



Neighborhood Leadership

MEET THE 2023 COHORT

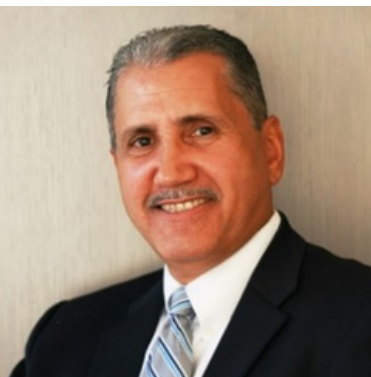
We are excited to introduce the 2023 Neighborhood Leadership (NL) cohort! These participants will use New York City as their classroom to explore how they can influence meaningful change and address complex challenges across NYC's commercial corridors. By the end of the program, participants will have developed a deeper understanding of policy and decision-making in the city, the skills to lead change in their organizations and communities, and a network of engaged and influential alumni to support them in reaching their goals.



Aarti Mehta

PROJECT MANAGER, PERCH ADVISORS

Aarti Mehta contributes a diverse portfolio of inclusive community engagement, public space planning, qualitative research design, and analysis. She seeks to shape policy and build relationships with the community to help connect and learn from one another. Aarti strongly advocates for place governance and improving quality of life throughout her work. She understands the nuances of addressing complex ideas in meaningful ways and enjoys collaborating with public, peer, non-profit, and community partners. Born and raised in India, Aarti's relationship with the importance of place was the impetus for shaping the built environment profession. Her diverse interests and experiences led her to collaborate in planning for mini plazas at Times Square Alliance Business Improvement District in New York City.



Alberto Valentin

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WOODHULL COMMUNITY DISTRICT MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION
DBA GRAHAM AVE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT**

Alberto has been the Executive Director for the Graham Ave Business Improvement District / Woodhull Community District Management Association since April 1, 2021. He has been focused on rebuilding the Graham Avenue commercial district, which is heavily Hispanic. A native of New York City, Alberto was born and raised in Brooklyn.



Beny Castro [in](#)

PROJECT MANAGER, CORONA PLAZA, QUEENS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Beny serves the Latino community as a liaison between small businesses and government agencies. He provides business resources, organizes placemaking events, and collaborates with other community-based organizations. He started at Queens Economic Development Corporation as a business counselor in 2021, helping business owners and entrepreneurs with grants, loans, and other valuable small business resources. Fluent in English and Spanish, Beny served over 200 businesses throughout the commercial corridor as a marketer & liaison for the Sunnyside District Management Association (17-21). While there, he was honored with an NYC Proclamation For Outstanding Leadership in the Latino Community. Beny holds an Associate's Degree in Business Administration from LaGuardia Community College where he received the Winston Davidson Memorial Award For Outstanding Service To the College Community.



Connor Hassett [in](#)

COMMERCIAL REVITALIZATION PROGRAM MANAGER, BRIDGE STREET DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Conor Hassett is the Commercial Revitalization Program Manager for Bridge Street Development Corporation. Spearheading the AvenueNYC grant for Crown Heights, Conor provides hyper-specific technical assistance and guidance to local businesses and merchant associations. Prior to joining BSDC, Conor worked as a Relationship Manager for Pacific Community Ventures, creating lasting mentorships between 200+ small business owners and a pool of 6,000 volunteer expert advisors. As a public relations consultant to the commercial real estate industry from 2016-2021, he advised leasing and marketing teams for 13M sf of manufacturing and walkable downtown redevelopments across the New York Metro Area. Conor graduated from Hamilton College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications.



Cuthbert Onikute [in](#)

PROGRAM MANAGER, FLATBUSH NOSTRAND JUNCTION BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Cuthbert has several years of experience in social impact and leadership as a program manager, director, startup founder, and CEO for organizations, institutions, and campaigns. Cuthbert holds an MSc in Urban Planning from the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia University and a BA in International Studies, History, and African American Studies from the University of Buffalo – SUNY. He has worked on community and economic development in New York City, India, Mali, and Guinea. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, and has lived and worked in several countries, including France and Guinea. A fluent French speaker, Cuthbert is also learning Portuguese and French Creole. Lastly, Cuthbert is a proud Eagle Scout of troop 193 in Jamaica, New York.



D'Arcy Sampson

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, TIMES SQUARE ALLIANCE

D'Arcy is a marketing professional and public space enthusiast with experience at several NYC Business Improvement Districts. She is the Director of Marketing at the Times Square Alliance, where she leads marketing and digital content strategy, tourism outreach, stakeholder support, and neighborhood branding initiatives. Before Times Square, D'Arcy worked as the Director of Marketing and Events at the Union Square Partnership a few blocks downtown. A Virginia native, D'Arcy moved to New York in 2017 after completing her Bachelor's in Urban and Environmental Planning at the University of Virginia.



