

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

Rhoda Westerman, Park Place resident
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Our neighbor Rhoda Westerman first came to Prospect Heights almost sixty years ago. *“Guess what my rent was in the 1960s?”* Um... around \$200? My guess was low, but still pretty far off. *“Eighty-three dollars a month. Eighty-three! And things were so different then; I would walk up these dark streets and wasn’t nobody but me coming back from work.”* Rhoda describes Vanderbilt Avenue in those days as very quiet, *“Just a little grocery store, a shoe repair and a hair dresser (Miss Cleo). Cleo would go to second hand shops out on Atlantic and Nostrand and come back with things to sell out front on the sidewalk on the weekends. Vanderbilt Avenue was a ghost town, but everybody looked out for one another.”*

Born in Manhattan on 63rd Street, Rhoda was the youngest of seven children and she still marvels that her mother had to take a boat to the hospital on Roosevelt Island where she was born. Rhoda’s attachment to Brooklyn began in her teens

when she started working at Abraham and Straus, and I notice something that has struck me before in the many conversations we have had about her 30-year career with the flagship department store: she only refers to it by its full name, not the easy abbreviation of A&S. A testament to how proud she was of her time and work there. *“I started as a cashier and worked there all through high school and then stayed. I did every kind of job there. My mother died when I was in high school and they were so good to me.”*

In the mid-70s, Rhoda made a career change and went to work for Rachel Robinson (Jackie Robinson’s wife), moving to Brownsville where she became the housing assistant at Rutland Road Plaza. Mrs. Robinson’s real estate development company specialized in low- to moderate-income housing, and it was at Rutland that Rhoda found her vocation as a Cub Scout den leader. Recognizing a need among the little boys who lived at Rutland Plaza, Rhoda chartered a Cub Scout troop. She is still remembered by some of those boys, (now men), including the Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, Van Johnson II. Mayor Johnson spoke at Rhoda’s 80th birthday party and in a letter she keeps on the wall, he fondly remembers the impact she made on his life.

Rhoda would shepherd a dozen little boys on outings and overnight trips with more classroom management than most teachers ever get, and she remembers them all as beautiful boys she shared adventures with. A favorite Cub Scout story she tells is of the 1977 blackout when about 20 little boys stayed the night in her two-bedroom apartment until their parents could safely come get them the next day. *“I always had other people’s children,”* she remembers with pride.

It would be hard to overstate the importance that church has, and always has had, in Rhoda’s life. She was a longtime member of New Frontier Baptist Church, staying until the death of their pastor. She then joined Brooklyn Tabernacle, through which she has built many friendships, including with people who have sought out the famous church on visits to New York. My husband’s Aunt from Wisconsin is one such long-distance friend. A family visiting once from California came to the church and sat next to Rhoda. When the service was over, they asked her for directions to the subway, but Rhoda went one better, escorting them all the way back to their hotel. They have returned many times to New York to see Rhoda since then and continue to stay connected as loyal pen pals.

When Rachel Robinson closed her business, Rhoda returned both to Prospect Heights and also A&S, where she worked until retirement. She then began caring for an elderly neighbor, Mrs. Hill, at 296 Park Place, eventually moving with her husband to live in the house. When I asked Rhoda what she thinks has changed in the neighborhood, her answer wasn’t surprising – especially for 2022: *“Something that’s changed here is the people connections. I miss the meetings. Mrs. Hill would make sure I met everyone when I first came. Everyone is still very friendly, but making connections isn’t as easy.”*

Connecting with people is a particular gift of Rhoda's. She is known locally as the founder of the Grand Army Plaza Wedding Watchers: an informal but very dedicated group that would go every Saturday during the summer to support and help bridal parties with their photographs at the fountain. A video story by the New York Times in which Rhoda narrates can be found [here](#).

With the recent death of her beloved husband David, and the challenges of living in a home with so many stairs to navigate, Rhoda is now considering looking for a place that can better suit her changing needs. She does have one condition, however: *"I want to stay in Prospect Heights. This is the best neighborhood. I don't know everybody; but I know just about everybody."*

A link to David's obituary can be found in the "Obituaries and Remembrances" section of the [PPUABA Archives](#) page, or you can go directly to the obituary by clicking [here](#).

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.