



It was Howard Cosell who famously called out to the world, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning," during the 1977 New York Yankees World Series Game. This quote backed by the shockingly vivid imagery of burning tenements is as deeply ingrained in the psyche of Middle America as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And much the same as the latter events, the Bronx's untimely death was so visually documented that removing those images from the mind state of so many is as near unattainable a goal as bringing someone back from the grave.

Which means Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr., has assigned himself a near mission-impossible goal while in office.

The Bronx, once a thriving municipality of factories, theaters, stadiums and mom-and-pop shops, became a victim of the great white flight, between the years of 1953 and 1973, after Robert Moses began construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway. The highway became the one-way ticket out of the Bronx that 750,000 Jewish, Italian and Irish residents, willingly utilized, to exit the beloved borough for the promise of a better life in the newly formed suburbs of Westchester County and New Jersey. As a result of this mass exodus, a greater part of the borough was plunged into socio-economic ruin, which to this day ensures that the Bronx remains the poorest urban county in the nation.

Latinos and African-Americans became the new majority of the Bronx. But with 600,000 manufacturing jobs being lost over that twenty year period, and the average yearly household income plummeting to \$2,400, there was very little honest work for an honest day's pay going on around the borough. Crime became the dominant variable in the problematic equation now suffocating the environment. And the elevated hostility of these surroundings resulted in many fathers being imprisoned, strung-out or murdered; leaving single-mothers the impractical duty of helping their children navigate the very same troubled waters that had mercilessly drowned their fathers.

So I found it of great interest when I sat down with the silver-tongued, charismatic, charming, and young Bronx Borough President, Ruben Diaz Jr., 36, that one of the first things we spoke about was the fact that he was a product of a household with a father—a rarity in our neighborhoods to say the least. And I found it down right noble that he's made it his personal mission to alter the perception of investors, those willing to utilize their resources in the Bronx, in hopes of taking us back to the pre-Robert-Moses days, when industry was strong in the borough and when Bronxites were prosperous and hopeful for a better tomorrow.

With Barack Obama working diligently—and battling congress—for change early on in his presidency, Mayor Mike Bloomberg doing little more than showing up to the area for photo-ops, the responsibility of a better tomorrow for this borough falls squarely on the shoulders of the Honorable Diaz Jr.

But how does one man even begin to alter the dreadfully visual perception of a place that's

been 40 plus years in the making? And of greater consequence, why in the world would any one man want to take on the weight of an entire borough, the weight of 1.4 million residents, in effect, inheriting all of their problems and making them his own?

There is a saying by Author Wendell Berry that might serve to explain his crusade, which reads, "The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it."

In this theoretical statement, the Bronx represents the "bad" and the questions being pondered while sitting with Diaz Jr. were, is he truly an advocate for real progressive change in the Bronx, here to add something better to it, thus making improvements? Or is he merely another puppeteer politician exploiting the borough and its people for the advancement of his own career...for his own escape from New York and all of the problems thrust on the Bronx so many decades ago?

With such vital questions looming in the air, one can ascertain that this wasn't just another journalistic visit to a fancy office, covered in commemorative and congratulatory plaques on the walls. This was a visit from a concerned citizen who'd seen his share of pain and concern in the faces of his fellow Bronxites. And within minutes of pressing record, Diaz Jr., much to my surprise, would begin to topple my guard with each word, set my mind at ease with each statement, and make me feel like I was just chatting with one of the fellas from my old Kingsbridge neighborhood with each reflection.

As fate would have it we quickly fell into a discussion about his old neighborhood of St. Lawrence and Watson Avenue. And within minutes we were talking about my cousin Freddie, from Elder and Watson who'd been murdered in the early '90s as a result of the crack-epidemic that swept into the neighborhoods. Diaz Jr. said he remembered Freddie as one of the tough guys, to which I replied, "Live by the gun, die by the gun." And when Diaz Jr. said he recalled the memorial wall done for Freddie on Watson Avenue, it led to an in-depth explanation of what the walls represented, when his Press Secretary, Liseth Pérez Almeida, asked for further explanation..



Diaz Jr. stated, "Unfortunately when a tragedy happens, rich people build mausoleums and monuments to commemorate folks. In our neighborhoods you get a mural on the wall. It's unfortunate that sometimes that's all that life is worth."

I watched his face grow into a slight smirk as he disappeared into an explanation of how his life was a duality of parallel circumstances. There was the life he was living while hanging out with his crew in the Bronxdale Houses, the same projects that raised our first Latina Supreme Court Justice, the Honorable Sonia Sotomayor. He recalled the neighborhood being very territorial and made sure to note that there were no Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings or Ñetas at that time, just

neighborhood crews who made sure no outsiders came in to bring harm to ones block. He spoke openly about the consequences the violent street life meant to some of his friends who ended up with their own R.I.P. (Rest In Peace) memorials on the walls, friends murdered like Lou, June, Whiteboy Steve and Polo.

The natural flow of the conversation led me to reveal my own reflection of wanting to die at 15-years-old, due to that lack of hope I saw in my neighborhood. When I asked Diaz Jr. if he ever felt this type of hopelessness, he was quick to reply, "Oh no, I loved myself way too much for that," to which the room erupted in laughter. And when the laughter subsided he became serious again when I asked him if his father was instrumental in his life. He replied, "When I was growing up in the neighborhood, in my household, my brother and I, we were the only guys on the block who had our biological father living in the house, we were the only ones who lived in a house with a yard."

