

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

Al Bass, Park Place resident
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My first memory of Al Bass was from a block party some twenty years ago. He had been manning the music and sound entertainment station for the day, keeping us all in a festive spirit with lively tunes. Then, as the afternoon was getting lazy and the tables were starting to pack up, he picked up the microphone and began crooning out a jazz ballad. Al was in his element and having fun, but more than that, he *cared* about what he was sharing with his neighbors in that song; he wanted to engage and invite us in, and those same qualities of comfortably being in his element, joy and genuine caring have come together in literally every area of his life's work. Speaking with Al is a pleasure. He takes his time, listening to his own story as he tells it in a kind of magical balance between narrator and audience, sprinkling a warm chuckle throughout his anecdotes and marveling along with me at moments of consequence, irony or poignancy. While it is easy to list achievements as the signpost markers that define a person, (and he has more than his share to enumerate) Al speaks with equal pride and satisfaction about the success he has enjoyed refinishing wood flooring or leading a karaoke party.

Al first came to Brooklyn as a young child, living in Crown Heights and then Bed Stuy until, as a young man, his college studies were interrupted when he was drafted into the army. In revisiting that history, Al's naturally wry and understated style could not minimize the significance of that experience. *"You may recall that the sixties was a very interesting period in the U.S. – especially as it relates to the Black consciousness movement."* His call to service in 1968 came just at the time he was becoming aware of political and social shifts in the world. He began his stint in Key West, Florida *"...where the US had a base set up to deal with the threat of Cuba."* Al was assigned to the personnel unit where it was his job to type up the orders that came down from headquarters that reassigned servicemen who would be going from that base to Vietnam. *"I was there so long I thought that I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam."* He chuckled at the memory of how confidently he came home during leave in August of 1969. *"But when I came back a couple months later and read the list of new names: there was my name. It turned out I had to type my own orders sending me to Vietnam!"*

Al talked for a while about his experience in Vietnam, but let me take a step back here for a moment to say that listening to his remarkably gentle, mellifluous voice as he described his time there belied the intensity of what that experience must have been. It struck me in particular that instead of using the word racism, Al uses the words "hatred energy" to describe an environment that *"...started here in the U.S., but in Vietnam it was really pronounced."* And why not: isn't hatred energy what racism is? The saving grace was the community he found himself in. *"There was a brotherhood that formed naturally to resist this hatred energy and that brotherhood allowed us to exist and survive in the service differently than previously – I think... That brotherhood prevented a whole lot of negative stuff – it insulated us from the hatred."*

Because of his two years in college, Al was assigned to the officers' branch as a sergeant – a rare position for African American servicemen at the time. Despite language barriers, the Vietnamese Al interacted with made their opinions about

him clear, but he used his position to try to educate and to deal with the racism that permeated everything in that environment. This included working in the affirmative action committee to find discriminatory policies within the command. Bringing attention to the disparities of representation by people of color among officers (1.6%) versus all other units in the service (well over 50%) did not impress Al's superiors at the time, but it did impress Al, who parlayed that wartime experience into a lifetime of community organizing.

Al returned to New York and civilian life spending the early 1970s as an adult advisor to the Youth Leadership Foundation in the Bronx, finishing his Bachelor's degree (Cum Laude in Business Management) and simultaneously working to support a new family. He returned to Brooklyn in 1974 where his work in tenant organizing took hold after an initial experience building a coalition of neighbors who were being forced out of their building on Eastern Parkway during a renovation. That project left him with an appreciation for what could be achieved through organizing as they won their court case against the landlord, but also, *"Based on that experience, I decided that I didn't want to be a tenant anymore."* In the early 80s he started looking for a townhouse and found one in Clinton Hill. *"It was a fixer-upper and they were asking close to 90K, but after conducting an inspection with a professional, I was able to get that home for 35K."* (Insert another one of those warm chuckles here.) *"The roof was bad, the boiler was out, pipes had burst... a myriad of things... but I proceeded over the next fifteen years to restore the house myself."* During this time, Al also organized a non-profit called Brooklyn Neighborhood Improvement Association (BNIA), which became part of a coalition opposing the city's plan for redevelopment of city-owned properties here in both Prospect Heights and Crown Heights. The city's proposal (under then-Mayor Ed Koch) called for all of its properties west of Washington Avenue to be developed as market rate housing while all those east of Washington Avenue were to be developed as what was euphemistically being referred to as affordable. *"Washington Avenue was to be the dividing line where poor folks would be on this side and everyone else... well, it was worse than redlining..."* The coalition successfully argued for quality, mixed-income housing throughout the development areas under consideration and further proposed that different organizations sponsor developers for the various site projects. BNIA worked specifically with units here on St. Marks and "The Crown Prospect Houses" was redeveloped with a 1% ownership in the project. After the regulatory agreements expired the city transferred complete ownership of the project to BNIA, which today holds 100% ownership interest in the project, ensuring that those units will continue to remain affordable in perpetuity. It's a legacy of my otherwise modest subject that elicited a particularly warm smile and chuckle in its telling. *"Prior to us, we're not aware of anyone ever doing that, but being involved in housing and understanding the problems of gentrification and redevelopment... well, our position was that the community needs to own and manage the housing on a non-profit basis."* Today, BNIA is 42 years strong and one of the few organizations of its kind in New York to survive that long.

With a master's degree in Public Administration that focused on urban development issues, it is easy to see how Al's professional and volunteer/civic work have overlapped. *"There is a connection between all of my activities where one thing leads to another."* Al's professional journey has covered a variety of private and government sector positions including Assistant Director in the Governor's Office of Minority and Women Owned Business Development; Supervisor with the Catholic Charities Neighborhood Preservation Program; Housing and Community Development Representative with the NYS Division of Housing and Community Renewal; and a manager with the MTA's Office of Civil Rights. In addition to that impressive resume, there have been times when he has pursued a variety of self-employment ventures. Those times when he found himself between steady gigs were when he made opportunities for himself that tapped into both his artistic/creative abilities and his people skills. He has worked as a photographer, a karaoke host, a handyman and more. I recognize in Al the work ethic of generations of Americans who are now becoming less and less the norm – he has never shied away from learning something new: *"Sweat equity is the mother of invention... to me, calling a plumber seems strange."*

Circling back to that first impression I had of Al Bass the singer, he chuckled (a really delightful one) and gave me his history with music from the time he was a kid singing with his older brother (Mom made them stop touring to prioritize school) to a stint in a college group and later, being recruited as lead-singer for a band that he spent three years touring the east coast with. *"That was an experience that demonstrated what can be done when people come together with various talents and energies and choose to work together to support one another."* He paused a moment then added, *"Musicians who have different skills are no different than folks who come together to make sure Vanderbilt Avenue stays open."*

After more than ninety minutes of a truly engaging narrative, it was time to wrap up and Al noticed that the two most local and relevant organizations we share in common hadn't been discussed. *"I left out PPUABA and PHND!"* We chatted a bit more and he concluded with this: *"I try to stay low key; by nature I try to fill in the blanks. If I see people doing stuff, I'm happy to play a supportive role and add to the mix where something needs to be added because most of the time, even when there are obvious leaders, there is support that needs to be done."*

Somehow, even after hearing about a lifetime of taking on leadership roles, this modest assertion did not come as a surprise. Al isn't someone who you think of as rolling up his sleeves and getting to work, he's someone you think of as never having buttoned those cuffs in the first place.

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.