She told Ms. Abreu that she applauds the work she’s doing and the support she’s getting from the community. Ms. Abreu agreed that there is a problem with diversity, and added that in a survey conducted last year it was found that 76 % of the publishing industry is white.

Member James asked if DWA has ever thought of partnering with Afro-American writers who don’t get published, and the possibility for the kids attending her writing classes to learn about intercultural issues? Ms. Abreu responded with a “yes”. DWA’s writing workshop and book club events are open to everyone. But, the only thing is that the books are written in Spanish, and are purchased from Dominican authors. The readership is also focused on the Dominican author. However, DWA also shares the work produced by many of their African-American colleagues with many other organizations. Member Estrella thanked both presenters (Ms. Rodriguez and Abreu). She made a comment about people in the community who would like to share their stories, not necessarily about self-enrichment or promotion, but instead about empowering other women, and in general human beings.

Participants from the public also asked questions. Gabriela Biel shared her concern about the demolition and new construction of the Inwood Library. She stated that according to the EDC the library project will take at least two years to be rebuilt. But, she believes that it may take at least five years. She brought the example of Donnell Library’s construction that took eight years to complete. In her opinion, the community is looking at a project that may take five to eight years, which is a considerable amount of a child’s childhood. The interim library is depriving the community of a full library service, which hits some groups harder than others. Unfortunately, this situation disproportionately impacts Hispanics, low-income communities, seniors with fixed incomes and also deprives children of a safe place. Ms. Biel is a Dominican woman, a child of immigrant parents, who came to the U.S. at the age of 3. English was not her first language, and she learned to read and write during her pre-k years behind the library, and by borrowing books from the library. She couldn’t afford to pay for her college prep courses and materials. But thanks to the library, she was able to get them. She also elaborated on the importance of saving public libraries and having equity of access for all minority groups like Dominican, Brown, and Black immigrants. According to her, the community needs to ask the NY Public Library important questions like, what is happening with the current programming? What is happening with the startup date? The EDC is telling the community at least two years? What about the asbestos abatement Brownfield remediation as in what’s underneath there? Since there used to be a gas station the community needs to be informed about these problems.

The community needs also to know that this project is going to take I.S. 52’s racetrack and parking lot. This is a huge problem and no one is saying anything about it. She asked the Y&EC what can be done to get a commitment from the NYPL on the current programming? Who are the community partners they promised to get this information from and where is it? What’s the status of public access to computers? What’s their commitment to getting reading tables, summer reading programs, homework help, and express printing for basic things? Unfortunately, the present way in which the interim library is operating is not helping the community. And last, Ms. Biel asked the committee to address this issue at the next committee meeting, and Ms. Florimon responded that she will try her best to make it happen, but the committee has already committed with other guests to present. The agenda, so far, is full.

### **Business / New Business:**

Community Announcements – were pending for April meeting.

Announcer: Anastasia Galkowski is a representative (Volunteer Coordinator) from the Volunteer Projects in Riverside Park/Ft. Washington Park. They take care of the park from 59<sup>th</sup> street all the way to 181<sup>st</sup> Street, including the shoreline portion of Fort Washington Park. She wanted to inform the committee that they are presently hosting small group projects

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in the park. Due to COVID-19, they are not yet fully open to the community for engagement. But, hosting with community organizations are in effect. Ms. Galkowski is interested in connecting with public schools in the hope of offering her program. So far they only have one school from the community on the calendar, the Community Health Academy of Heights, located at 158<sup>th</sup> Street and Amsterdam Avenue. The school will join the working project in late May or early June to do some weeding and some invasive plant removal.

Ms. Galkowski also announced that her program is accepting applications for their “Teen Core Program.” The program is for high school students in their freshman years, and it runs from July 6<sup>th</sup> through August 26<sup>th</sup>. Equally important, Ms. Galkowski wanted to make sure the committee is aware of their program and would appreciate any assistance in connecting them with the community, especially the school district. Ms. Florimon asked how long is the program for and what are the incentives if they join (metro card, for example). Ms. Galkowski responded that volunteers are provided with a T-shirt, but wasn’t sure about providing them with metro cards.

Ms. Florimon promised to introduce the presenters with the SD6 Superintendent Office for possible collaboration.

An announcement was made about the possibility for the CUNY expansion in the community.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:56pm and was seconded by Miriam James.

**NOTE:** To view this meeting, please access the following link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLULrMJoe\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLULrMJoe_o)