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The Cultural Capital Bronx Residents Possess

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The Cultural Capital Bronx Residents Possess

Whenever people at Fordham encounter Bronx residents, especially Bronx residents who study or work at the University, it is critically important to understand the cultural capital people from the Bronx acquire as a result of living in this unique borough. All too often, members of the Fordham community view people from the Bronx as being scarred by the experience of living amidst poverty and hardship, rather than strengthened by the multicultural quality of Bronx neighborhoods and the courage and resilience of the Bronx's many immigrants. Unfortunately, this view is prevalent even among Fordham students and faculty who see themselves as progressive or anti-racist.

To encourage a more respectful and accurate view of people living in Bronx neighborhoods, especially those adjoining the Rose Hill campus, and a more welcoming attitude toward Fordham students who come from the Bronx, I would like to offer this brief summary of the cultural capital the Bronx fosters.

Bronx Cultural Capital Trait One-- the capacity to live and work with people from many different backgrounds. The Bronx is unique, among the nation's urban areas, in having virtually no ethnically or culturally homogeneous neighborhoods. Not only do people from a wide variety of different backgrounds live in the same neighborhoods, they often live in the same apartment buildings and attend the same schools. This fact hit home to me when I invited about 90 students from an elementary school in Morrisania, PS 140, to sit in with my Bronx class at Fordham 4 years ago. When I asked my 20 students how many different countries of origin were represented in the class, they came up with 7; when I asked the students from PS 140 how many countries were represented, they came up with 29- representing Africa, the Caribbean, South and Central America, Asia and Europe. This experience gives Bronx residents a capacity for empathy and adaptability that all too few people brought up in homogenous backgrounds possess.

It also contributes to the Bronx's unique legacy of musical creativity. During the 1940's and 1950's a few South Bronx neighborhoods, where African Americans, Puerto Ricans and West Indians moved into neighborhoods largely populated by Jews and Italian Americans, produced more varieties of popular music- including jazz, Afro Cuban music, Mambo, doo wop, salsa, and gospel- than any place in the US. This tradition has continued into today, where artists like Cardi B, French Montana, Romeo Santos and Prince Royce, became global superstars building on the music they first created in Bronx communities. An amazing example of this is the transformation of a Dominican music called bachata by Bronx based artists when people moved from relatively homogeneous Dominican neighborhoods in Washington Heights into multicultural West Bronx neighborhoods in the 1990's. A group of young men who called themselves 'Aventura" started fusing their parents' music with R&B and hip hop and took what they created from street fairs in the Bronx to Madison Square Garden and global tours! The Bronx is the place where different musical forms are fused because the streets are always filled with the music of different nations.

Bronx Cultural Capital Trait Two- the capacity to bridge the gap linguistically and culturally between people of different generations. Because so many Bronx residents are first and second generation immigrants, some coming from countries or regions where people speak languages virtually unknown in the US, young people growing up in the Bronx often have to serve as intermediaries for their parents and grandparents in dealing with health providers, landlords, police and school officials. This responsibility, which often falls upon children in their elementary school years, gives Bronx young people an ability to communicate with their elders, navigate often baffling bureaucracies that their peers from more privileged backgrounds rarely have to cultivate. When you meet young people

from the Bronx, you often find they have a deep connection with grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles, and neighbors who need their dual language skills to get needed services, or deal with crises requiring outside intervention. While this experience puts young Bronxites under high levels of stress, it also makes them more empathetic and more capable serving as a unifying force in multigenerational families.

Bronx Cultural Capital Train Three: a fierce work ethic and a legacy of courage and heroism. The courage and heroism of Bronx residents should not be underestimated. Not only did many survive extreme danger to leave their countries of origin and find their way to the US, many work multiple jobs to support their relatives back home as well as support their families here.

I still remember the immigrant from Mali I interviewed who came to the US at age 17 and managed to acquire enough education to attain a position as a building superintendent in a Bronx elementary school. For his first twenty years in the US, he never worked less than 3 jobs, or slept more than 4 hours a night, because was determined to lift his relatives in Mali out of poverty as he advanced himself, and his children here, up the economic ladder. That experience was not only typical of the African immigrants in the Bronx I have worked with, it has been equally true for immigrants I have met from Mexico and Bangladesh, other countries who have contributed a growing portion of recent Bronx immigrants. Young people in the Bronx growing up in families such as these have models of courage to guide them through the harshest challenges life has to offer. Their strength of character is something people who have not lived the Bronx immigrant odyssey can learn a great deal from. It is my hope that people reading this short essay will start to rethink what they see when they walk, drive, or take public transportation through the Bronx, meet Bronx residents, or develop friendships and working relationships with Fordham students and staff who come from the Bronx.

We have so much to learn from people whose identities have been forged in the Bronx multiracial, multicultural, immigrant communities