

Redistricting, Two Primaries and New Office Holders Reshape PLG's Political Landscape

By Milford Prewitt

A draft of a redistricting plan generated a furious response from black voters and elected officials who saw the new law as an attempt to fragment the voting power of the black community.

"I don't think the special master served the state well in drawing these districts," said U.S. Rep. Yvette Clarke.

Although congressional districts are redrawn every 10 years, this redistricting was punishment against state Democrats for gerrymandering the Republicans practically out of business.

Talk radio was all abuzz when it was reported that the draft called for Clarke and U.S. Rep. Hakim Jefferies – who had been moved into Clarke's district – to run against one another to represent the Ninth Congressional District, which Clarke represents as an incumbent and includes Prospect Lefferts Gardens and most of Central Flatbush.

But Clarke says while the new maps show a pattern to fragment traditionally black neighborhoods, she said she and Jefferies will not challenge one another. Instead, Jefferies may compete in a newly created district. At the same time, the Ninth District has grown considerably, nearly doubling in size and stretching all the way to Bensonhurst.

Clarke gaining more real estate is one of a flurry of changes that is reshaping the political contours of PLG.

In November, Rita Joseph, a teacher for most of her working life, beat out a heavily endorsed field of rivals to win the 40th City Council District seat, long held by Mathieu Eugene.

Following a similar storyline of the underdog, Brian Cunningham won a low-turnout special election in March by winning the 43rd State Assembly District seat by a whopping 30-percentage points.

Joseph and Cunningham both identify affordable housing and education as the district's major challenges.

Joseph immigrated from Haiti as a young child with her parents and taught in the public school system for 21 years. She made her mark as early as high school by staging protests and other civil actions for immigration reform.

Joseph told the Sterling Street Block Association that the key to her victory was "people power." Realizing that many of her opponents had "super-backing," she said she had no choice but to campaign harder than anyone else.

"We knocked on 32,000 doors, made 150,000 phone calls, and here we are today," she said. "Nothing was given to me, everything was earned. Every endorsement earned. This race speaks volumes to the fact that the people still matter. Races still can be won with the people. It's the people's win not mine."

Cunningham fills the seat of five-year incumbent Dianna C. Richardson. The high-octane Richardson resigned the state assembly seat to become Deputy Brooklyn Borough President. Ironically enough, Richardson backed Cunningham's closest rival in the balloting, Jelanie DeShong, who came in second despite the powerful blessings of the Working Family Party.

Born in Flatbush, Cunningham began his career as an advocate counselor for the non-profit CAMBA, helping at-risk youth succeed in school and life. He later served as a senior aide to State Sen. Kevin Parker, chief of staff to council member Laurie Cumbo where he worked on affordable housing, women's issues, and small business. More recently he returned to counseling youth as the Director of Neighbors in Action, a project of the Center for Court Innovation and the home of Save Our Streets Brooklyn.

"Housing is a first, second and third priority," he said. "Rents are too high, property taxes are too high, and developers are getting too many incentives to the detriment of locals."

Cunningham will have to run for office all over again when Richardson's term ends at the same time of the Primary Elections. If he wins, he will have to run again in the November General Election. Win or lose in November, Cunningham will be that rare politician forced to run for office three times in the same calendar year.

Joseph thinks he can handle it.

"He has a unique blend of government and community experience," she said. "He knows government inside and out and how it operates and how to get things done and how to make a difference in people's lives. But he also knows PLG and Assembly District 43 like the back of his hand."



Rita Joseph



Brian Cunningham

PLG's New Private Middle School Teaches "Maker Education," Learning by Doing

By Milford Prewitt

The new Workshop Middle School on Washington Avenue has a tagline that declares: "Middle School Can Be Amazing."

It's a tagline that says as much about the intellectual growth and wonderment of being a kid in the 6th-, 7th- and 8th- grades as much as it signals the amazing ambitions the school's staff and students are setting their sights on.

