

REMARKS BY NANCY BIBERMAN '73

Founder & President, Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation Rutgers School of Law–Newark Alumni Recognition Dinner November 1, 2007

I am deeply honored to receive the Fannie Baer Besser Award for Public Service. Being honored for my public interest work by the law school that quite literally founded the teaching of public interest law is an awesome recognition.

When I decided to go to law school Rutgers was my first and only choice, because of the extraordinary clinical law programs, which were then, and remain today, the school's hallmarks. [I trust you all saw article in yesterday's *New York Times* – yet another validation of Rutgers' pioneering approach to legal education.]

I remember vividly the law professors who taught me — Civil Procedure by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg; Constitutional Law by Frank Askin; Clinical Law by Annamay Sheppard; Contracts by John Lowenthal (who on the side did a seminar on the Alger Hiss trial — in what other law school would you find a course like that)?

Of course the most brilliant star in the Rutgers galaxy was Arthur Kinoy — an unforgettable teacher who brought the law alive, telling gripping stories that unfolded into constitutional law cases. What Arthur really taught was American history through the lens of constitutional law; or maybe he really was teaching constitutional law, but in the process actually taught American history. Whatever he did, Arthur had us all on the edges of our seats waiting to find out what happened next.

I had the privilege of being one of Arthur's work/study research assistants. And one of the real pleasures of being in contact with the law school during the past few months has been getting emails from people@Kinoy.Rutgers.edu. What a wonderful way to bring this brilliant mind and master teacher into the 21st century!

So, I owe Rutgers a lot in the intellectual inspiration department.

Intellectual inspiration alone does not necessarily lead into a life-long career in public service. I segued into what is today called not-for-profit social enterprise after nearly 15 years as a legal services attorney on Manhattan's lower east side. I loved being a legal services lawyer; it nurtured me; gave me courage when I was the only woman in court (that's the way it was not so long ago)! In legal services I learned how to truly listen; to laugh even when things weren't funny; I developed common sense, some modicum of expertise and compassion. I learned that litigating on behalf of poor people meant you were always the under-dog and thus the best prepared and the most persistent.

But while I loved legal services, I eventually found litigation a pretty blunt instrument for tackling complicated social problems associated with poverty. So, I decided to parlay my interest in housing, social welfare and families into community development — creating models of housing and economic development programs designed to tackle entrenched social problems.

It is the theory of social enterprise that creative models developed by the non-profit sector can more nimbly and holistically deal with difficult problems that government and the private sector have failed to adequately address. The Bronx, where I've worked for the past 20 years, is the poster child for problems not adequately addressed, although it is hardly alone, as those of you who live in or near Newark well know.

Every social enterprise is built on a theory of change. In other words, why will your approach – your business model – more successfully advance the prospects for families living poverty than someone else's idea?

Fifteen years ago I founded the Women's Housing & Economic Development Corporation — WHEDCo — premised on the theory helping families out of poverty required at the outset using a common vocabulary – the same nouns and adjectives – as we use in the middle class. So we began by applying that language to building homes for low-income families that were beautiful and uplifting and in neighborhoods that offered the very same infrastructure and amenities we all insist on in our own communities, and for our own families.

This theory came from no more scholarly a place than my own experience as a mother, viscerally understanding the importance to any parent that our kids are safe and well cared for when we're not around; that they have the best education, get help in school when they need it, and are stimulated by music, art, clubs, sports and the wider world. Between my home and the neighborhood where I work – 20 minutes by car – I became increasingly aware that two languages were being spoken and they weren't English and Spanish; they were the language of social class. We in the middle class have homes and not housing; doctors not clinics; therapists not social workers; tutors and not special education.

Whenever I speak about WHEDCo's work, I keep my mind on my own community, a nice suburb that borders the Bronx. But it might as well be another country. Where I work, more than half all high school students drop out of school; teen pregnancy and parenting rates are rising and 60% of all babies are born into poverty. Where I live more than 90% of high school students – in public schools – go on to four-year colleges. Teen pregnancy and parenting is barely a blip on the radar screen, and yes, a number of families have moderate incomes.

It's not that middle class kids in neighborhoods like mine don't act out in class, don't drink, do drugs or have sex before they're ready. They do it all. But they have parents with the money and time to help them. We catch them when they fall, pick them up and set them back on track, sometimes over and over again.

This is what poor kids living in places like the South Bronx don't have, and this is why WHEDCo's work is so vital. We look at kids who fail and don't see sociopaths; we see them as our own, who have precious few adults at all levels – policy makers, teachers, community leaders, role models and parents – who are really watching out for them.

So, how to start creating a common vocabulary for both ends of the income spectrum? First, we build beautiful homes, places where we could see ourselves living. And that means paying attention to every detail of a building's construction in the same way that we would the renovation of your kitchens. Money is not the issue here; building beautiful doesn't require building expensive. It requires a common vocabulary.

A nurturing home is literally a foundation for a good life. We all know that. Yet living in substandard housing and frequently doubled-up is often the only way to pay the rent. The urban trifecta of crowding, noise and danger can too often lead to chronic mental fatigue, to stress, depression, abuse in the home and violence in the streets. A beautiful home – even 800 square feet – goes a long way toward restoring some inner peace, which can then radiate outward.

It was these ideas that infused the creation of Urban Horizons more than a decade ago, the building in which WHEDCo operates economic development programs and provides elegant apartments for 132 families. We built Urban Horizons in the burnt-out ruin of a city hospital abandoned in the 1970's, by far the most visible symbol of urban decay on the Bronx skyline, restoring it to its original beauty through a patchwork of funding from government and private sources.

WHEDCo's newest venture in construction, 178 apartments, beautiful, affordable, entirely green and wired for broadband internet will open its doors at the end of 2008. The buildings will have green roofs, a forest of vegetation and a public sculpture garden. Beyond reducing the building's carbon emissions and energy costs, building green for us is also grounded in research showing that proximity to nature – to trees and grass – restores the very psychological resources likely to be depleted in the daily struggle to get by.

WHEDCo has also created the building blocks of opportunity: from Head Start, to after school arts, sports, academics, fitness and health. WHEDCo trains women to start successful and profitable microenterprises caring for children in their homes. This network of 180 businesswomen is now a decade old, cares for over 1000 children, and collectively earned over \$6 million last year. These businesses are infinitely expandable, as is the demand for childcare; and these family-supporting businesses can never be exported.

Our commercial kitchen incubates small food manufacturing businesses – empanadas and vegan cookies are our latest incubator products, generating money for the businesses and creating jobs.

I invite anyone interested in WHEDCo's social enterprise model to pay us a visit in the Bronx- just a subway stop from Yankee Stadium where the Yankees are hosting our 15th anniversary benefit in a couple of weeks; you are all invited!

Eliminating poverty in the Bronx – in urban America – requires social ventures with theories of change that engage whole families and ripple out into larger communities that eventually, and hopefully, blend into our own.

Every one of us here this evening has the capacity for public service, to speak a common vocabulary that articulates the values of true equality of opportunity. This is what my Rutgers legal education instilled in me.

Thank you again for recognizing my work with this wonderful honor.