

# **Behind Brooklyn Neighborhood's Rebirth, a Woman Who Joined in a Dream**

By Jim Dwyer

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The car coasted down her sister's old block in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and in the front seat Janis Borden glanced out the window and, for an instant, saw not a Monday in December 2016, but an evening in the late 1970s or early 1980s. At the time, Ms. Borden's sister, Carmelia Goffe, had three little sons.

"I used to hate coming over here to babysit for her," Ms. Borden said. "The neighborhood wasn't like this — it was all knocked down."

The street she looked at Monday afternoon had rows of tiny, tidy one-family homes, children spilling along the sidewalks, traffic with legitimate purposes. It is unthinkable in the New York of 2016 that here, and on hundreds of acres of the city in the 1970s and 1980s, the blocks teemed with menace.

Street signs were stolen for their scrap metal value. A falsely named "urban renewal" project bulldozed entire blocks, then left the lots vacant. In the husks of dead buildings, copper pipes were ripped from the walls, the flashing stripped from roofs, banisters wrenched from stairs.

Against the march of decay stood, among others, Ms. Goffe, who grew up in Brownsville and died last week at 68.

On her own, she raised three children while working at various times as a bank teller, subway conductor and train tower operator. And with other barely visible, little-celebrated people and groups, Ms. Goffe helped replace the broken world of 30 to 40 years ago with one that is alive and able to thrive. She was one of the founders of East Brooklyn Congregations, which has built or rebuilt about 5,000 homes for working people of modest means since 1980. (Another founder, Bishop E. L. White, also died this month.)

“They saved East Brooklyn and helped save New York City as surely as any mayor or governor or banker did,” said Michael Gecan, a co-director of the [Industrial Areas Foundation](#), a network of faith and community organizations.

This was not the work of gurus or messiahs or political egomaniacs.

Ms. Goffe was one in a family of four sisters who grew up in the Van Dyke Houses. She attended Thomas Jefferson High School. The family belonged to Pilgrim Baptist Church. The Brownsville of their youth, with its strivers and the lively stretches of Pitkin Avenue, began to give way by the '60s to depopulation and disintegration. But Ms. Goffe did not lose track of what had been, and saw it as the shape of what could be again, Ms. Borden said.

“It was part of her personality,” Ms. Borden said. “We grew up here. We felt safe here.”

The car passed a stately building on Glenmore Avenue, one that seemed to have lasted from an earlier time. “Here was our library,” Ms. Borden said. “We were in there all the time.”

An encounter with an after-school program backed by the Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn gave a focus to Ms. Goffe’s activism. She joined with Doug Shafer and John Reynolds in starting East New York Christian Fellowships, which became a founding member of East Brooklyn Congregations in 1980.

With both vacant land and despair in abundance, East Brooklyn Congregations approached the city with a startling proposal: It would

build single-family houses for about \$50,000 each if the city would give it the land and abate the real estate taxes. The project was called [Nehemiah](#), for a prophet who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

At a time when hardly anyone seemed to have ideas that worked, the Nehemiah homes became a roaring success in Brooklyn and the Bronx. It is hard to imagine the city's renaissance without the vibrant foundation of Nehemiah. (A [video](#) on East Brooklyn Congregations' [website](#), shows the transformation.)

Ms. Goffe bought a Nehemiah home in Brownsville, and became the head of the homeowners association.

"You couldn't possibly pay her for all she did," said Sheila Bennett, an administrator with East Brooklyn Congregations. "She was always on. She was always negotiating."

If fences were mistakenly built over drainage lines, she worked out solutions. When people in an apartment building and Nehemiah owners were getting on each other's nerves, Ms. Goffe opened diplomatic channels.

She sang "Battle Hymn of the Republic" [with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir](#) at President Obama's second inauguration, and ran a weekly circle that is making a giant quilt about Brownsville.

History is not made by speeches or Twitter posts; it is what people create of the world around them with their lives. "Carmelia," Ms. Borden said, "took care of business."