

CARMEN NIEVES, BRIDGEPORT, CT

Resilient Bridgeport Community Member
South End Neighborhood Revitalization Zone President



Carmen Nieves in action (left)

Tell us about your experience with resilience?

I was born and raised in Stamford and have only been in Bridgeport about 15 years although it feels like a lifetime. In 1998 I lost my job a result of merger and restructuring, then my home. It is sheer chance that brought me to Bridgeport. Bridgeport is now is where I hang my hat and my heart. I know the struggle of community, working in poor conditions trying to make ends meet, so I am empathic to that.

There are many steps to my journey and civic engagement. When I moved to the South End, I was looking to engage in a Community Council, but we did not have one. The closest was the South End Neighborhood Revitalization Zone. In truth, I really didn't understand the mission and least of all how to take action. I was coming to meetings, but not many others were. I complained so much that I was challenged to put my money where my mouth was. Later I became the interim secretary, and president the following year. I am now serving my second term.

During my first term when we learned about Rebuild by Design, I started just by attending and learning. Being part of the community conversations and helping the project move from research to implementation, I felt very welcomed and needed. That motivated me to stay connected.

“ Bridgeport is now is where I hang my hat and my heart. ”

What part of the project excites you the most?

Through the work of Neighborhood Revitalization, I have had the opportunity to be part of its leadership, work on beautification, development projects, signage projects, sidewalk projects, meeting local businesses and stakeholders and work on Rebuild by Design. I am looking forward to moving from plan to action!

What lessons have you learned from being on a Rebuild by Design project advisory group?

I have learned that visuals works, we all have ideas and local expertise is critical. When we work together we can do better work. Just as we emphasize that experts can learn from community, we can also learn a lot from experts.

What has been your biggest surprise?

My biggest surprise is the realization that progress takes time and that we as a community have a responsibility to be informed, stay engaged, be positive and work toward the greater good. There are so many people, groups, rules, and moving parts to any projects. The understanding that if you make one single change, no matter how big or small, has a ripple effect on the outcome, so it's important to get as much right as possible.

What has been the biggest project challenge?

What I have found to be the most challenging is working with the City while simultaneously managing the expectations of our constituency. The perception and reality from the inside looking out can be demotivating and exhausting. Learning to understand and navigate systems and processes, staying with it and finishing a project no matter what it is creates success. When our constituency doesn't see immediate visual change, they attribute it to failure and not work in progress. Work happens in phases. Resources, timing, funding, zoning, and permitting are like puzzle pieces. The project advisory group has really done a great job of trying to inform, be inclusive and listen to people's ideas.

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What community engagement tactic worked best?

The Resilient Bridgeport team has done a lot of great things. Highlights include the project website, and providing refreshments and incentives to encourage community members to attend meetings. The best thing is having visuals outside of the project boards and models. The pictures of other projects and what the project area actually looks like now have really made it a lot clearer for me.

Fun Fact: I don't look it, but I have a daughter's age 30, 27 and 24 years old and 4 grandchildren.

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<http://www.rebuildbydesign.org/our-work/sandy-projects>

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