

Ben Edwards: Born to Lead

• A DAUGHTER'S TRIBUTE •

by Shaleah Nyx

My father, Ebenezer Edwards, was born in Trinidad in Victoria Village. He was known for his prolific artistic abilities: he designed the Public Medal of Merit in Trinidad, logos for various companies, and worked throughout the Caribbean as a graphic artist.

He was also a militiaman in the Trinidadian army. While serving, my father's rare blood type was in high demand and he unselfishly traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean giving donations.

Upon moving to and becoming a citizen of the United States, he settled in Brooklyn where, for the past 20-plus years, he was actively involved in politics and PTAs, showing his interest in educational progress and reform.

Once he became a resident of Lefferts Manor in 1997, residing on Maple Street, he became the president of the Lefferts Manor Association in the 1990s.

As LMA president, my father worked with former Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz and other politicians to advocate for all. He assisted annually with the West Indian American Day Carnival Association. He also worked to build a bridge between the NYPD and the community. He assisted the NYPD to ensure that officers who were killed in the line of duty did not die in vain. He helped organize services, memorials, and plaque preparation for NYPD's fallen.

My father became a member of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), the Office of Emergency Management (OEM), and the treasurer of Community Board 9 in Brooklyn. He credited his extra motivation to join these organizations to the birth of my daughter. He placed her in this protective shield and wanted to be prepared for everything and anything that could possibly impact her. Neighbors continue to share fond memories of my father walking around the neighborhood beaming, while holding his granddaughter.



He helped everyone who sought his help. He mentored fellow real estate brokers, political hopefuls, and community activists, supporting their political journeys.

I recall the extent of his selflessness when I was a student at Philip-pa Schuyler. A van carrying students flipped over and without hesitation, my father pulled his car over to render

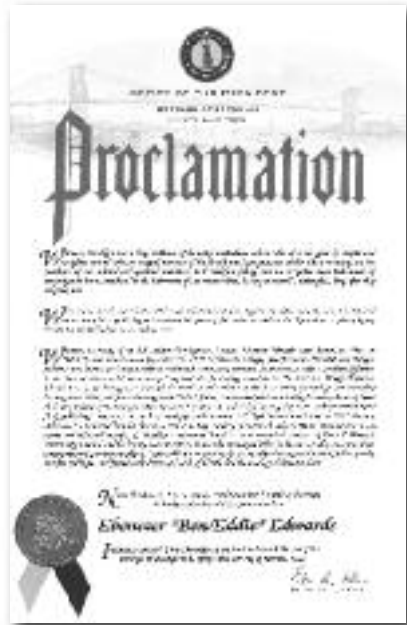
help. He climbed on top of the van and pulled students out one by one, freeing the driver last. Ever since, he always checked on drivers in their cars if they appeared to be sleeping, something I continue to do to this day. Upon asking why he did these things, he told me: "We are not bound to help others by anything but an inherent duty." This mantra has guided me to do the same.

Everyone he has helped and mentored through the years will feel his presence and impact for years to come.

My father, Ebenezer "Ben" Edwards will be missed, and his legacy will live on, not only through his surviving seven brothers and sisters, wife, two children, and his granddaughter, but by a grateful community that he loved.

On January 19, 2019, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams issued an official Proclamation honoring Ben Edwards. It read in part:

"On behalf of 2.6 million Brooklynites, I salute Ebenezer Edwards...who was known as a stalwart leader and community advocate, determined to make a positive difference in the lives of others in his community....an active citizen who encouraged others to become socially conscious about community and government affairs. I join with you in spirit as he is remembered as a great husband, father, family member, colleague, and friend in the hearts and souls of all who had the privilege of knowing him."



A SALUTE TO THE LEADERSHIP OF BEN EDWARDS

Quiet Dignity, Cool Under Fire, and a Love of Community

The good deeds of Ben Edwards—one of the hardest working, most committed, and productive public servants Brooklyn ever produced—will endure in Prospect Lefferts Gardens for decades to come.

Colleagues, neighbors and politicians who worked or collaborated with him agree that for a man who was essentially an unpaid and unelected volunteer, Edwards was without peer. He was a first-class expeditor who could oil the rusty cogwheels of government bureaucracy and tap the right people to advance this community's agenda.

And on this there is no quibbling: Edwards's hard work and leadership in PLG as the long-serving president of the Lefferts Manor Association were as impactful on the quality of life here as that of any elected official.

Edwards led an organization whose core mission was to uphold and defend the one-family-only housing covenant over the 600 homes that comprise the Lefferts Manor Historic District, a subset of Prospect Lefferts Gardens. The group also orchestrates the popular Prospect Lefferts Gardens House & Garden Tour.

