

Justice for the SouthBronx: Activist Alexie Torres-Fleming

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [July 28, 2009](#) issue

After moving out of the Bronx neighborhood where she grew up and finding a corporate job in Manhattan, Alexie Torres-Fleming decided it was time to return to the Bronx. She got involved in neighborhood issues, and in 1994 she founded Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice. The community organizing group works on environmental and social issues. Last month the group celebrated one of its major successes—the opening of Concrete Plant Park, a seven-acre greenway in the South Bronx.

What people and institutions shaped you?

I was primarily shaped by the Franciscan fathers of Holy Cross parish in the South Bronx. I grew up very much grounded in Franciscan spirituality—especially with regard to simple living and the idea that church is not a place to hide and pray to make it into heaven, but a place where you learn to deal with the hell that so many people experience.

My parents came from Puerto Rico. I am a child of a family that suffered tremendous poverty. My father couldn't finish school because he didn't have enough money for shoes. He was a deli man and a maintenance man in the public housing projects. My mother was active in the church.

My dad worked hard to make sure that we could survive and have a good life. But in order to do that, he suffered great indignities. When he was a deli man, his bosses didn't want the Puerto Rican employees to be seen. He was never allowed to come out front. I watched my dad wash the urine off the elevator and stairwell walls where men who drank too much would relieve themselves. I watched him do that with tremendous dignity—all the dignity you could have washing urine off walls. That formed me.

What was the South Bronx like when you were growing up?

It was the 1970s, the time of what is known as the Burning of the Bronx. The South Bronx was decimated by public policies that closed down police stations, fire departments, schools and hospitals. The idea was that “planned shrinkage” would spur urban renewal. No thought was given to the poorest of the poor who lived here. Building owners and store owners would burn down their own properties to collect the insurance. I was taught that I would be successful only if I could escape this hell.

Did you escape?

In my 20s I worked at various jobs in Manhattan and made good money for my age. But it began to be clear to me that I didn't fit. I really thank God for that. To allay my guilt I did charity work. I would go down to welfare hotels and work with children—take them to the movies, for example.

It wasn't bad work, and I did it with love. But what I learned later was that if you don't attack the systems that put people in such conditions, then you help perpetuate them. It is comfortable to make a nice turkey dinner for people at Thanksgiving; it is more difficult to ask why people are hungry in the richest country on earth. How do you begin to attack the unjust economic, education and health systems that leave people poor? I didn't really understand that until I started to do volunteer work at the Franciscan parish where I had grown up.

What were the Franciscans doing?

The Franciscans had organized a group trying to deal with the crack houses in the neighborhood. The fathers had organized a small demonstration in front of one of the houses. We didn't really know how to be activists, but we wanted to pray in front of those places and make known the darkness that was there.

A couple hundred people showed up one Sunday afternoon. We prayed and went home. A week or two later drug dealers torched the church in retaliation. That was a wake-up moment for me. What have I done? I wondered. Charity work didn't get me in this kind of trouble.

Eventually we decided to stage another march. That wasn't received well by some people. Death threats started to come in, and our pastor had to wear a bulletproof vest for a while. On the one hand, we were afraid that people might be hurt in the march. On the other hand, we were afraid that it would be a waste of time and no one would show up.

On a beautiful November day I walked down the block to find 1,200 people ready for the second march. It was such an extraordinary moment: in the crowd were single moms pushing baby strollers, young teens, elderly people, immigrants—all of them people that I had been told were powerless. And my father—the man who washed urine off walls—was there. None of the people that I worked with on Madison Avenue showed up. It was like God said to me, “This is what real power is.”

In that moment of grace, I knew that God was calling me away from the life that I was living. A few months later I quit my job and moved back to the South Bronx to start Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice.

What led you to youth ministries?

I felt that the paradigm for traditional youth services—the up-and-out vision of success—had failed. It has not necessarily made our urban communities any better. I wanted to experiment with a different way. I call it the theology of urban youth liberation. We are free ultimately in binding ourselves to each other. While that might seem like a paradox, it is really the way of Jesus. God bound himself to the poorest of the poor, and in that he redeemed us. The theology of the incarnation mandates that you must place yourself in what you want to redeem. You cannot redeem what you will not assume.

So we are not building up young people so they can move out of this community. We are here to stay and rebuild our own community. We do that through community organizing and taking on the systems that have harmed our community. Not just through community service. Not just through arts and crafts. Not just through keeping kids off the street.

We work on forming young people and residents to be voices for peace and justice by taking action in our communities. We act on issues of environmental justice, housing reform, education reform, police reform and immigration reform. We do service, and we make sure that people who are hungry eat—because in order to work for your own liberation you have to be free from hunger and have a place to sleep.

What are you most proud of?

The legacy I hope to leave to my community is a restored Bronx River. I grew up in the Bronx River Housing Projects, and I never knew that there was a river literally a

block behind my house. It was a highly industrialized area. There was one park along the river that had a gas plant buried underneath it and was adjacent to a highway. There was also an abandoned concrete plant.

Over the past ten years we have struggled to reclaim the river. The river has had 48 cars and 10,000 tires removed from it. The site of the concrete plant is being made into a waterfront park. The \$11 million that had been planned for a truck route nearby is going to be used to create a greenway up and down the river. We struggled with our local energy company to arrange an appropriate cleanup—we got all the contamination removed, the ground water treated, and six feet of clean soil above it. The park will now have new access points. One seven-acre park opened last month, and a second will open in 2012.

While I can point to the creation of beautiful places, I think the bigger transformation has been in people. What was passed on to me was a legacy of powerlessness. All of that is part of the darkness that doesn't belong to God.

When a young person—when a generation, including my own children—can be healed from feeling powerless, can believe that they have the power to determine the conditions of their own lives—that is a lasting legacy. I think that is God's work.