

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

Jill Frasier, Park Place resident
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As we tested the voice recorder app on my phone, adjusted lighting for taking notes and generally settled in, my conversation with Jill Frasier began with her quoting a BBC radio program from her childhood called *Listen With Mother* that opened with “Are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin.” Her lilting accent has just the cadence for good storytelling and Jill has a lifetime of stories to share. “I am an immigrant to the United States, but I’ve spent over two-thirds of my life here, so when I go to England, they take me to be a foreigner now. I accept that and feel that I come from a rock in the middle of the Atlantic which represents my accent, which is more American than British now.” How Jill came to America seemed a good place to start and it follows the path of so much migration in the world, namely love and family. “I came on a fiancé visa. I had met Roy in Malawi and we got engaged there.” After first returning to England, where she secured the necessary visa, Jill joined Roy in the United States “And we were married within five days of my arrival.” Was it clear that they would live on this side of the pond from the beginning? “Well, he did visit me while I was in England waiting for my visa, but

the weather was awful and he was ill with a flu, so...he didn't think he would want to go back...but he got to liking it quite well over the years."

Back to Malawi: Jill went over through a program that is like our Peace Corps called Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). She was there teaching at a secondary school in what was then the capital, Zomba, though while she was there plans to move the capital to Lilongwe were put into effect. *"It was a very colonial town: small, and on a hill, the Zomba Plateau, and you could climb up to the top of the plateau and it was beautiful...a kind of pine forest up at the top and very pretty. I was 21 and I didn't have an education degree because I had majored in Economics in college, but I realized that the best thing for helping development was education so I thought I would go there and teach. I just assumed that if I knew something, I could teach it!"* (Note: If you can imagine a very pleasant laugh following some of these quotes, you will feel as though you are sitting right where I am now as you read.)

When Jill moved to the states and was ready to start looking for work here as a young bride, she didn't have the necessary qualifications to teach so instead got a job as a statistician with the ILGWU (The International Ladies Garment Workers Union). After a year she and Roy both enrolled in NYU for master's degrees in a program called the National Teacher Corps, a federally funded program. They became teacher trainees together at a junior high school in East Harlem where the classes were split for them to share. Her next few years of teaching took Jill to many different classrooms, often working as a substitute and often with students who had as many challenges outside of the classroom as in. She had begun to feel that perhaps teaching wasn't the right fit for her when Roy was offered a contract job in Ethiopia through the Agency for International Development and she was promised a job there as well teaching the children of the staff. They had hoped to stay for three years, but during their stay, a revolution in Ethiopia meant the cancellation of their program and their return home six months earlier than planned. *"But it was a very, very happy teaching experience. The children all ran to school. At most I had eleven children in five different grades. It was like a one-room schoolhouse. There were Ethiopian, American, Dutch, Israeli children all learning in English...I was very happy there."* That turned out to be the zenith of Jill's teaching career because when she returned to New York, she discovered her credentials were no longer valid. *"I had not become a citizen and didn't even realize that meant I would lose my license."* She quickly turned it into a new opportunity: *"I went to library school."*

Her first job after graduating with her second master's degree, this one from a program at Columbia, was a good match for her skills and experience at an information center that focused on US organizations involved in overseas development. Funded by the Agency for International Development, this group published booklets on each country that listed which not-for-profit agencies were working there. This allowed the different agencies to know about each other and to share information and resources. Although her employers were always talking about computerizing their basic information so they could produce reports more spontaneously and keep them up to date, it wasn't something they had the capacity to do yet. *"This was in the 70's and nobody really knew*

