

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

**Ethan Mulligan, Park Place resident**  
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It is hard to overstate the delight (and relief) the block association’s nominating committee feels when a new neighbor steps into an officer’s role in our block association. Ethan Mulligan not only recognized a need, but also acted on it. *“I don’t think it’s a secret that the block association leadership was looking for some younger folks to step in and I think it’s important – I do feel we all have a responsibility to our communities. It’s easy to follow national politics, but folks often aren’t as focused on their local community... and, you know, change starts local. I think we could all spend less time screaming at cable TV and more time participating in block association activities, which are less stressful and more impactful.”* This isn’t where our conversation started when we met on my deck a couple of weeks ago to hold this interview, but it is a nice introduction and set-up for what was to come in our visit.

Ethan is a proud native of New Jersey, but in moving to Brooklyn has returned to the immigrant roots of his great, great grandfather who is listed in the 1890

census as a coal trader in Kings County. *“I think that was his way of sounding fancy to the census bureau. What he probably did was lug coal from the Erie Basin up Atlantic Avenue – maybe to the Brooklyn Navy Yard where I work now.”* A few years later, his ancestor moved to “the greener pastures of Kearney” where the family has continued to have roots ever since. Ethan and his (now) wife, Kyle Taylor, moved to Prospect Heights in the fall of 2019 with plans for a June 2020 wedding, but found their plans interrupted by the pandemic. *“It’s hard to even remember those first six months now... both of us working from home for the first time and in such close space, we would joke about how tired it made us having to do each other’s jobs as well as our own! But the neighborhood camaraderie every day at 7:00 and hearing Bruce come out with his shofar – that was great. But I didn’t see my parents for months and I still don’t think we’re all past the trauma of it, and obviously we’re still in it because here we are sitting outside. All the things that were laid bare by the pandemic: inequality, food insecurity, healthcare and education disparities... that was on the macro, but here, on the micro level, I did feel part of a community and that was helpful.”*

Community was something of a theme throughout our conversation, which then turned to Ethan’s work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard (or more accurately, the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corp.) where he is the Community and Government Affairs Manager. In preparation for our interview I had watched the video on the BNYDC website: <https://brooklynnavyyard.org/> – (really, everyone should check it out) – and I was amazed. Who knew? *“People not knowing about us is a systemic issue and that’s because the navy, for 165 years, didn’t want people in there. Marines guarded the perimeter with guns and we still have these brick walls. But our mission now is to soften that perimeter – to create public spaces where people can interact with the Yard.”* Ethan started to list the myriad opportunities at the Yard, including the food-manufacturing hub at Bldg. 77, the permanent exhibition of naval history at Bldg. 92, the public programming, WWII tours, architecture and infrastructure tours... *“It’s really a micro city of 300 acres for 500 businesses employing 11,000 people and we are working hard to let people know that you’re welcome there.”* Those numbers amazed me, but what is really impressive is how they connect local residents to the jobs and resources there. Ethan’s work is in building those community connections, which include partnerships with the NYCHA complexes closest to the Yard, local Community Based Organizations like the Myrtle Avenue Restoration Project, Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce and what I found most exciting, partnerships with local schools, *“from elementary all the way up to colleges and universities. We also have a CT (career and technical education) high school on the premises for juniors and seniors who spend half the day at their home school and then half the day at our STEAM center. There are five pathways for study and we work with eight local high schools – all public – that are in our hyper-local catchment area. What’s really, really cool is that, for example, in design engineering when they use 3-D printers or CNC machines, they will be using that same equipment when they go into Yard businesses. A big thing that they get is coming out with industry credentials, so the kids on the*

