



Photos provided by Norma Silva

Trailblazer

Alumna Norma Silva Dedicates Post-Retirement Life to Service

Ten years ago, Norma Silva '84 envisioned a different pace for her retirement than most of her peers. After retiring as a New York City special education teacher, Silva had no plans to slow down.

The Yonkers resident adopted a full-time mission to volunteer in her local community, essentially spending between 30 and 50 hours a week between 15 different organizations. "I'm not the sort of person to stay at home or play cards," said Silva, who admits she gets easily bored.

Nearly a year into her retirement, Super Storm Sandy hit – catapulting Silva into a crusade for many residents impacted by the storm. For 20 months, she worked with a team of a dozen other full-time volunteers through Habitat for Humanity, assisting nearly 350 Breezy Point families whose homes

were destroyed by flood and fire.

It was a pivotal realization for Silva of the value of service. "It's people that fuel me. Seeing the devastation in that community, and putting myself there to help where it was needed mattered to them," said Silva.

Volunteering is in Silva's blood. She remembers watching her mother, born in Puerto Rico, start a nutrition program in Yonkers, addressing a vital health need for the Hispanic community. Silva similarly finds healthy living and the environment important components of the causes she champions. Through the Westchester Parks Foundation, she has worked to rebuild and maintain trails – an investment which became increasingly crucial during the pandemic when many of her urban neighbors sought safe refuge and outdoor activity.

Also, thanks in part to Silva's

tireless advocacy and pressure on Yonkers government officials, a water tower, neglected for three decades, underwent a \$4 million renovation in 2018. "The water was supplied to low income neighborhoods. I wasn't going to let it be ignored."

Silva takes pride that her alma mater is an institution dedicated to a mission of service. When she found Mercy College, she was raising two children, struggling financially, and in the midst of a divorce. Earning her bachelor's degree in behavioral science and education, she put herself back on the path to financial stability.

"Mercy gave me so much," said Silva. As a first-generation college student, Silva said that for her and her siblings it was never a question that college would be a part of their plans. "I felt Mercy helped me to be the most prepared person to handle students with special needs." In the almost 40 years since her own graduation, she has rarely missed giving an annual gift, seeing it as her small way to pay it forward for what she received. "Some may say \$50 is not much, but all of us have the power to make a difference if we do it together," said Silva.



Silva has received numerous citations and awards for her community work, but for the grandmother of eight, it's not about the recognition or plaques to hang on a wall. Her simple philosophy is just to show up. "It takes one person to make a difference. Sometimes you just have to step in and do something."