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Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation:
United Bronx Parents, Free Summer Meals, and a Women's Movement for Everyone

The subject of my talk today is a grassroots, women-led organization called United Bronx Parents, also known as UBP, and its work to provide New York City's children with free lunch over the summer of 1971. I'll spend a little time discussing what the group did, and will then consider its relationship to feminism.

UBP was based out of the South Bronx, which was, until very recently, the poorest congressional district in the United States. UBP was founded in 1965 by Evelina Antonetty, a charismatic visionary from Puerto Rico, known for her interracial diplomacy, strategic wisdom, cultural pride, and flamboyant hats. Most members of this resolutely bilingual organization were Puerto Ricans, with some African Americans. They tended to be poor, with little formal education, although two important paid organizers who worked there from the late 1960s until the early 1970s were Jewish and middle-class women (they were also the only two white people). Originally UBP was an all-volunteer group, but by 1967, with various grants from the Urban Coalition, the Ford Foundation, and the Office of Economic Opportunity, they were able to hire some staff. Evelina Antonetty formed the group after the expulsion of her five-year-old son on so-called "disciplinary charges." Her goal was to improve the quality of local public schools, which overwhelmingly discriminated against children of color. Expanding its focus, UBP went on to do things like develop daycare centers and addiction treatment facilities and, as I will discuss, run the city's first-ever free summer meals program in 1971.

Free meals during the summer months began in the United States in 1968, with an amendment to the National School Lunch Program of 1946. The free school meals that low-income families relied upon throughout the school year were no less needed during the summer holidays – as they say, Hunger doesn't take a vacation. In the first couple of years that federal money for summer meals was available, the general cry among food activists in New York City was for the Bureau of School Lunches to run it. This seemed to make sense because many schools had kitchens and cafeteria facilities that sat idle during the summer.

Initially, organizers from UBP tried to convince the State Education Department in Albany to pressure the city's Board of Education to run summer meals. (The State Education Dept was in charge of distributing federal money for summer meals.) No luck. Eventually, an official from Albany said to UBP – "Why don't you do it? *You* run summer meals for the city." So they accepted this enormous task. They knew it would help a lot of people, as welfare benefits were being cut and the ranks of the unemployed were growing throughout the city.

Despite some terrible administrative setbacks, such as the fact that UBP's budget was not confirmed until eight days before the program was set to begin, they were able to feed over 150,000 children a day in all five boroughs, ultimately serving more than 6 million lunches in July and August of 1971. UBP was known as the *sponsor*, and it contracted with ARA Food Services (today Aramark) to be the *vendor*, producing food for all these children. Then the lunches were distributed by volunteers at various sites - daycares, summer camps, churches, block associations. They tended to consist of cold milk, juice, a sandwich, and a fruit. UBP prided themselves on the

quality of food, and indeed the organization received countless letters of praise for how good the lunches were. Site organizers also thanked UBP for the opportunity it gave them to help their community, to meet neighbors, and to enroll more young people in services. They also praised the workers who delivered lunches (-- all people from the South Bronx, as stipulated in UBP's contract with ARA. An important part of summer meals was providing jobs for community people – men and women – who badly needed employment). Being able to provide food for the whole city's children gave UBP enormous power both materially and symbolically. People wrote in saying things like, "If there's anything we can ever do for you, let us know," "Please add us to your mailing list," and "there's a reason why people talk about UBP as the number one anti-poverty agency in this city." Clearly, organizing around food was an important way of building local power and gaining citywide recognition in these years.

If anyone has more questions about the specifics of the summer meal program, we can return to that in Q&A. I now want to discuss the relationship of this organization to feminism. I should first point out the possible danger of anachronism – UBP began in 1965, before the explosion of women's movement activity in the late 1960s and early 70s. So, the feminist discourses that were prevalent a decade later were not available while UBP was picking up steam a few years before.

While this makes it relatively simple to say, "No, UBP did not really see itself as a feminist group," the question of whether feminism can be read into the group's politics retroactively is more complicated. UBP was part of a long tradition of women taking the lead to care for their children where they perceived official institutions and traditionally male leadership falling short. The majority of the volunteers and workers - I would say all but the three lead women - did not

see themselves as political activists (they seem to have associated "political work" with city politicians and the electoral system) but they still knew they were playing a significant role in the community.

Over the course of interviews with a half-dozen people who worked with UBP in its early years, most expressed a sense that *of course* women have a special strength and power – but I never saw it associated with a desire to exclude or work separately from men. I'm sure this has a lot to do with the position of Puerto Rican men in the South Bronx at the time – these men did **not** enjoy the same level of privilege as their white counterparts. They faced racial discrimination from employers and the police, and suffered from drastically high levels of unemployment. Women also suffered from unemployment, in fact at higher rates than men, but under the male breadwinner paradigm that prevailed, this was not generally considered as serious. Puerto Rican men may have derived some social power within their own communities from their machismo, but they were losing far more than they were benefitting from the system at large.