The LMA also publishes the *Echo*.

Edwards recent death comes at a time when he was looking forward to being involved in the association's centennial celebrations this year and by extension, his 20-plus years as president—inarguably the longest tenure of any LMA president since the group's founding a century ago.

However, Edwards exerted his leadership and influence way beyond the LMA's prime directive to include the entirety of PLG. For example:

- He persuaded the Landmarks Preservation Commission to issue advice instead of fines when several homeowners in recent years ran afoul of the historic district's exterior rehab codes, especially as it related to window replacement.
- Working with then Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz, funds were found for all of PLG—and not just the Manor—to receive wrought-iron tree guards throughout the neighborhood.
- He managed to get the city to live up to a promise it made years earlier with the installation of the historic Bishop's Crook lampposts that line the Manor's blocks.
- He helped bring landmark status to the stately limestone block on Ocean Avenue near Lincoln Road.

All that energy and know-how ended December 28, 2018 when Edwards succumbed to injuries he had sustained weeks earlier after being struck by a vehicle on Flatbush Avenue, just a quarter of a block away from his Maple Street home.

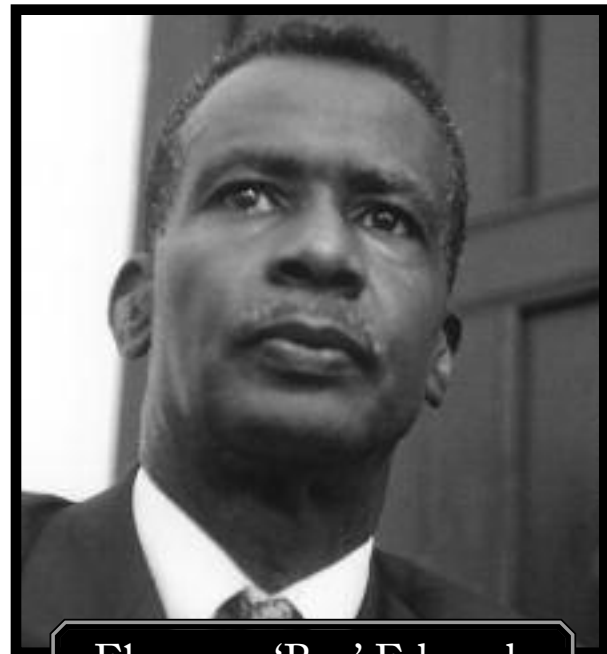
He was 74.

Pia Raymond, vice president of the LMA, is Edwards's well-prepared successor in both experience and spirit. A life-long PLG resident who was raised on the same Maple Street block as Edwards and was mentored by him later in life, Raymond has a long background in community engagement. She ran for city council, sits on Community Board 9, and is an entrepreneur. She is also a professor of social work at New York University, as well as a wife and mother.

Busy and Productive

Markowitz didn't know his friend had died until a reporter called to discuss Edwards's life of leadership. One could hear the change in Markowitz's voice in reaction to the news.

"His leadership was quiet but firm," said Markowitz, who served three terms as borough president and was famous for his energetic promotion of all things Brooklyn.



Ebenezer 'Ben' Edwards
1944-2018

"He was very clear in his objectives but always courteous," he said. "Even his phone manner was polite and respectful. He always returned calls and did it quickly."

Even more important, Markowitz said they trusted each other.

"I felt overwhelmingly that he was an ally of mine and together we did the best we could to make Brooklyn and Prospect Lefferts a better place," Markowitz beamed. "When Ben called, I took his calls. He was serious and straight. No gossip or shooting the breeze. He was all business."

Beyond Edwards's long presidency of the LMA, he served nearly ten years as a board member and most recently treasurer on CB9, and he was a longstanding member of the 71st Precinct Police Community Council.

He did all that and more while working as an associate broker at a Century 21 franchise—earning the real estate chain's "21st Century Achiever" honor—and living a quiet life with his family on Maple Street.

"Mutt and Jeff"

Semi-retired even though he still promotes Brooklyn (and Queens) for the city's tourist arm—NYC & Company—Markowitz came to know Edwards well during his 34 years in elected office, from state senator to borough president.

With his calm reserve, conservative business attire, and soft-spoken demeanor, Edwards was the straight man to the booming baritone of the high-spirited Markowitz.

In fact, Markowitz teasingly referred to the two of them together as "Mutt and Jeff," after the long-extinct cartoon strip about two bumblers.

But Markowitz meant it not in jest, but out of respect.

