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TOXICOLLEGE

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Bronx Community College (BCC) lies in the poorest congressional district in the United States. In fall 2023, the BCC student body, was 52% Latino, 38% African American, and 56% female.¹ Those students face unusual challenges. The Bronx has the highest rate of asthma of any county in the United States² and is one of only five counties in the United States where single mothers head more than thirty percent of households.³ Although it promises social mobility to its students, BCC exemplifies the injustice in New York, the state with the most segregated schools and the worst income inequality.⁴

Hired as a Spanish lecturer at BCC in January 1999, I immediately noticed that the hallway clocks were wildly out of sync. The clocks were removed shortly afterwards and never replaced. My office ventilator stank of urine and emitted neither heat nor cool air. A physical plant technician told me that it could not be fixed. The long-ignored maximum occupancy signs in the classrooms were also removed. Sometimes students had to stand or sit on a radiator in class because administrators would over-tally my classes, without my consent, to as many as forty students. BCC, then under the leadership of Carolyn Grubbs Williams, was in a state general disrepair and dysfunction.

In an essay published in the BCC Senate newsletter, André Hurni, BCC Campus Facilities and Planning Officer, detailed several unmet needs at BCC:

Screams for grass seed, for adequate air supply in the classrooms, for working elevators, for potable water in buildings, for fire exit doors, for heating in the winter and cooling in the summer, for lights, for more security at night, for fences, parking spaces, pigeon guards, paving, trash receptacles, toilet seats, floor tile; the chorus of screams is loud and clear... It creates a powerful symphony of anger and despair... Here's one more scream, this one primal and final: Did you know that there are 2658 air filters in our buildings and that they have to be changed every three months?⁵

Without the resources or manpower to fully remedy the safety and environmental hazards at BCC, Hurni faced choices that recalled triage in a war-zone hospital. The BCC Physical Plant Services had shrunk from 256

¹ *Data Bulletin*. Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Bronx Community College (February 2024): 1.

² Levene, Rachel, et. al. "The ongoing impact of COVID-19 on asthma and pediatric emergency health-seeking behavior in the Bronx, an epicenter." *American Journal of Emergency Medicine* 43 (May 2021): 109-114.

³ Feuer, Alan. "Single Mothers, Far From Alone." *New York Times*. (8 January 2004): B1.

⁴ Cohen, Danielle. *NYC School Segregation*. UCLA Civil Rights Project. (June 2021): 3.

⁵ Hurni, Andre. "Thoughts of the Campus Architect." *BCC Senator*. (May 1999): 7-8.

employees to just 113 within a decade. Chronic absenteeism among custodians had compounded the maintenance problems.⁶

In May 2000, the Gould Memorial Library Rotunda was closed because of falling ceiling tiles. And air quality problems persisted, as noted in the minutes of a BCC Senate subcommittee: “In Tech One the ducts are completely dirty. Filters must be installed on the ceiling, covering the supply registers. The filters are installed on all registers in all rooms. These filters are also exchanged four times a year. This is very cumbersome work.”⁷ The same minutes also detail similar problems in what was then the Gould Student Center (GSC):

In the GSC the ducts are completely filthy. Recently a cloud of black soot was blown from the ducts onto the food in the kitchen. Several hundred dollars worth of food had to be thrown out. Andre [Hurni] reported that he has requested duct cleaning from DASNY (Dormitory Authority of the State of New York), but that he does not have a response yet. The cafeteria is presently running without a ventilation system, a code violation.

Near my office on the second floor of Colston Hall, a water fountain basin had a coppery sheen indicative of water pipe corrosion. After summer or winter breaks, the water would briefly flow copper-colored into the men’s bathroom sinks before turning transparent. In fall 2003, the drinking fountains at BCC were sheathed in plastic without advance notice. Shortly afterwards, Professor Martin Pulver, the BCC Environmental Health and Safety Officer, informed the campus community in a memo:

About four years ago it was noticed that, at times, the water leaving the faucets in several laboratories in Meister Hall had a pale blue tinge. The problem was immediately reported to the Dormitory Authority (DASNY) engineers on campus. They responded by hiring an independent water testing company to come onto the campus and perform tests at many locations. Some of these tests indicated higher than acceptable concentrations of dissolved metals. I reported these results to Vice President of Administration and Finance, Mary Coleman, and recommended that all of the locations that had metal concentrations higher than those specified by the New York State Department of Health be shut off. The V.P. agreed, and all of those drinking fountains were turned off and remain so today.⁸

Pulver did not specify which heavy metals had been detected nor did he explain why it had taken four years to turn off the water fountains at BCC.

