

Owning It: Elizabeth Torres has a passion for service

By Jordan Grice



Photo: Christian Abraham / Hearst Connecticut Media

Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust President and CEO Liz Torres poses in her office on State Street, Bridgeport, Conn., on Wednesday Apr. 11, 2018.

Elizabeth Torres' passion for helping the lives of people in need started with her mother.

One of six children living in a two-bedroom apartment in New Haven, Torres, 7 at the time, would read classified ads in the paper looking for jobs and affordable housing opportunities for her mother.

“Part of the reason why I love my work so much and places like the East End (of Bridgeport) is because it reminds me so much of where I grew up, and the families that we serve mirror my own family when I was growing up,” she said.

Now 42, Torres is still helping people find affordable housing and improve their lives but on a much larger scale. She has spent the last 13 years at the helm of Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust, a nonprofit that focuses on housing for and revitalizing neglected neighborhoods. It also provides services to the region that help people facing foreclosure

Under her leadership, BNT has grown to 26 employees, with an operating budget of \$5 million a year. It owns more than 25 buildings in the city that provide affordable housing and commercial space, with several projects coming through the pipeline.

In a city that has started to pique the interest of large developers looking at prime locations in the downtown and on the waterfront in recent years, Torres has taken a different focus, aiming for a social impact.

“As I look into the neighborhoods that we’re working in and I see the impact that we have had, I am proud of that, but when I drive down Stratford Avenue, there’s so much work left to be done,” she said.

Welcome to Bridgeport

BNT was a different place before Torres’ arrival in 2005, almost 20 years after it was founded. At that point it was more a group of volunteers who organized community events and block watches.

With few assets and a tiny operating budget, Torres found in her first board meeting the organization had \$11,000 in the bank — barely enough to cover basic needs. “I remember thinking to myself that I made a mistake,” she said.

Anxious about her future, the mother of two said she got to work with a

whatever-it-takes approach, focusing on a surge of nonprofit work in the city to meet a demand for affordable housing and social services.

Torres quickly established consistent year-over-year growth, adding an array of social programs and services, including foreclosure counseling, which has helped save 88 families in their homes as the only organization in the region to offer the service.

“I remember feeling like I can do this,” she said. “I remember feeling like I can do what everyone says can’t be done.”

Beverly Hoppe, education director of the nonprofit’s Empowerment Resource Academy, witnessed firsthand the growth of the organization, watching as Torres tackled larger projects each year.

“It tells me that I can do anything,” Hoppe said. “If you can dream it and with enough skin in the game and passion and knowledge of what you’re doing, you can make it happen, and that’s what she does.

“That’s her passion,” Hoppe added. “It’s been really thrilling and mind blowing to see her vision coming to reality, and the difference it’s made in the lives of the folks who live in the apartments that we build and in the portfolio we manage.”

Neighborhood view

Torres’ drive to change struggling neighborhoods hasn’t been lost on community stakeholders.

“She took the ball and ran with it and took it places that nobody knew it would be going in,” said Frank Borres, president of Bridgeport’s Chamber of Commerce as well as chairman of the citywide Neighborhood Redevelopment Zone. “I’m not sure she even knew where it was going. I believe she only decided she was going to take it there.”

A longtime Bridgeport resident, Borres said Torres' willingness to accomplish neighborhood-focused ventures is most evident with the work done on the East End, which had seen little to no construction or development in recent years.

That all changed with the construction of the Milestone property along Stratford Avenue, with apartments and commercial space, that opened in 2016. "That's the biggest thing that in my recollection and my knowledge of the city," Borres said. "She has been bold enough to say I am going to go where no man has gone before."

Since opening the 30-unit mixed-use property over a year ago, BNT has seen several other neighborhood developments coming through the pipeline including a pop-up market and a cafe.

Borres said he appreciated Torres' holistic approach to meeting the needs of the community.

"She was the perfect person at the perfect time," he said. "She cared about parents, single mothers, the need for housing, and took that passion and really put it into overdrive with this organization."

Overcoming obstacles

Early in her life, Torres was met with her one of her biggest challenges after getting pregnant with her first child at 15, which led to her dropping out of high school.

"It was really hard being a young single mom," she said. "For a long time, I sort of went from couch to couch with child in tow, and I remember that feeling of hopelessness."

After years without steady work and a home of her own, Torres reached a turning point at 18 when she earned her GED following a six-month state program aimed at helping at-risk youth get job training and obtain a diploma.

She then completed an administrative assistant training program which ultimately led to her first job with Community Builders, a national nonprofit that owned the development where she grew up.

In the next 10 years, Torres worked her way up through the ranks and into a project manager role with three successful developments in New Haven before she was recruited to her current position at BNT.

“I remember thinking like the only way this was going to work is if people understood that the reason why I’m here is because this is where I also come from,” she said. “Although it may be in a different city, the neighborhood condition and the demographics are the exact same as I grew up.”

Proving grounds

Torres measured her success early in her career by every apartment that she had a part in creating for people in need, but as she travels through many of the neglected neighborhoods of Bridgeport, she said there is plenty left to do.

It’s no longer about the number of apartments; it’s about changing perceptions of ailing neighborhoods. That journey has not been without its share of challenges both financially and personally.

Coming into her role as CEO barely out of her 20s, as well as being a Hispanic woman, presented challenges in changing perceptions of her peers.

“I spent the first bunch of years here at BNT proving myself, demonstrating a track record, showing that in fact this organization was serious about change and changing neighborhoods,” she said.

While her triumphs at BNT earned the respect and acknowledgment among other developers and CEOs, overcoming her insecurities remained a constant struggle.

“I had to embrace being a leader and embrace my own authenticity,” she said.

“I think that for long time I felt like I had to be a certain way to fit into this role as a CEO.”

Gut check

A self-described introvert, she explores her independence and freedom outside of work with hobbies like hiking, which she picked up three years ago. In that time, she has explored nearly 400 miles of the Appalachian Trail.

Sometimes spending up to 10 days at a time exploring trails, Torres uses that time to reflect on her life and career. “I can say that I’ve spent the last 13 years here without a day of regret,” she said. “I really believe I am here to serve a purpose and it is much bigger.”

Whether it was helping her mother find work, taking care of her children or fighting to create a new neighborhood for the community she has come to love, Torres’ tenacity and hustle were at the center of it.

For that, she is thankful for her childhood. “If I were to meet that young girl now, I would say ‘I told you so,’ and then I would thank her,” Torres said. “From when I was born to 15, that had to be one of the hardest points.”