"I was short and tubby like Mutt and Ben was tall and lean like Jeff," he said. "So not only did I look up to him because he was taller than me, I looked up to him because of his leadership."

One irony about Edwards's leadership was that despite his public presence over two and a half decades, he avoided the spotlight, deflected attention from himself, and preferred that others took credit for initiatives he started or backed.

"He did a lot of good behind the scenes that people never knew about," said Patricia Baker, a five-year veteran of CB9 and the current chair, noting with pride that Edwards was her mentor.

"One of the things he taught me is that a leader is not always someone who has to be on point to get things done," she said. "Sometimes a leader is someone who gets people to work together and know who to go to get things done and bring issues to a resolution."

Carlene Braithwaite, an LMA board member, said Edwards's reluctance to be applauded for his achievements holds a clue as to why he never ran for public office.

"He just liked working behind the scenes," she said. "He told me he'd rather see other people get the credit."

Carole Schaffer, who organized the PLG (continued on page 2)

(continued from page 1) house tour for more than 30 years as a board member of the LMA, was the type of individual to whom Baker and Braithwaite refer.

Schaffer's and Edwards's love of the community was matched only by their dedication to make sure each house tour was better than the one before. But she became the face of the annual event while Edwards played a supporting role backstage, using his influence to solve whatever problems Schaffer confronted.

Art Schaffer, Carole's widower, recalled how magnanimous Edwards was in helping him spearhead the effort to co-name Midwood I—the block the Schaffers lived on since the 1970s—after her. Today the corner of Midwood St. and Bedford Ave. is co-named Carole Schaffer Way.

Now a chorus of politicians and lay citizens are proposing a similar lasting memorial to Edwards, either a bench in Prospect Park, a tree planting or a block co-naming.

Thankless Job, Strong Results

LMA treasurer Jerry Bennett, who considered Edwards a close friend and confidant, said Ben was going to resign as president at the end of this year, but remain on the board.

"His intention was to go through the centennial celebration and step down at the end of the year, but stay active as a board member," Bennett said.

"It was a lot of work, thankless work, that no one wants to do [being president of the LMA]," he continued. "Unless you want to up your profile and run for an elected office at some point, few people want to do it. Ben wasn't that kind of person. He didn't blow his own horn."

Bennett and Edwards met, coincidentally enough, on the board soon after each bought homes in the Manor at almost the same time.

Combined with Edwards's real estate experience and Bennett's neighborhood preservation instincts, both men were aware of the neighborhood's recent past as a battleground of blockbusting and redlining. They did a lot of extracurricular work outside of the board to help support residents and small merchants who had conflicts with landlords, developers and banks.

But it was the mixed blessings of gentrification that bothered Edwards, Bennett recalled, particularly the numerous closings of the neighborhood's iconic beauty shops, nail salons and barber shops with unbearable leases.

To State Assemblywoman Diana C. Richardson, who also worked with Edwards on the board of CB9—from which she sprang to the State Capitol in Albany—Edwards was a bulwark against predatory development. She said most people don't know that he spent a lot of time challenging the ambitions of realtors and developers who set their targets on PLG.

"You know the Manor has a lot of protections: It's a historic landmark district and it has the covenant," she said. "But the surrounding areas of PLG do not have those protections and we are seeing developers try and break through and acquire properties because the name of the game is to buy a row of houses, knock them down, and get the zoning to build out-of-scope housing.

"But Ben was a strong leader at the helm who really sent a message that no games could be played here because he was a seasoned warrior in the battlefield to defend our community."

Whether or not Edwards saw the job as thankless, those who worked with him at CB9 and the LMA admired his cool under fire and the way he got bureaucracies to deliver on services or lighten their rules for the neighborhood.

Recalling the blistering criticism he took from activists who disrupted CB9 meetings when plans to green-light a neighborhood rezoning study were at a stalemate, Baker said she learned a lot from him.

"He had such a confidence and calm in himself on those circumstances," she recalled. "That is why he appeared so unflappable. He used to tell me know why we are here and don't forget your goals."

Bob Marvin, a former LMA president and former *Echo* editor who has been on the board since 1982, said Edwards was a deft negotiator with government bureaucracies, especially with Landmarks. He recalled one of Edwards's successes in a meeting with Landmarks to grant a historic district designation to a row of homes on Ocean Avenue.

"He was just more effective than they," Marvin said. "It was remarkable the way he was able to work with bureaucrats and get things done and I thought I was pretty good getting things done."

Marvin said another victory for the neighborhood that Edwards achieved was getting Landmarks to eliminate the fines they used to hit homeowners with who installed the wrong kind of windows.

