

Neighbor Profiles – a series of interview-based stories about members of the PPUABA
By Patti Veconi

Kihshah Armstrong, Traffic Control Flagger

April, 2023



Back in January, I wrote a quick poem titled “Kihshah Stands Sentinel” in a notebook that I subsequently lost on a trip, so I don’t have those words at hand anymore, but I know what it was that inspired it; there is something reassuring about seeing her and knowing she has her eyes out – that she’s paying attention. It’s curiously comforting. One morning a few weeks ago I literally found myself calling to her from my stoop as a friend ran to the corner to catch a car ride and her wave back to me said, “*I got you, don’t worry.*” What a simple gesture of kindness. So when Stacey reminded me that a newsletter deadline was (ahem) here, I took the opportunity to go outside and visit with a new but now-familiar face in the neighborhood.

I had just arrived when a neighbor walked across Park Place with a cheery wave and a “Good morning, Kihshah!” – a greeting that was just as quickly and warmly returned. Kihshah Armstrong has “stood sentinel” at the corner of Park Place and Vanderbilt Avenue for some months now and has spent the past two and a half years in the neighborhood working with Perfetto Contracting on the sewer and water main project

we are all so familiar with. I have appreciated her warm smile and calm presence and have easily come to think of her if not as a neighbor, per se, certainly as a member of our neighborhood. I started by asking her about that neighbor's "hello" and her impression of the community in general. *"They have the good and the bad – and I'm not good with names, but they always remember mine."* (I am suspicious of this claim as Kihshah has always remembered my name.)

Kihshah has worked as a traffic control flagger for nineteen years and while today is bright and sunny, it is still April and quite chilly, so she has her wooden board to stand on and is bundled up. *"The board is warmer than the pavement, so I stand on it when my feet get cold. I dress in layers and keep extra clothes in my car. I come prepared."* She considers this for a moment. *"I may need to add another hoodie for today."* She said that, as winters go, this one wasn't bad, *"But cold is cold."* The worst place she's ever worked? *"The Rockaways! It was just a madhouse over there – just a madhouse... and COLD. We were a block from the beach – and they were not so friendly. Over here, they stop, they talk, ask me how my day is going and how I'm doing – but over there? Not at all."* A little bit of friendliness seems the least we should extend toward each other and simple greetings are always a win-win... note to self: this might be a subject worth exploring further in another epistle...

I asked Kihshah about her day and some of it surprised me. For instance, she lives in Pennsylvania! Being a native of Pennsylvania myself, we compared notes. *"I'm from Harlem, but I moved to New Jersey and then, when I wanted to buy a house, I wanted one I could afford and without a man! So I looked in Pennsylvania and now I have a four-bedroom, 3 ½ bath all to myself."* She smiled proudly but quickly added that she has a twin who lives in New Jersey with seven children, so it's nice to have the space when they visit. Although her morning drive is (only) ninety minutes, she leaves at 4:00am in order to avoid traffic and secure a parking spot close by. *"After nine hours, I don't want to walk far to find my car."* She listens to music on the way, *"mostly R&B, slow jams"* and music is a nice wind down on the longer drive home. What is the best part of your day? *"Going home!"* And the worst part? *"The mornings – closing the street is hard cause the people get [irritated]. Even though we give them until 8:00 and try to accommodate parents taking kids to school... Some people just want what they want and that's it. I know they get mad at me, but..."* She trailed off here and I marveled at the fortitude and constitution it must take to do the work she does. I looked around a bit at Kihshah's immediate work environment and considered those orange barrels aren't much protection. Then I noticed the STOP sign Kihshah holds. Do you feel safe? It hadn't occurred to me before that moment, but looking at that banged up sign, I wondered. Kihshah's smile was circumspect – after all, she wouldn't be standing there if she was thin-skinned or easily daunted. *"This sign is both a shield and a weapon, too."* She indicated one particularly jagged, octagonal edge. *"The other day, a lady threw two bottles at me! One was a Snapple and the other was glass."* What?! *"M-hm, sometimes you get the crazy ones who won't listen."* In spite of that incident, Kihshah doesn't judge our whole community by it. *"I'm supposed to go back to Rockaway soon, but I don't want to go. I like it here and I hope I can stay until the end."* I hope so too.

I thanked Kihshah for her willing conversation with me and asked if I could get her a coffee or tea, having presumptuously just offered her hot chocolate in the past. As it turns out, and should you find yourself inclined to make a similar offer, she likes Lemon Zinger tea with three sugars. We said goodbye... until I run my next errand.