It is my impression that the women of UBP understood their own power, within families and within the community, but did not wish to call attention to it. They cared about getting the work done, helping everyone who needed it. Laly Woodards was a Puerto Rican immigrant to New York who worked for decades as Evelina Antonetty's secretary. She told me a story that successfully captures the prevailing attitude about men within UBP:

> "Sometimes [Evelina] would come to my desk and sit down. One time a man came through the door. – and she says to me 'Laly, when men come through that door, it takes *every-thing* they have because men are *very* proud. They don't want to beg. And when a man comes through that door, we *have* to help them. We have to give them what they need.' People were coming in for all kinds of things... food,

> housing… They needed help with welfare… And I think that when she told me that, I remembered my father, and I remembered my brothers, and I said, God! It just clicked. So after that, men came through the door and I was gonna help. I always say I was blessed to work with a woman of such vision, of such wisdom."

This story also exemplifies Antonetty's immense personal power. As the Executive Director, she set the tone, the style of leadership, the goals, and the organization's moral imperatives. And luckily she was a real visionary with a lot of charisma: it's a bit disturbing sometimes how much organizing momentum can seem to be generated by the charismatic leadership of or two key peolpe. From everyone I have spoken to, and from all evidence I have seen in archives, it has been very difficult to find anyone critical of her. You get the sense that she was in charge – so in that way the organization was quite authoritarian – but there was a tremendous amount of respect, appreciation, and gratitude for her and the work she did in the community.

Whatever can be said about the powerful passion driving Antonetty and other UBP organizers to create food programs, it's important to remember that there were some men involved, too. I think this may be part of why they called themselves "United Bronx Parents": to have called themselves "United Bronx Mothers" would have made the contributions of concerned fathers and other male community members invisible. While I would never want to deny to **overwhelming** burden that women face for childrearing, I am weary of underestimating the number of men who actively cared for their children in more ways than breadwinning.

I think this was particularly true in a context of growing unemployment. It's reasonable to suggest that involvement with UBP not only provided useful skills or occasionally some money, but also a way of contributing– not just to the immediate nuclear unit of spouse and children, but

the much more meaningful "extended Puerto Rican family." I have seen this "extended PR family" reoccur as a theme in UBP literature, evoked for instance in grant applications for programs intended to keep young people out of trouble with the law. For the majority of immigrant and first-generation PR families, the all-American nuclear family structure didn't obtain. Rather than two parents, a mother and father, being the primary caregivers of one or more children, you frequently saw not only parents and offspring but aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins sharing both home spaces and caregiving work.

UBP understood the way that these alternative family arrangements were pathologized both formally and informally. A good example of the formal rejection of the extended family was public housing regulation. Housing projects forbade occupancy of anyone other than the nuclear family – parents and children - and contravening this arrangement was punishable by immediate eviction. On an informal, discursive level, much was being said in "the media" about the "problem" of single-mother households. Seven out of ten homes in the South Bronx were headed by one adult only, and that 98% of these were headed by women in the early 1970s. It seems clear that many women ended up taking on "leadership" roles in their community by virtue of the struggle to survive, and that there were **far *more*** mothers active than fathers. But it is also important to understand that, in the absence of biological fathers, men could still take on important parenting roles.

I don't think this makes the organization any less feminist. I am not arguing that the men involved with UBP had outstanding gender politics, but to work in an organization that was completely dominated by women meant not only that women set the agenda (focusing in this

period primarily on projects to do with young people: education, food, day care, youth job training) but that men were comfortable being subordinate to women superiors, whether this was Evelina Antonetty, Ellen Lurie, the director of education training, or Kathy Goldman, who coordinated parent leadership campaigns and summer meals. This was a hierarchical organization and I have not seen evidence of *any* challenges to the structure of leadership. These three women, each with a very different leadership style, worked confidently and effectively in a mixed-gender atmosphere.

In the end, the question is not so much whether UBP was feminist, but what it can teach those of us interested in a more equal world: for women and men, for children and adults, for racial and economic justice as well as gender. We need to acknowledge that an intersectional approach and a rejection of separatism were never matters of philosophical choice for marginalized communities like this one. We need to appreciate the strong leadership of powerful women who were able to get things done, who accomplished what the city government refused to touch. We need to view the decision to evoke *parenthood* rather than *motherhood* as a testament to the holistic vision of the women at the helm of United Bronx Parents: either the whole community was helped, or nobody was.