much about computers, but I was really interested!" Jill found out about a course on computer programming at the Computer Center at CUNY and her professor was impressed; she landed a job developing technical reference manuals and user guides there, taking her career in a new direction. As a librarian she could organize information and she was interested in computers, so once again, Jill's skill sets coalesced to her advantage. (For those of you who want to geek out, Jill was programming on PL1, which she claims nobody uses anymore.) At this point in our conversation, I made some comment about what it must have been like working in such a new department in this new field of computer programming, to which Jill said – dryly and with that mid-Atlantic accent that sounds much closer to the other side of the pond to me – *"Well, yes, and it was full of nuhds. In fact, they used to hire students who would break the system."* Hackers? *"Yes, hackers! A hacker would write in to say they broke into their system and the next thing you knew; they were on the staff."* Naturally, Jill's enthusiasm for the work led her back to school for another master's degree, this one in computer science. (Are you noticing the trend here?) She stayed at CUNY, moving through different departments, and eventually maintaining the operating systems on the different CUNY campuses, staying for 17 years. Then, the apocalypse loomed, and everything changed. (Ominous music soundtrack.) *"When Y2K approached, it turned out that the machines on the campuses couldn't be upgraded to handle the eight-digit dates. I would have had to learn UNIX and I felt I had already learned an operating system and how to maintain it once."* If her career at CUNY had been a solid oak door closing, Jill soon found some lovely glass French doors opening to another opportunity and the financial security that comes from years of saving. Suddenly, and with Roy already retired, Jill made a new discovery: *"I said, Roy, I can go to law school!"*

Where did that come from? I'll summarize: Jill was always very politically involved, writing letters to politicians on a myriad of issues, but after becoming a homeowner here on Park Place in 1978 *"I said to myself, I should become a citizen...of course, I had always said I wouldn't become a citizen as long as the Vietnam war was going on, but that was no longer an excuse and as a new homeowner, I felt I ought to be responsible."* She continued to write *"Many, many letters: to Amnesty, NYPIRG, Common Cause, I was a member of ACLU...and all these organizations were telling us to write and I would write, but I thought going to law school would give me a better understanding of what I was doing while writing these letters."* As an attorney, Jill worked with Legal Services for the Elderly on elder abuse in family court and also Supreme Court where predatory lending and deed fraud could be addressed. *"I think we did very important work there. They're still doing it."* Her stories about some of those cases is fascinating...and heartbreaking.

Jill didn't need any special degree for the next direction her life took, just the abundant compassion she has always brought to everything she's done: *"Roy said he needed me, so at first I continued to work half-time, but you can't work half-time as a lawyer, you just get half pay, so I stopped..."* Her voice drifted and I was reminded of the first thing she said to me after he died five years ago, *"He was such a good friend."*

Jill met Roy in Malawi, which is where we started our conversation (and the hook I used to land this interview). Through Friends of Malawi, an organization for returned Peace Corps volunteers that she is part of, Jill learned this winter about a new program that collects books for specific schools in specific countries. She volunteered to do a collection and has been assigned a school in central Malawi near a town called Dedza, *“And at first I thought, What have you done, Jill? How are you going to do this!?”* but as soon as Marc (Gordon) posted it to the block association donations began coming in. *“And then another neighbor put it on Buy Nothing and that was a massive response!”* Even someone from the other side of Brooklyn who saw Jill’s post on Freecycle has responded. She is now closing in on her goal of 1,000 books and will be wrapping up the project in a couple of weeks, but if you have any that are appropriate for grades 3-9 that you would like to still donate, you can reach Jill by email at frasiergf@aol.com.

Jill is a modest marvel of accomplishment and industry, but a busy woman as well and she had already given me the only slice of time she had free before leaving town for several days to attend a funeral. I was just about to turn to another subject when she pleasantly but with that mid-Atlantic-really-way-closer-to-England tone, *“Have we done enough?”* I knew my minutes were running out. Almost, I replied. I still wanted to touch quickly on Jill’s impact within our neighborhood and block association. She has done sooooo much over the years, but currently Jill puts her block association efforts toward coordinating the [Nourishing Our Community](#) initiative. Few Brooklyn experiences have impressed me more than the mornings I have spent delivering food to CHIPS on 4th Avenue or the Chance For Children food pantry at the Ebbets Field Apartments. The need just keeps growing, while those who give their time or money to support that need barely keep up. If donating to a book drive all the way in Africa doesn’t feel tangible enough for you, consider making a difference locally. We mused a bit about the neighborhood for a while – what it was like when she and Roy first arrived and observations that forty-five years of perspective give her legitimacy to comment on. *“You know...things change.”* That may be true, but I’m happy Jill’s generosity of her heart and spirit have remained constant.