Between November 1998 and May 1999, two independent water testing companies had evaluated the water quality at BCC, finding that concentrations of lead at eight buildings exceeded the maximum contaminant level (MCL), or legal regulatory limit, of 0.015 milligrams per liter (mg/L).⁹ A water sample from the second-floor drinking fountain in Bliss Hall had a lead concentration of 0.133 mg/L, nearly nine times the regulatory limit. Because lead causes neurological impairment, reproductive damage, and hypertension, the target contamination level (TCL) for lead, or the level at which action must be taken, according to EPA guidelines, is any amount above zero.

In Meister Hall, Colston Hall, and Havemeyer Annex, copper concentrations in water samples exceeded the MCL (1.3 mg/L) by as much as 18.4 mg/L.¹⁰ Excessive copper ingestion can cause liver, kidney, and brain damage. Moreover, water samples taken at seven buildings had concentrations of iron that exceeded the TCL of iron (0.3 mg/L) at by as much as 5.90 mg/L. Although iron is essential for red cell production, excessive intake

⁶ Minutes of the BCC Senate Sub-Committee on Space, Facilities and Physical Plant (27 March 2000).

⁷ Minutes of the BCC Senate Sub-Committee on Space, Facilities and Physical Plant (27 June 2000).

⁸ Pulver, Martin. “Campus Drinking Water.” Received by The BCC Campus Community (October 10, 2003).

⁹ “Letter Report. Limited Water Quality Evaluation. Bronx Community College.” GZA GeoEnvironmental of New York, Case File No.161186, (October 18, 2002)

¹⁰ “Letter Report. Limited Water Quality Evaluation.” GZA GeoEnvironmental of New York. File No. 161186 (October 18, 2002): 2.

can disrupt cell metabolism in the heart, liver, and central nervous system, and even cause organ failure. To reduce heavy metal concentrations, the BCC physical plant flushed out the water pipes regularly, placing considerable demands on its employees. A pilot water filtration system that was installed in Meister Hall failed to lower heavy metal concentrations below regulatory limits. Therefore, BCC switched to bottled drinking water.

In spring 2007, the BCC Health and Safety Committee, newly formed by faculty and staff, reported a spill of titanium tetrachloride on the lower level of Sage Hall. When exposed to water, titanium tetrachloride produces hydrochloric acid, and when exposed to fire, poisonous gases such as hydrogen chloride and titanium oxide. Because it is highly reactive and corrosive, titanium tetrachloride can damage the eyes and lungs.

By then, faculty and staff were speaking up about the dangerous working conditions in the Meister Hall Library, as evidenced in a Spring 2007 Health and Safety Committee report:

Leaks, mold, missing ceiling tiles, and wet carpeting are a few of the conditions staff must deal with on a daily basis. Katherine Parsons sits in her office with an improvised system to prevent water leaking from the ceiling onto her and her desk. Although PPS staff has tried to find a solution to her rainy office, nothing seems to work. According to Ms. Parsons, “Two trays with tubes were placed in the ceiling over my desk to collect and send water to a bucket adjacent to my office. The bucket is dry. Unfortunately, this is not working and my office has been leaking since Friday, August 25. In the evening I have to dress my desk in plastic, so water will not damage the computer monitor and hard drive, files and pictures. During the day, I have to decorate my desk with a garbage can to collect falling water.” Others complain of “sick building syndrome” symptoms: headaches, rashes, and breathing difficulties that abate on the weekends and holidays.

Also of concern were the asbestos disturbances in floor and ceiling tiles as well as in tank and pipe insulation. BCC often had to request asbestos abatement such as in September 2001 when flooding from a staff toilet caused asbestos-containing floor tiles to become delaminated in faculty classrooms and offices on the fourth floor of Gould Tech One. Hurni expressed his concern that the exposed glue might become friable, which is to say, airborne. In early 2003, BCC informed the CUNY’s Chief of Construction that the broken and delaminated floor tiles in the tutoring lab on the third floor of Gould Tech posed potential hazards from tripping and airborne asbestos fibers.¹¹

In spring 2006, biology professor Peter Yom noticed a loose ceiling tile in his office in Carl Polowczyk Hall, the new name of Gould Tech. Upon further examination, Yom found a dead rat behind the tile. BCC building staff delayed removing the rat because asbestos was present in both the ceiling and floor tiles in Yom’s office. In accordance with Article 31 of the contract between the faculty union, the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), and CUNY, which provides for a workplace free from safety and environmental hazards, the union requested that the air in Yom’s office be tested for the presence of asbestos fibers.¹²

In April 2007, a car-sized sinkhole opened up in front of the Havemeyer Lab building, resulting in a one-day class cancellation.¹³ Although the sinkhole was repaired in 2008, a new sinkhole, nicknamed Sinkhole, Jr., opened up that year on the running track, growing for five years until it measured thirty-feet across and became visible on Google Earth. It was not repaired until summer 2013.¹⁴

On November 24, 2009, the PSC faculty union chapter held a Hall of Shame exhibit in Meister Hall to publicize such problems as the collapsing tiles and gaping holes in two classroom ceilings that caused water to drip down

¹¹ Oliva, Gennaro J. “Bronx Community College Asbestos Abatement/Gould Tech/Rm 320.” Received by Michael Stabulas, DASNY (March 7, 2003).

