

Recollections

A Community Worth Fighting For

By Joanne Ciccarello

East Boston, MA., Volunteer 1980 to 1983

I grew up in East Boston on Bremen Street across from the mattress factory. An Italian Catholic, second-generation working class kid, I was convinced that the sooner I left Eastie the better. In a stifling neighborhood where a girl's biggest ambition was supposed to be marriage and motherhood, I had other ideas planted by TV broadcasts about civil rights, anti-war protests, women's liberation and the Beatles.

I remember watching the battles on Neptune Road on TV. My mother shrugged her shoulders, commenting, "That's the pretty part of East Boston. Why don't they come over here and take Bremen Street instead?" In the early '60s, Eastie was merely a waiting platform before you caught the gravy train to the suburbs in Revere or Saugus. My family was one of the last to leave.

Jump ahead to college graduation with a degree in communications. Looking for something to do, I stumbled onto the East Boston Community News. To my chagrin—while I had been ducking the nuns at Sacred Heart Grammar School—those "hippies and outside agitators" I secretly admired were supporting my claustrophobic

community in their anti-airport struggle through a newspaper I never knew existed.

I covered the airport beat under editor Laura Brown. Production weekends were always a highlight of my volunteering. People constantly coming and going—Jim Wiley pasting columns, Carmela stopping by with her daughter Rachel to drop off her column, Paul Karoff turning an offhand conversation with the Meridian Street bridge operator into a delightful feature story, Laura lamenting missed deadlines, typewriters clacking, warm wax under fingernails, headlines stuck to the floor, people getting punchier as the weekend wore on. And the food - Meridian Market cold cut sandwiches for lunch on Saturday, doughnuts Sunday morning at Delma's, and Santarpio's after we put the paper to bed.

Soon I embraced Eastie as a community worth fighting for rather than trying to escape. I could always get a quote from a reluctant interviewee by confiding that I was a bona fide Eastie kid - not an "outsider." I heard wise words from people whom I would have otherwise ignored. Orient Heights Projects tenant activist Winnie Rizuti commented that projects folks in Roxbury and Eastie had the same thing in common—they were all broke—so they should work together despite the differences in skin

color. Alice Christopher spoke an uncomfortable truth: as long as Massport provided jobs for the community, most neighbors would not bite the hand that fed them. The highly quotable Anna DeFronzo always spoke truth to power: "There is no progress when progress destroys." Truth is, the Community News helped me appreciate the richness of my home and my heritage. For that I am forever grateful.

(Postscript: I remained an activist in Eastie for another 15 years, on the boards of East Boston Ecumenical Community Council and Zumix. I am now a photo editor at The Christian Science Monitor.)



Left to right, top to bottom: Paul Karoff, David Nelson, Jim Wiley, Frank Conte, Robert Sabet, Hank O'Meara, Renee Loth, Holly Sutherland, Christy George, Maxine Tassinari Teixeira, Mike Rezendes, Sue Mampre, Nancy Bell, Rachel Magoon, Carmela Cicconce, Joanne Ciccarello, Bob Nakashian and Laura Brown