Destany Batista

DIRECTOR OF STOREFRONT ENGAGEMENT, ALLIANCE FOR DOWNTOWN NEW YORK

Destany Batista, the Director of Storefront Engagement at the Alliance for Downtown New York, was born and raised in Queens. A graduate of the Macaulay Honors College, she received a degree in Urban Studies and worked for various elected officials and offices during and after college. She has worked extensively at organizing communities and merchants in Northeastern Queens but has also conducted similar work in some areas of Manhattan and the Bronx. At the Alliance for Downtown New York, Destany works directly with over 1,000 storefronts in Lower Manhattan and develops programs for small businesses. Destany was recently listed in Crains' New York's "20 in their 20's".



Dirk McCall de Paloma

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SUNNYSIDE SHINES BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Dirk McCall de Paloma is the Executive Director of Sunnyside Shines Business Improvement District. Previously he worked for the Queens County District Attorney, Bronx Borough President, Manhattan Borough President, and Councilmember Alan Jay Gerson. He was Executive Director of the Bronx Community Pride Center and the Greenwich Village - Chelsea Chamber of Commerce. Dirk has lived in Astoria for 30 years. Originally from Georgia, Dirk moved to NYC in 1991 to pursue a Ph.D. in Political Science at Columbia University. He married his husband Andres in Colombia in 2021 and is currently experiencing the immigration system firsthand. Dirk has been involved with immigrant communities in most of his positions, especially with the Latino communities. He speaks some Spanish and regularly travels to Colombia.



Iman Almarwani [in](#)

AVENUE NYC PROGRAM MANAGER, MORRIS PARK BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Iman works to support the merchant community. Iman moved from Sweden to New York on December 24, 2021, and before that, she worked in Sweden as a lecturer in social orientation for Region Värmland. Iman also worked in her homeland, Yemen, as Operation Officer for the Community Livelihood Projects in Sanaa. Iman has a Bachelor's Degree in English Literature from Sana'a University. She also has a diploma in Film Industry from Karlstad University and advanced university courses in Business Administration, English for International Students, and Intercultural Studies.



Isabella Conway [in](#)

MARKETING AND PROGRAMMING MANAGER, HUDSON YARDS HELL'S KITCHEN ALLIANCE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

At Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen Alliance Business Improvement District, Isabella curates public art projects and community programming in Bella Abzug Park and throughout the district. Isabella holds a joint Master's degree in urban studies from the University of Copenhagen, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Universität Wien, and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Her joint Master's degree is a result of her participation in the Erasmus Mundus program 4CITIES. This immersive, experiential urban studies education overcomes geographic and disciplinary boundaries while embracing the diversity of actors, forces, and contexts shaping the 21st-century city. Isabella values space as a critical lens used to analyze urban social issues. Isabella looks forward to learning more about the city, its challenges, and innovative solutions from her peers in this year's cohort.



Jonathan Marable [in](#)

BUSINESS SUPPORT SPECIALIST, BROOKLYN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Jonathan Marable is a Business Support Specialist with the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce. He serves small businesses primarily located in Central Brooklyn but will focus increased efforts on Ocean-Hill Brownsville. Jonathan previously worked in City Council with Councilmember Laurie Cumbo, the Atlantic Avenue BID as a Neighborhood 360 Fellow, Pratt Institute's Spatial Analysis and Visualization Initiative, and FEMA. He received a Bachelor's degree in Geography from Dartmouth College and a Master's degree in City and Regional Planning from Pratt Institute. His graduate thesis focused on strategies employed by small businesses to respond to neighborhood change.



Kelly Carroll [in](#)

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ATLANTIC AVENUE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Kelly Carroll is the Executive Director of the Atlantic Avenue Business Improvement District and serves ethnic legacy businesses and newly-arrived immigrant businesses hailing from the Middle East. She is an award-winning community outreach specialist and writer. Previously, she served as the Director of Advocacy and Community Outreach at the Historic Districts Council. Working alongside communities, she was instrumental in the designation of several New York City historic districts and landmarks. She also teaches historic preservation courses at NYU School of Professional Studies Center for Publishing and Applied Liberal Arts. She is a Board Director at the Art Deco Society of New York. She holds an M.S. in Historic Preservation from Columbia University.



Kurt Cavanaugh [in](#)

VICE PRESIDENT OF PLANNING, STREETScape AND CAPITAL PROJECTS, FLATIRON NOMAD PARTNERSHIP

Kurt manages the daily operations of the Flatiron Public Plazas and seasonal open streets, including NoMad Piazza, the Partnership's Public Art Program, and everything related to bike and pedestrian safety. He oversees the district-wide horticulture program and works closely with the Partnership's Field Operations, Marketing, and Economic Development Departments on strategic initiatives, advocacy, and planning. Kurt has a B.S. from Guilford College and an M.S. from the University of North Carolina. He has traveled extensively through arguably the world's most bike-friendly region, Scandinavia, and is fond of traveling around cities on two wheels. He lives in Greenpoint, enjoys running, and closely follows baseball and the English Premier League.