"I admired him even when I didn't agree with him," he said.

Leaders Salute a Leader

On the freezing Saturday afternoon of January 19, family and celebrants of the life of Ebenezer "Ben/Eddie" Edwards packed the chapel of St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church on Hawthorne Street for a final good-bye. Church officials said later that nearly 400 people filled its chapel that day.

His life celebration had all the trappings of that of a head of state, even including an NYPD honor guard.

As the 71st Precinct Commanding Officer Francis Giordano put it:

"Ben Edwards was an inspiration to this community with decades of selfless community service. He forged connections to bolster our relationship to the community and he supported our passion to make this a better place to live."

Practically every elected official who represents the area (or their top



Ben was active with the organizing for the West Indian Day parade for many years. In 2004, he was greeted by Mayor Michael Bloomberg at a Gracie Mansion reception honoring the West Indian community.



An unassuming Ben Edwards, uncharacteristically in casual wear, casts an appreciative eye on ticket sales at last year's neighborhood house tour.



Congresswoman Yvette Clarke delivered a eulogy at the service celebrating the life of Ben Edwards. She spoke movingly about how Ben was "like family" to her.



During a national wave of police killings of unarmed black men, Pia Raymond and Ben led a "peace and focus" prayer meeting to tighten the relationship between the 71st Precinct and the community. Between them is NYPD Officer Daniel Oh.

representatives)—from Borough Hall to the City Council, from the State House to Capitol Hill—were on-site and unanimous in their eulogies that Edwards was a man of uncommon compassion, intelligence, drive and service.

U.S. Representative Yvette Clarke, whose voice broke a few times during her eulogy, said Edwards was a guiding hand in her political life.

"He could not have impacted my life more than he impacted his own family but I felt like he was family," she said. "I cannot remember the day I actually met Ben Edwards but it feels like he was in my life all of my life."

"He always had an encouraging word for me, a smile and a hug and you know, the work that we do, where you get beat up on all sides all the time, a smile and a hug are good things."

Current Borough President Eric Adams was out of the country, but his closest aide and top staffer—senior advisor Ingrid Lewis-Martin, who has known Edwards for years going back to the days when Adams's office was on Flatbush Avenue at Midwood Street—presented the family with an official Proclamation that appears on page 1.

To the Rev. Dr. Zorina J. Frederick, CB9's former education chair, Edwards was "the quiet energy" behind a number of positive neighborhood developments for which he went largely unacknowledged.

"He did a lot of things behind the scenes most people will never know about," she said. "I'm glad I was able to say this man was an awesome force for good before I leave this community." [Frederick is retiring out of state.]

City Councilman Mathieu Eugene, who rushed to Edwards's side at the hospital the night of the accident, praised his friend as a "quiet force."

"He was a quiet and wise man and he treated people with respect no matter the circumstances or who the opponent," Eugene said.

NYPD Detective Vinny Martinos, the community relations officer of the 71st Precinct, told the celebrants that he met Edwards at the start of his career and worked with him when there had been a short-lived LMA civilian security patrol.

"We spent a lot of nights together," Martinos said. "He taught me how to be of service. I'm proud to say that we became friends."

"We serve Prospect Lefferts Gardens, in this great city of diversity, where Ben Edwards brought people together and that was an inspiration."

The obituary program ended on this poignant verse: "...well done, thou good and faithful servant..." from Matthew 25:21.

—Milford Prewitt, *Echo* Editor

SAVE THE DATE JUNE 2nd

The 49th Annual Prospect Lefferts Gardens House & Garden Tour

LMA Plans Busy Centennial Year

This year the Lefferts Manor Association celebrates its 100th anniversary. We intend to celebrate our centennial with a number of activities:

- The Prospect Lefferts Gardens House & Garden Tour will be a most ambitious one this year as it will strive to include a house from each block that makes up the Manor.

- We're going to produce a centennial yearbook, modeled after the earliest days of the LMA. It will include a commemorative summary of major events that shaped our neighborhood and recognize residents—past and current—whose contributions were priceless.

- All of that will be capped off with a centennial gala to be held at Brooklyn Commons on September 14 (save the date!) when neighbors, friends and supporters can gather for an evening of fellowship, food and a good time. More information will be forthcoming.



For a stronger community, join the



Lefferts Manor Association

Dues are \$25 per household or \$15 per senior citizen household

Dues cover January through December 2019. Make checks payable to Lefferts Manor Association.

Send payment with your name, address and contact info to: Martin Friedman, 214 Rutland Rd., Brooklyn, NY 11225, drop in the mail slot at 214 Rutland Rd.

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