Blending a traditional education in the "three R's," with a focused emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), Workshop incorporates a trade school element with heavy machinery, hand tools and real hands-on projects the students will create for community use and enjoyment.

So called "maker education" is the buzz phrase at the core of the school's mission. It updates a century-old alternative educational philosophy that pushes students to "learn by doing."

"What maker learning tries to do is integrate some of the best principles of vocational hands-on instruction and technical training within a traditional middle school education," says Andrew Ravin, co-founder and head of the school. "We're a private, progressive, project-oriented school. We don't rely on textbooks to solve complex problems."

"It's a very innovative approach to learning."

Ravin says the middle school years are the most important in a student's academic life.

"Important research on student behavior and achievement has shown that what happens in the middle school grades is more important and has a higher impact on student achievement than what happens in high school or college," Ravin states. "People don't believe that at first, but it's true."

"What happens in early education matters in middle school. If we don't build up middle school to be successful, our early elementary progress is a bridge to nowhere. So middle school matters."

The Phat Albert School



Andrew Ravin, head of the Workshop School and Denise Daniels, co-founder.

Occupying 10,000 square feet in the long defunct Bond Bread Bakery Building (more recently known as the Phat Albert Building), the school opened last July on Washington Avenue near Sterling Street. The bakery space had been unoccupied for decades.

Founded about five years ago, Workshop operated in Prospect Heights for two years while the renovation and build-out occurred at its current site, ultimately taking up 10,000-square feet. The mixed-use rooms include an auditorium, meeting hall, front lounge, and theater space in addition to large a classroom, a socializing area and machine workshop.

The heavy machinery includes a table saw, band saw, and a mitre saw, all of which could be employed in a project close to home: the revival of the iconic clock tower on the building's roof.

"Yes, we are looking to restore the clock tower and we've already talked to the landlord about it," Ravin says. "But we must go through the city since that's considered structural."

"But that's how we learn. We identify issues and challenges and connect that to real academic learning inside the school."

More immediately, the school is close to building a boat. Workshop currently has a student body of 49 students with a goal to grow to 75.

It graduates its first 8th grade class this spring.

Tuition is \$39,000 a year, with 80 percent of the students on some form of financial aid or reduced tuition. Forty percent are receiving free or reduced lunch.

As a private, independent school, Workshop's students do not qualify for federal tuition assistance. But no student is ever turned down because of their inability to pay, says Ravin, who taught in public schools for 20 years and has an Ed.D. in education.

Private investors, corporations, non-profit entities, professional artists, family and friends who believe in the school's mission are the generous benefactors.

"Passionate Teachers"

Of the 14 teachers on staff, Ravin says there was a simple qualifying criterion: that they know their subject matter and are passionate and care about middle school kids.

"Private, independent schools in the state of New York are not required to have credentials greater than an undergraduate degree," Ravin points out. "Our teachers may have a master's degree, they may not. They may have a Ph.D. They may have no teaching background."

"Our criterion was that we find highly talented individuals who care about middle school kids and know their content [of their subject areas]. Too often middle school kids are thought to be too unruly, too much trouble and loud."

As an example of the expertise on staff, Ravin says STEM classes are taught by two engineers.

Workshop students are performing well on standardized tests.

"Over the past two years, 95 percent of our kids exceeded their growth expectations on standardized tests and 50 percent exceeded it by two grade levels," he says.

While academic excellence matters, so too does the school's aspiration to be a good neighbor in Prospect Lefferts Gardens.

"We want everyone to know that we want to be a good neighbor," Ravin declares. "We want to be a constructive and productive working partner with other non-profits. So, whatever that looks like, we're open minded."

The school is already hooking up with the Sterling Street. Block Association to paint a mural on the wall surrounding Western Beef's parking lot and will assist in a day of planting.

More long range, the school wants to host a "maker street party" so local artisans can show off their work with the kids, and it welcomes neighborhood groups to use its auditorium.