Lina Alfonso Gutiérrez [in](#)

PROGRAM MANAGER, GRANTS AND SERVICES, LOWER MANHATTAN CULTURAL COUNCIL

As Program Manager of Grants and Services, Lina works with Manhattan's immigrant populations, including the Latinx community. Lina is an Innovative Cultural Advocacy Fellow of the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute and an Advocacy Leadership Institute Fellow with the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture. She has been a panelist for the New York City Parks Foundation, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the New York State Council on the Arts, and New York City's Awesome Foundation. Lina speaks Spanish and has a Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts and Economics from Andes University in Colombia and a Master's degree in Arts Administration from Columbia University.



Melisa Coburn [in](#)

DEPUTY DIRECTOR, PARK SLOPE FIFTH AVENUE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Originally from Texas, Melisa has lived in Paris and San Francisco in addition to New York. She has a background in writing and editing and has contributed to Parents.com, TimeOutNY, My Generation, and Curious Jane Magazine, among others. For the last several years, she's been Brooklyn-based and in positions focusing on community-building in various ways. She's worked at Curious Jane, an all-girls summer camp and in-print maker magazine, and at Lakeside in Prospect Park, where she worked on programming and partnerships with a vital communications element. She is currently the Deputy Director of the Park Slope Fifth Avenue Business Improvement District. She's a mom of two and an avid consumer of queso.



Paula Roxana (Roxy) Tico

PROGRAM MANAGER, CENTRAL ASTORIA LOCAL DEVELOPMENT COALITION

Paula Roxana (Roxy) Tico is the Program Manager at the Central Astoria Local Development Coalition. In this capacity, she is responsible for implementing cultural and event programming on the Steinway Street commercial corridor and in various parks in the greater Astoria area. Roxy is also responsible for liaising with the businesses on the Steinway corridor, providing up-to-date information on various programs and assistance on any problems and issues they may be encountering. She holds a Bachelor's degree in History from Hunter College with a minor in Spanish and speaks Romanian and Spanish.



Sean Lewin [in](#)

OPERATIONS ASSOCIATE, HUDSON SQUARE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

As a born and raised New Yorker, Sean has always been fascinated with the City's public realm. When he left college, his goal was to become a lawyer. He spent roughly three years working in the Legal department at WeWork until the company collapsed. At that point, Sean moved his focus back to the City and how he could improve it. He's been with the Hudson Square Business Improvement District for a year and a half and feels like he is impacting my district.



Sierra Brown [in](#)

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS, LONG ISLAND CITY PARTNERSHIP

Sierra serves as the Director of Marketing & Communications at Long Island City Partnership (LICP). At LICP, she oversees various focus areas, including campaigns, membership, sponsorship sales, social media, content production, and website development. Sierra joined LICP with a desire to localize experiences representing a global roster of tourism, economic development, and hospitality clients, overseen while working at various public relations and destination marketing agencies. Sierra is passionate about outer-borough development, equitable tourism, and support for arts & culture initiatives. She graduated from Spelman College and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. In her free time, Sierra enjoys bicycling and off-Broadway theatre. She is also a consummate traveler who has visited 30+ countries and countless cities.



Stefanie Alleyne [in](#)

DIRECTOR OF SMALL BUSINESS AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, UNITED WAY OF NEW YORK CITY

Stefanie Alleyne is the Director of Small Business and Workforce Development at United Way of New York City (UWNYC). She holds a Master's in Social Work, majoring in Community Organizing, Planning, and Development from the Silberman School of Social Work. Before joining UWNYC, Stefanie was a Senior Community Liaison for the New York City Council and an Outreach Liaison for the New York City Charter Revision Commission. Her earlier career involved video production, editing, and government relations.



Viarlenis (Vivi) Acosta [in](#)

DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS SERVICES AND SPECIAL EVENTS, GREATER JAMAICA DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

As a Dominican American born in Brooklyn, Vivi is bilingual in English and Spanish. Her career focus has been community-centered, and she has accomplished this across sectors. Vivi began in hospitality, working in a local bakery, and eventually became an international training manager for Shake Shack with stints in the Middle East and Europe. She returned to school, earning a Master's in Public Administration which she utilized in her small business assistance work at Cypress Hills Development Corporation through her present employer, Greater Jamaica Development Corporation. Community development is her calling, and she loves helping businesses navigate the road to success.