¹² Kelly, Virginia Myers. “Living, Breathing, Working.” *On Campus* (December 2006 – January 2007): 11.

¹³ Rajendra, Dania. “Sinkholes and War Spur Action.” *Clarion*. (May-June 2007): 4.

¹⁴ Murphy, Carla. “Repairs Put Bronx CC ‘On The Right Track’: PSC-Led Push Nets \$ 30 Million in Capital Funds.” *Clarion*. (November 2013). <https://psc-cuny.org/clarion/2013/november/repairs-put-bronx-cc-right-track-psc-led-push-nets-30-million-capital-funds/>

on students when it rained.¹⁵ Several weeks later, BCC legal counsel Mary Rogan informed the PSC Chapter Chair, Nikki McDaniel, that BCC would install doors in fifteen bathroom stalls, repair a damaged wall in Havemayer Hall, and improve outdoor lighting around Sage Hall where a lecturer had been injured falling down a dimly lit stairwell.¹⁶ However, other serious issues at BCC remained unresolved.

In April 2019, a drop in power and voltage shut off the pumps that circulated water in the heating system, causing water pipes to burst in Colston Hall. The flood damaged over sixty ventilators, causing systemic heat and electrical outages. The administration closed the building, which houses six departments, and moved five hundred classes elsewhere.¹⁷ This crisis, in part, prompted the BCC Faculty Council in November 2019 to vote 23-3 no confidence in Kay Ellis, BCC Vice President of Administration and Finance, censuring her for “a failure of oversight and forethought in the execution of her duties, leading to a widespread lowering of morale amongst the faculty and staff.” The resolution noted that dozens of staff members had resigned under her leadership, that Ellis had instructed a faculty member who complained about the freezing workplace to wear a sweater, and that she had dismissed a request for mold testing in Colston Hall after it flooded by saying, “This is the Bronx.”¹⁸

In October 2021, the administration closed Nichols Hall whose offices and bathrooms had long been sullied by mouse feces, dust, filth, and mold. To destroy the mold, BCC had used a chemical that caused burning sensations in the eyes of the non-instructional staff who worked there. Because its windows could not be opened easily or opened at all, Nichols Hall could not be properly ventilated after the chemical was applied, forcing its occupants to work remotely.¹⁹

In spring 2022, faculty and staff rallied for health and safety at BCC, but the working environment continued to deteriorate. Extreme cold forced BCC to hold classes online for a week in late November 2022. Two weeks later, the BCC College Senate voted 47-7 no confidence in Ellis who a day earlier had resigned effective the end of the fall semester. Rather than face his own vote of no confidence, BCC president Thomas Isekenegebe announced that he would resign in summer 2023.

By rededicating itself to educating the whole citizen, BCC may yet cast off its identity as a toxic sinkhole. A repurposed BCC would host theater groups, art galleries, and civic associations instead of businesses in pursuit of tax breaks. It would cultivate an ethos of learning and justice to catalyze community involvement and public service, so that someday the Bronx might be known for its parks and organic community gardens rather than for its power plants and waste transfer stations.

This essay originally appeared in *The American Dissident* and is reprinted here with permission.

¹⁵ Tarleton, John. “Turning Up the Heat at BCC.” *Clarion* (January 2010): 12

¹⁶ Tarleton, John. “BCC Admin Moves on Campus Repairs.” *Clarion* (February 2010): 3.

¹⁷ Ahmad, Shomial. “Burst Pipes Cripple BCC.” *Clarion* (April 2019). <https://psc-cuny.org/clarion/2019/april/burst-pipes-cripple-bcc/>

¹⁸ Schneider, Aliya. “Bronx Community College Admin Resigns As Senate Calls For Her Removal.” *Bronx Times* (9 Dec. 2022). <https://www.bxtimes.com/bronx-community-college-kay-ellis-removal/>

¹⁹ Paul, Ari. “PSC Wins Safety at BCC.” *Clarion* (November 2021). <https://psc-cuny.org/clarion/2021/november/sick-workers-lack-air-bcc/>