Janice Grannum helped with this story.

PLG Historical Project – "Voices of Lefferts" – Seeks \$7,500 from GoFundMe

"Voices of Lefferts", the historical writing project focused on Prospect Lefferts Gardens, has a busy year ahead as it tries to restore funding and keep its programming robust. The volunteer writing group hopes to raise \$7,500 to continue its series of publications and printed oral histories on PLG and wants residents to be its core contributors. Failure to raise the money means VOL may be forced to go digital only. "I'm all for digital communications, but having this in particular, this print journal, in your hands, there's a need for it, I think, in the community," Deborah Mutnick, VOL co-founder, told Brooklyn Paper. Up until this year, the 6-year-old history project had received grants from Humanities New York, the Brooklyn Arts Council, and Citizens Committee for New York City. Those grants covered the cost for renting space at Grace Reformed Church, printing each issue, and for the creative provided by graphic designers, photographers, copyeditors, and others. More recently, VOL applied for funding at the Library of Congress and the American Council of Learned Societies. But competition with other groups recovering from the pandemic, shut the VOL out of the running. Enter the GoFundMe project which VOL started in April.

To contribute, visit gofundme.com/t/voices-of-lefferts-community-writing-project. The group's works can also be purchased at Greenlight Books where it occasionally holds reading events and talks. To see what

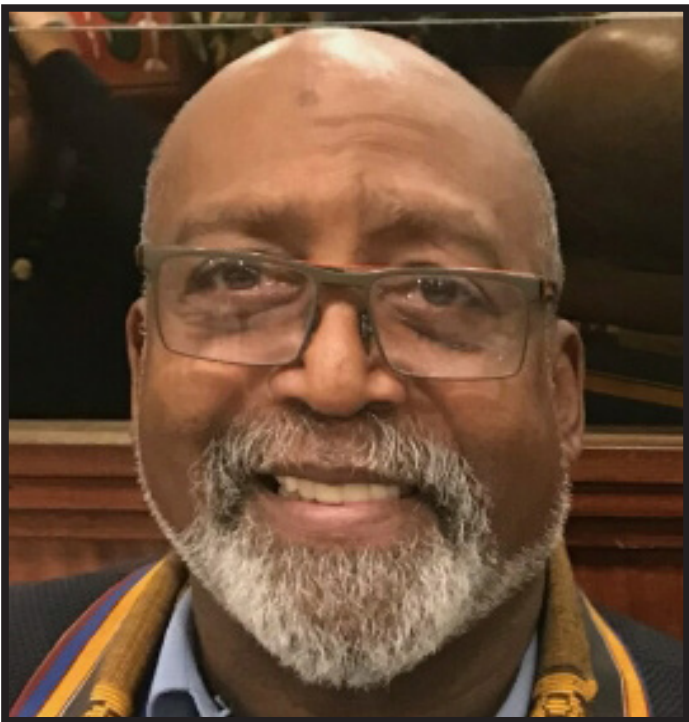
Echo Looking For Co-Editor
The Echo is looking for a co-editor or writer to volunteer their talents in generating editorial content about this dynamic neighborhood. If interested, contact Milford Prewitt at 917-301-7700 or milfordprewitt@aol.com

*Midwood 2’s Richard Maxwell,
Peace Maker During Crown
Heights Riots, Youth Counselor,
Educator and Singer, Dies at 77*

Richard Maxwell didn’t back down from a challenge. As a guidance counselor, he helped at-risk kids get serious about their futures. As an anti-gang specialist, he worked to keep Crips and Bloods out of Brooklyn schools. As a jujitsu instructor, he gave youths confidence in learning martial arts. All of that altruism and more helped him during the Crown Heights race riots in August of 1991, precipitated when a Jewish motorist in a funeral motorcade tried to beat a red light and struck two Guyanese children, one of whom died. The accident set off two days of riots and a Hasidic scholar and a non-Jewish white man were killed. As the Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder of the Crown Heights Youth Collective, Maxwell and Richard Greene, who still runs the CHYC, helped bring peace between Jews and Blacks following two days of bedlam. “Whenever we needed him, he was there,” Greene recalled. Maxwell, who lived in his great-grandmother’s Midwood 2 home in two different phases of his life, died November 26th from complications of diabetes and Covid. He was 77.