*culinary path get their food handler's license, the kid in construction is getting their OSHA 40s, etc. The idea is that if they wanted to step right from high school into a career, they will have these credentials to open doors. While most of them will go on to higher education, we also have an internship program where they intern with us, BNYDC, but also with other businesses here at the Yard... so it is a really cool program that is going well – I think we're graduating our fourth class this year."* Ethan's personal involvement in the Yard's education program is in facilitating what he calls their "pyramid of engagement" which begins with public programming on the bottom, building through their STEAM center, internships, employment opportunities and finally being a business-owner. There are ten zip codes that comprise the catchment area from the neighborhoods that touch the yard. *"I'm an ambassador within an eco-system, between the community and the Yard. I go out and explain to folks how they can enter at any one of those levels and then connect people."* This hyper-local focus means that NYCHA residents, for example, get employment opportunities on the Yard in manufacturing. *"We focus on manufacturing because these jobs pay more than retail or food service jobs in entry level positions. Also, if you look at the racial breakdown in manufacturing, it reflects that of NYC as a whole more than some of those other industries."* With intentional and purposeful placement of workers through the Yard's employment center and information workshops to build a cache of ready candidates, the Yard is able to connect local residents to jobs on the Yard. The Employment Center focuses on Brooklyn residents (especially those in the Yard's catchment area), public housing residents, individuals who are long-term unemployed, and individuals previously involved in the justice system. The last focus is for women in non-traditional roles such as welding or working in the shipyard. I was so impressed and excited hearing about Ethan's work and what goes on at the BNY – not only because it's fascinating and I had no idea there was this whole world behind those old stone walls – but because he clearly loves what he does and is (rightly) proud of BNYDC's mission. I asked a lot of questions and he had a lot more to say, so I feel a bit badly there isn't room here to give you more details, but while I now had a good sense of the Community part of his job title: Community and Government Affairs Manager, I wanted to understand the latter part more.

*"The line that has connected the different jobs in my career has been public service."* For his last semester in college (Johns Hopkins), Ethan was a public service fellow interning on Capitol Hill for the senator from New Jersey. *"I moved to DC two days before Barack Obama was inaugurated."* From there he applied to the New York City Civic Corps (formerly AmeriCorps) where he ranked the environment as his first choice and was placed with the Parks Department on the million trees initiative. *"My next step was working for a City Council member from Harlem and so I moved to 117<sup>th</sup> Street to live in the district... that was very fortuitous because that's where I ended up meeting my wife."* The work was intense and comprised *"just about everything from constituent issues work, legislation work, press releases... you're interacting with everyone."* As difficult as it was, there were moments of real satisfaction. He shared one particularly

poignant story involving the director of a supportive housing project. His career continued to evolve and his next job was with the Manhattan Borough President, which was even more intense. *“It sounds cheesy, but even though I went to lots of fancy places and did lots of cool stuff working for the council member and borough president, I do remember that guy and how thankful he was. Knowing that it was for supportive housing and helping folks – that felt good.”*

While government work is a powerful track, Ethan wanted to explore other opportunities in the private sector and not-for-profits. He landed at the FDR Four Freedoms Park Conservancy on Roosevelt Island, almost a home-coming for this young man from the garden state with a penchant for civic issues. This unique monument to ideas is nestled in the center of the East River and at the tip of a small island. *“It’s something of an unknown gem in the city.”* Ethan’s job was in visitor services and in addition to enjoying the work immensely, he also discovered a love of birding while on Roosevelt Island. (A hobby I was delighted to learn we share.) He spoke of his time there with real appreciation. *“It’s a very meditative place; I encourage everyone to visit. It’s free, and you can now take the F train there, the cable car, the ferry... and not to get political, but the human rights laid out in 1941 and represented here... well, the way the country is struggling now, many people would come and find it interesting – for lack of a better word.”* Ethan segued his work in visitor services from Four Freedoms Park to BNYDC, where he had barely gotten his feet wet before replacing the Community Affairs and Government person there. *“They knew I had a background in that area, so with a hiring freeze due to the pandemic, I stepped into the void helping with government affairs.”*

I came away from my visit with Ethan feeling as though I had learned so much and trying to determine how quickly I could arrange field trips to tour the Navy Yard and visit Four Freedoms Park. Our conversation had returned to the block association and I was talking about the last time I had served as an officer when Ethan interrupted me. *“That’s a chimney swift up there.”* Looking up, we mused about cedar waxwing sightings right here on our block, a yellow warbler in Mount Pleasant Park and a brown creeper in their backyard recently. We watched the swifts for a while, and I gushed a bit over how much material this interview had produced – the anticipated challenge of having to edit it down – and thanked him for sharing his story so thoughtfully. *“Well, I do give tours for a living, so I guess I know how to talk.”*

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If you have a PPUABA neighbor you would like to nominate for our Neighbor Profiles series, please send your suggestion to [ppuaba.webmaster@gmail.com](mailto:ppuaba.webmaster@gmail.com).