Diaz Jr. didn't only have a father in the household, his father happened to be Reverend Ruben Diaz Sr., who was not only involved in church but also in Bronx politics. The elder Diaz was successful in introducing his son to a world of political affairs. Diaz Jr. recalls meeting political heavy-weights such as the Godfather of South Bronx politics, Ramon Velez. Olga A. Méndez—the first Puerto Rican woman elected to state legislature in the US mainland—as well as the first Puerto Rican Bronx Borough President, Herman Badillo and Fernando Ferrer who was BBP from 1987 to 2001. Although Diaz Jr. believed he was headed for a career in the NBA, with dreams of playing for the New York Knicks, it seems through meetings like this he was being preordained to follow a path as an elected official.

Introductions to these powerful officials, who Diaz Jr. recalled seeing on the evening news, afforded him the understanding that life wasn't all about the corner. And though he continued to live dual lives into his teenage years, it was his greatest challenge in life that would finally turn him into the serious-minded person he would have to become to break into public office.

At only 18-years-old, while still in high school, Hilda Diaz would tell Ruben of her pregnancy. And nine months later while holding Ruben Diaz III in his arms, he had finally found the purpose in life to stop being a self-professed charlatan, and start being the focused individual he needed to be in order to continue his studies, by way of night school at LaGuardia Community College, and eventually Lehman College in the Bronx.

He spoke to me about the early days, living with a newborn baby on Fox Street, in a rat-infested apartment. And of walking past Longwood and Fox St., where an open-air drug market ensured that violence in the neighborhood was always present. But he remained persistent knowing he now needed to leave his mark on history not only for his own benefit, but for that of his son as well. His hard work paid off. At 23-years-old, Diaz Jr. became the youngest elected New York State Legislature since Theodore Roosevelt. And as his political career began to flourish his family grew when he and Hilda welcomed another son, Ryan Isaiah. He shared with me that overcoming these obstacles was important, but that being prepared when opportunity presented itself to him was equally as important.

While sitting with Diaz Jr. it became apparent to me that his love of the Bronx is almost as

genuine as his love of family. And his words only served to fortify that belief when he stated, "The Bronx is my home, I don't know anywhere else. I've lived in the Soundview section of the Bronx my entire life. I'm a product of this environment, I've seen the very worst times for this borough, but I know that it can get better. I'm proud of where I live. I get homesick when I'm gone for too long. And I want to be able to provide, at the least, the same opportunities to the younger generation in this borough that I had growing up. That they're able to educate themselves as best they can, that they can play in parks that are safe, that they don't have to worry about gun violence, that they can aspire to be elected officials, doctors, and scientists. And that if they want to seek out programs in the arts and music that we provide those programs."

"I take being the borough president very personally," he continued, "When I battle with the Mayor of this city, with commissioners, when I ask about the services that we should be getting, that we're not getting; it's not only because I'm the Bronx Borough President, it's because this is my home, and because I have a personal vested interest in making this place better."

Diaz Jr. has gone on to successfully battle Mayor Bloomberg, when he tried to place a prison in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx. And recently he stopped Bloomberg's friends from capitalizing off the hard work and labor of Bronxites, when he killed the Kingsbridge Armory Development deal that would've meant big money for Bloomberg's people while paying minimum wages to Bronx residents. Yet, he's quick to point out that he stands side-by-side with Bloomberg on issues of stricter gun control. And while a lot more can be done with gun control, such as better marketing and promoting of the Gun Stop (1-866-GUNSTOP) program and better community relations between the NYPD and community leaders, Diaz Jr. has shown a commitment to removing guns from the streets with the recent success of January's gun-buy-back program, which took almost 1,200 guns off the streets of the Bronx. And with a sister serving as a sergeant in the NYPD, he is also very much in favor of better relations being built between the officers and the communities they serve and protect. When told about the Officer Adil Polanco (41st Precinct) incident of sergeants trying to force quotas on their officers, he didn't hesitate to say, "They should be fired on the spot."

When I asked Diaz Jr. if he'd ever faced any opposition due to his race and how he felt about immigration, he responded, "I don't believe in using my race as a crutch. This country was built on immigrants. I am one who praises the courage of someone who leaves their country and everything that they know to come to America for no other reason than to provide a better future for future generations of their family. It's been happening since the founding of this country. Certainly New York was built on immigration when the Dutch first came here in the early 1600's. I think we should do all that we can to help individuals be here in a way that is legal. If you're not a Native American, in some shape or form, you come from a lineage of people who came here as immigrants looking for hope and looking for a better tomorrow." He's hopeful that President Obama will revisit Immigration Reform once the Health Care Reform is done.

Before I could finish the rest of my questions, duty called and Diaz Jr. was off to the next meeting. But I didn't let him off the hook that easily. When I informed him about PS463 in the South Bronx, a school experiencing extreme problems with lack of resources and services necessary to help the families of its students; he asked his press secretary to pass on the

concerns for me.

I don't believe the answer to the Bronx's tribulations lie within just one man, but I do believe Diaz Jr. has the sincerity, real-world experience, skill set and fortitude to help us redefine our past, or at the very least to help us escape it, by adding something better to it, thus making the words of Author Wendell Berry prophetic.

I'll fight side-by-side with Diaz Jr. anytime, in the trenches, knowing we've walked through the same fires and are now trying to rise up out of the ash and silence Howard Cosell's cries once and for all. The Bronx is no longer burning...but instead returning to its glory days of yesteryear.