In a two-hour Brooklyn Historical Society oral history project which covered his long involvement in community activism, Maxwell quoted Eleanor Roosevelt: “Give credit to the people who lit a candle rather than curse the darkness.” It could have been his epitaph. He ultimately acquired the Midwood Home in 1981 as a single dad. He joined the Prospect Lefferts Gardens Neighborhood Association though most of his good deeds unfolded in Crown Heights. Civil rights, affordable and fair housing, police reform, peaceful relations between Jews and Blacks, counseling at-risk youth, resisting street gang infiltration and recruitment at local schools became several areas Maxwell gave his heart and soul to. Born in Harlem in 1944 and reared in Crown Heights and Bedford-Stuyvesant, he served as a paratrooper in the U.S. Army in the years before Vietnam blew up. After his discharge, he earned master’s degrees at Medgar Evans College and Brooklyn College. One of his sons, Hassan, said his father was a pallbearer at Malcolm X’s funeral, something his closest friends never knew. He worked with the city for almost his entire working career, logging 30 years with the Board of Education in a variety of roles. He was a teacher, guidance counselor, and an assistant principal. Maxwell also worked for Baily Controls, as well as several other business ventures. He became, in the words of Hassan, a “Black Forest Gump,” who was either onsite or working behind the scenes at some of the most

storied events and social-political movements that shaped Black life in Brooklyn. “He has lived many different lives,” in his 77 years! Hassan said. In 1973 when his children were young, Maxwell took the whole family on an exchange program for three years to Moshi, Tanzania to help build infrastructure projects such as plumbing systems, wells, schools, and housing developments. “We learned so much about the world and got exposed to different foods and ways of thinking,” Hassan said. Though he recorded his activism for the Brooklyn Historical Society, he was essentially an anonymous but highly productive community organizer, an unsung hero, despite the positive results he forged in any number of causes. “To this day there are people in their 40s and 50s who have my father to thank for steering their lives in the right direction,” Hassan said. In his retirement years, Maxwell tried to get a singing career off the ground with a group he joined called “Nu Millenniums.” They would sing classic soul and R&B acapella Style at Midwood block parties, in subway stations, and other venues. Hassan was a part of the group. In addition to Hassan, Maxwell is survived by daughters Arusha Maxwell and Jonell Hair; another son, Kenny.



Popular Korean Grocer Closes Seven Months After Owner Dies
OEG Fruits and Vegetables, the popular farmers market on Washington Avenue near Lincoln Road closed in May, seven months after its owner died from diabetic complications of a heart attack in October. Kyung Ho Choi, the patriarch of the Korean family that operated the store for 20 years, died at 65. Paul was his English name. He and his wife, Cecilia Kim – to whom he was married for 38 years – emigrated to New York City from Argentina in 1988. Before he entered the grocery store business, Kyung had been a bus driver for a Japanese travel agency in New York. But the company shut down operations and moved back to Japan following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, forcing Kyung to re-think his future. He was mainly responsible for purchasing inventory and dealing with vendors. A self-taught florist, he added to the inventory fresh cut flower bouquets and live plants several years ago. On the morning of October 14, Kyung woke with chest pain and sweats. EMS transported him to Coney Island Hospital where he survived an initial heart attack only to succumb to complications of diabetes. He is also survived by two children, Erika Choi (an email marketing manager) and Christian Choi (a lawyer).

