

# LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY NOTES

## Childhood in the Bronx

### Contemporary Photographs by Georgeen Comerford and Vintage Photographs from the Collection of The Bronx Institute

This exhibition of sixty art photographs creates an enduring bond between children past and children present. The shared space, the obstacles confronted, the dreams espoused make them brothers and sisters in one family.

Twentieth century events—wars, depression, and domestic strife—have had a profound effect on the lives of those who experienced them. Millions of children have grown up in the Bronx in this century. Poverty and childhood have long been intertwined here. Making do with dignity was necessary for children in the typically large families of the early decades. And today, many Bronx young people must confront both poverty and devastation.

Childhood in the early decades is captured in the vintage photographs, most of which were copied from Bronx family albums. The accompanying descriptions of childhood experiences come from the oral history collection at Lehman College's Bronx Institute. We are indebted to the now-grown Bronx children who vividly recall their early years. Their contributions of words and images allow us a glimpse of what Bronx childhood meant to each of them.

The forty contemporary images by project photographer Georgeen Comerford are dedicated to the contemporary children who were photographed in Bronx schools, playgrounds, on streets, in parks, pools, and facilities of all kinds. Over two dozen Bronx agencies opened their doors to her.

This exhibition reveals the depth of the human spirit, the cornerstone of history. Here, generations are brought together. In the interviews gathered, not only are the earlier days remembered, but many discuss the present. The spark of redevelopment, revitalization, and positive energy has stirred the Bronx public.

### CHILDHOOD IN THE BRONX 1900-1986

"We had more improvements when we moved to the Bronx [1906]. We had steam heat, hot water, a complete bathroom, which we didn't have all the years we were downtown. We were in heaven."

"As a child, I was taught to speak English and Yiddish.... [We] learned very fast, because we knew in order to get along, you had to pick up the language of the country."

"This was an era of penny candies and five-cent ice cream bars and two-cent seltzers. A lot of money that children spent was acquired by returning empty Coke bottles."

"I remember the newspaper headlines when war was declared in 1914.... [Later] they used to come in on trains at the 230th Street freight yard, and they would parade up to Van Cortlandt Park, and they'd be encamped there for a week, or even a month."

"They were hard times.... The lamplighter would come around to light the lamps, and when the war broke out they took down all those posts because they wanted the metal to make guns."

"I remember the armistice when the men came back. They paraded up the Concourse and everybody was standing there with their hats over their hearts and they were playing the national anthem. Then right after the war you could go to the Five and Ten and buy knapsacks that had been used for the gas masks and the kids used these as school bags."

"A twenty-five cent piece of ice—that was the ultimate. It was the large size that was carried on tongs and deposited in your icebox. The water would collect in the pan underneath, and if you forgot to empty it, you'd have a flood all over your kitchen."

"On the corner of Bainbridge Avenue and 198th Street there was a German delicatessen where they sold loose milk, which was taken out of a pail with a dipper, and you had to provide your own pail to carry it home. I was sent off to shop for milk with my pail when I was five years old. I was very proud of myself."

"At sixteen, when you went with a boy, the big thing was to go on the Concourse bus and ride down to 145th Street, and ride back up. It was a nice ride and it cost a nickel, and that was your date. Kids today—at 18, everyone has a car."

"Being a delivery boy was a very choice occupation. The youngsters were screened very carefully. They were trained to





Freddie Schwartz in his wagon on Kingsbridge Road near Poe Park, ca. 1913.

be polite and treat people with respect.... Even now, you read about some [dignitary] who is being honored and he'll say he started off by being a *Bronx Home News* delivery boy."

"Many a night I was out helping [my dad] from 2 a.m. on.... In those days milkmen started out at two o'clock to deliver milk, eggs, butter, and then we would drive home in the horse and wagon and have breakfast.... My father would fill up the cases with milk, go up one apartment house, cross over the roof and come down the other without having to go back to the wagon to load up."

"The Depression hit us very hard. My father died when I was nine.... My mother just couldn't think of leaving [Amalgamated], so they allowed us to live off our investment with the promise to pay it back when things got better. It was the most meaningful thing about the cooperative—to know that you were not thrown out because you couldn't pay your rent."

"Many days we had nothing to eat, because for the first time, my father lost his job.... I would go to the grocery store on Claremont Parkway and get three cans of vegetable soup, milk, bread, butter, and spend about \$1.25."

"My mother had a standard of excellence about some things. She was extremely thrifty. We had an attractive home even though some things came secondhand, but you'd never know it from the way my mother dressed those things up."

"Mother used to cook on a coal range. She used to bake three, maybe five loaves of bread a week for us, and how that woman would figure out the temperature of that oven, I'll never know. Even though those people were not too educated, they knew how to survive."

