

Meet your neighbors: A portrait of the Bed Stuy COMMUNITY

ABOUT THE PROJECT:

I am submitting a proposal for an exhibition entitled “Meet Your Neighbors.” This is a documentary-style photography project that features portraits of residents of the Bedford Stuyvesant community, as well as excerpts from interviews I have conducted with these residents. The purpose of “Meet Your Neighbors” is to give a public voice to a community in Brooklyn that is often ignored or stereotyped in the local media, as well as provide Brooklyn residents and visitors to the Brooklyn Public Library a glimpse into a predominantly African-American neighborhood that is experiencing the growing pains of gentrification.

I came up with the idea to do the “Meet Your Neighbors” project after attending several meetings of my block association in Bedford Stuyvesant. What was most striking about the block association – and this seems to apply for the neighborhood as a whole – was the mix of ages and backgrounds of the residents. Several of the most senior members have lived on my block for over 40 years, and have raised their families in the houses they still live in; others are adults who grew up on the block and who have chosen to come back to the neighborhood after living elsewhere; and several members are – like me – new to the block, and are expatriates from other parts of Brooklyn and Manhattan, or other countries.

While living in Bed Stuy, I have noted an acute awareness on the part of residents of how gentrification may affect their community in both positive and negative ways. Some residents are happy to see new people of all ethnic backgrounds moving in, and refurbishing buildings that were in danger of becoming decrepit and abandoned, while others express concern that the new people moving in will not make the attempt to get to know their neighbors, participate in community events, or preserve important aspects of the community. The most striking aspect of this wave of gentrification is – perhaps to the surprise of outsiders – that many of the newcomers are affluent, upper middle class African-Americans. So while there exists a perceptible tension, at times, between lower middle class blacks and newly arrived, middle class whites – there is a growing dialogue about class and economics between residents of all backgrounds. In this so-called “post-racial” world perpetrated by presidential candidate Barack Obama, it is of great interest to me – and I believe would be of interest to visitors to the BPL – how issues regarding gentrification, class, and race are being perceived and discussed in African-American neighborhoods in 2008.

The “Meet Your Neighbors” project is currently a weekly feature on the Bed Stuy community blog, www.bedstuyblog.com, and as early as its first installment, the feature was picked up and linked to online news sources such as *New York Magazine* (http://nymag.com/daily/intel/2008/04/loch_ess_monster_on_21st.html) and *The Neighbors Project* (<http://neighborsproject.blogspot.com/>). The feature has received an overwhelmingly positive response from readers, and it is my hope that an exhibition at the Brooklyn Public Library will provide a wider audience for a project designed to get people to look beyond what they think they see, or perceive to be true, about members of a certain community, and to encourage viewers to realize that they probably have a lot more in common with their “neighbors” than they might have initially thought.