*“DR. JOE,” LONGTIME
RUTLAND 1 RESIDENT WHO
LOVED HIS NEIGHBORS,
DIES OF DEMENTIA*

When he was a young doctor starting out as an infectious disease specialist, Dr. Joseph Chukwudi Udeze found time in his rigorous career to play tennis and soccer on a high level, watch sports and prepare gourmet meals from his native Nigeria’s gastronomy. A physically fit man whose healthy bearing was only exceeded by his sunny, outgoing disposition, “Dr. Joe” was a



popular neighbor on Rutland 1, where he lived in a red-brick townhouse with his life mate, Norma Grant. As he grew older and ultimately retired, he would sit in front of his house and greet his neighbors and passersby as they returned home from work or school, every work-day, weather permitting. They would discuss sports, current events and community affairs. He even engaged with young school kids, inquiring about their activities and classes that day. Toddlers learned how to give the high-five salute before they could walk because of him. Dr. Joe and Norma were supportive members of the Lefferts Manor Association, having lived on the block for 25 years. “He was a fixture of the block,” said fellow doctor and Rutland Road neighbor, Dr. Stan Meyers. In 2000, he suffered a subdural hematoma or bleeding on the brain in an accident at home. The accident required surgery on his brain. But it also set the stage for dementia, which defined the last few years of his life.

When word got out that he was gravely ill, neighbors rallied to support him and Norma with a daily showering of kindness, errands, nursing help and companionship. Dr. Joe died in January, just three days after New Year’s Day. He was 75 years old.

At his rousing life celebration at St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Church on Nostrand Avenue where he worshipped, the pews were filled with neighbors, colleagues and neighborhood school kids who had been touched by his life. One young man produced a poster he drew encouraging Dr. Joe to do all he could to beat the disease. Dr. Joe was born in Aba, Nigeria – the fourth child of seven children – in a family of high achievers. His parents stressed educational excellence, giving back and belief in their Catholic faith as the steps to a successful life. Such life lessons inspired him and his siblings to attain the highest rungs in their professional pursuits in medicine and education. [His mother, a successful business entrepreneur, died wealthy at 107 and needed a soccer stadium to accommodate all the mourners at her funeral.]

In the late 1960’s, he was recruited in the Nigerian Army during the nation’s civil war, rising to the rank of Signal Officer. A lover of music, one highlight of his military career was producing musical entertainment for the troops. Dr. Joe played soccer on a professional level with one of Nigeria’s top clubs, Enyimba soccer club of Aba. He later played for Jeno Paulucci soccer club in Duluth, Minn. when he emigrated to America.

He left Nigeria at the urging of his eldest brother, Clement. A college professor, Clement secured admission spots for Dr. Joe and a younger brother, Donatus, at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Graduating in 1974 with a degree in biology, Dr. Joe pursued a master’s degree in endocrinology at the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse.

But the budding scientist was hardly finished with his education. He won a scholarship from the federal government of Nigeria to attend St. George’s University School of Medicine in Grenada and graduated as a medical doctor in 1987. He went on to specialize in infectious diseases at Cabrini and Beekman Downtown Hospitals in New York City. He met Norma, a Jamaican immigrant, in Brooklyn in 1981 on a blind date her sister’s husband set up. They moved to Rutland Rd. in 1997. One special talent Dr. Joe possessed was cooking Nigerian cuisine, which he made right up to the end. Three of his specialties were Moi-Moi, a multi-ingredient black-eyed peas pudding served as a side dish; okra stew; and Jallof rice with tomatoes. Nicknamed “Obi-Ade’we”– “he who never harbors a grudge” – by his mother, Norma said Dr. Joe “never met a stranger” and maintained a positive outlook right up to the end of his life. In addition to life mate Norma and brothers Clement and Donatus, Dr. Joe will be missed by three sisters, many nephews and nieces, and numerous neighbors and friends. Norma said words don’t express the gratitude she felt upon seeing how many neighbors showed up at his funeral to show how much he was loved and respected.