"The meals [for holidays] were very festive. Mother used to be busy baking and cooking for days. Even the Sabbath was considered a holiday. A woman did an awful lot of cooking and baking. Today they don't cook in a week what a woman used to cook in a day."

"What happened to the Sunday visits with families getting together? Now, all the cars are up in the shopping centers. It's such a loss. Family life is not what it used to be."

"I wore long woolen underwear and a woolen undershirt and black stockings that came up over my knees, and knickerbockers and a shirt with a stiff, Buster Brown collar. And a rather soft, flowing tie."

"I had a dark dress and a white apron, we used to wear to school. And I had rows of curls, and my sister wore curls."

"It was like a big square box, and I remember that to go to the lavatory, they had a shed from the main square box to the outhouse. It was situated way up high and it had a few beautiful elm trees and was surrounded with lilac bushes, and that was P.S. 8."

"Our public school was 80 [today, J.H.S. 80]. To get to school we took a bus. Our parents said, 'We're a big community and we need to get our own school built.' Eventually a school opened.... To this day, there is not an affair that we have, a wedding, a bar mitzvah, that all of us from P.S. 95 don't get up and sing our school song."

"We were explorers. We had plenty of lots to play in—lots meant you built little huts. You asked your mother for a potato, and then you'd roast it—we called them mickeys. This was our great delight."

"The City Island Trolley had a reputation. Just before the car would go over the bridge there was a turn and very often the car would go off the track and everyone would get out and pick it up and put it back on the track and away we would go."

"We played baseball mostly...over where Yankee Stadium is now.... I saw it being built. Those games were nothing like they are now. Now there's so much fighting.... We had all kinds of games we played right on the street—Kick the Wicket, Johnny on the Pony,





Julio, 1977.

Ring-a-Levio, Chinese Handball. Nobody had a bicycle. It was a very poor neighborhood, but none of us knew it."

"We didn't play baseball. It was strictly stickball. A good hit was equivalent to a six-story hit in the air, and when a fellow ran around five sewers, that was a home run."

"I remember walking with my father along [Macomb's Park] when they were making movies of a western and they had a flatbed truck, and this fellow was grinding away with a camera, going backwards and all the horses running. And he had to stop because if the camera went too far it would pick up the apartment houses across the river."

"We used to walk through Crotona Park. And in the summer-time we used to sleep in the park, moms and pops and kids. You'd have your evening meal right in the park, take your pillows and a nice blanket.... You'd get a nice, cool breeze, and the sky would look so pretty. It was really beautiful."

"We would play in the Botanical Gardens, climbing the rocks. We'd go swimming in the Bronx River, sans clothes. It was a very interesting area. You had all the amenities of the city...very close by, and all the things a country child could want."

"We used to swim in the Hudson River. It was fairly decent.... And at Clason Point, they had merry-go-rounds and entertainment. The water there was so clear you could see the bottom."

"I remember the day I got my library card; it was like graduating college."

"The war was still on. There was a block party on 139th Street, and in all windows there were little flags and a candle. And I came up out of the crowd, hundreds of people, and sang 'The White Cliffs of Dover' into a microphone."

"When there was an election, they had bonfires. Neighborhood boys would start collecting scrap lumber about six months before.... We lived on the fifth floor, and when I looked straight

out the window I could see the flames.... Next morning, the tar in the middle of Trinity Avenue at 158th Street had burned down about an inch."

"Neighbors were very decent. Nobody worried about nothin'. We used to stay out 'til two, three in the morning, and sit and talk on the front stoop. It was very comfortable. I was a happy kid in the Bronx."

"Each neighborhood had its own section, yet it was all one, it was all the Bronx. We had a feeling, a community spirit—we were all Bronxites. There was no such thing as getting lost or being in trouble. All you had to do was knock on someone's door. In fact, we never locked our doors. We always put the key under the mat. Those were the good old days."

"I was driving down Southern Boulevard this morning, and standing on the corner are a group of school children. And they're standing amid the rubble of these houses and I said to myself, 'My gosh, what is it like being brought up in the rubble?'.... I wonder how that would have affected me as a child."

"What do you do with rubble-strewn land?.... It occurred to me that if we could take the vegetable [waste] from the Hunts Point Market, and compost it with leaves, we could make a soil good enough to put on the vacant lots, and the people in the communities could turn them into gardens, and take care of them."

"My wife read about the reunion and said, 'We have to go.' When we got there we saw people we hadn't seen in years, and they all looked just the same, even though their hair was gray and thinning, and they'd put on weight.... They were all back in the '50s then, reliving everything."

"Simpson Street has proved one thing. You don't erase friendship. It's not erasable."