

# In the Shadow of an Elevated Train, A Zion

## A short history of The Bronx Pioneer Members and Original Branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

(from the personal journal of Rafael Reyes Jr, updated 4/12/2023)

January 26, 2003 a cold and overcast day in The Bronx, NY, a large group of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gathered together to dedicate a new chapel on Olmstead Avenue. Bro. J. S. Condie : Area President presided with President M. Bench, Stake President - Westchester Stake, conducting.

The new chapel was a glorious sight. Rising from the ashes of the demolished original building the new structure radiated a new light. On that beautiful day, hundreds of members from both the Spanish and English-speaking units gathered for the dedicatory service. More than 20 years prior to this date, slightly more than hundred pioneers would gather together to worship at this site, but on this day, about 800 members met together for the dedicatory services. Brother Condie, President Bench: and others spoke at the services, a glorious day of dedication not just for a structural edifice but also a real symbol of a dedication to the Lord.

However, there was another dedication that also took place that day, a quiet one, a re-dedication in the hearts of the original Bronx pioneer Saints ,those in the first row. Sitting quietly was living church history (from the 1973 branch beginnings), the Bronx pioneers, approximately ten individuals that represented the “rest of the story” of the Bronx Branch. This seemingly tiny group of members reflected back into time nearly 30 years to the foundation of the Bronx unit when it was just a “Dependent Sunday School”. These faithful members included:

- One of the first of three Bronx missionaries: a powerful single young lady from Italian decent.
- The first Black priesthood holder, he waited & served the Lord for 6 years before he had the priesthood.
- The first and second Branch Presidents of the Bronx Branch
- The first Sunday School President
- The first and second Relief Society presidents of the Bronx Branch
- Members that witnessed the first LDS marriages and funerals in the branch
- Parents of the child from the first funeral service in 1980.



The men top row- left to right: four (4) missionaries, Werner Rudolph, Bro. Ziel, Rafael Figueroa, Victor DeJesus, Clark Hinckley (Manhattan Ward Counselor- son of Pres. Hinckley), and Greg Marquez. Bottom row: John Hutchison, investigator, Orlando Cintron, Agidio Pate, Rafael Reyes Jr and Nag-Yeon Lee.

The women top row left to right: Helen Radichel, Elizabeth (Betsy) Hutchison, Marlene DeJesus, Linda Pate, Janice Galasso, Tomas D. Reyes held by Teresa Reyes, Anna Figueroa, middle row: investigator, investigator, unknown youth, Melinda Figueroa, Alba Marquez, Debbie Figueroa. Bottom row: Kali DeJesus, Erik DeJesus, Michael Pate, Janice Cintron, Rafael Figueroa Jr, Leah De Jesus and Anthony Figueroa. Sitting on the sidewalk :Unknown youth investigator, unknown youth investigator.

These members were a reflection of the rich and deep multiple cultures of the Bronx: Brazilian, Black, Puerto Rican, Korean, Chinese, German, Tongan, Guatemalan, Italians, Irish, Jamaicans, Ecuadorian, Black-Hispanic, etc. These different backgrounds brought distinct talents to the branch. The first group of members basically consisted of eight main families (Cintron, DeJesus, Figueroa, Camejo, Hutchison, Michilena, Pate, Radichel, Reyes and Rudolph), who over time, prepared and sent off thirteen (13) sons/daughter missionaries to do the Lords work. Olga Camejo was the first. As of 2011 – twenty three (23) missionaries have served from the initial Bronx Branch. Did they work hard? In about 1974 there were ten priesthood holders, each having the responsibility to home teach an average of eleven families each month. The sisters in the branch had a similar level of responsibility for visiting teaching.

Branch diversity? There were members from Germany such as Radichel, Rudolph, Prinz & Wolter,; the Italian's Pate, Rocchi, Mazella, Mandarino; the Koreans/Chinese: Lee, Fung, Kim, Yang, Yoo and many others who were single or the only active members in their family: the fabulous Olga Camejo- the branch's first missionary- what a wonderful person. Our entire branch was so proud of her. Then there was: Zabbia, Grant, Galasso, O'Brien, Soto, Iglesia, Messenger, DeMattos, DelValle, Davenport, Oppenheimer etc members representing a gathering of faith. Their stories and those of others outlining personal sacrifices are a sacred testament to the Bronx church history: these were common members with uncommon faith.

Many were called and placed by the Lord to provide the talents that were needed at that time. Such as the DeJesus and Hutchison families who possessed great musical talents. John Calas was another great member. Through his faith in God, he accepted the gospel and joined the church even without the priesthood. Who can forget the day that Brother Calas almost died from a ruptured appendix, then I was by his side as he was waking up from surgery in his hospital bed on June 9, 1978 to the news that the priesthood would be given to all worthy male members. What a glorious day that was for him!

Who would know the details of the conversion and commitment to the gospel of Orlando Cintron. He shared with me that when he joined the church (1968) a question arose as to lineage and the priesthood was withheld. There was pain, hurt, embarrassment etc. It would have been very easy to walk away from the church and gospel but he did not. He said to me: "I came to serve the Lord, having the priesthood was not what I was requesting." This small man of stature became a giant among men. He stayed true to principles he knew were right and waited until 1978 when he was ordained an Elder. He said "the process strengthened me". In 5/1/1994 he was ordained a High Priest. Through the years, in complete humility he served the Lord with or without the priesthood, a true giant of a man indeed, he passed away in 2022.

There was the Michilena family. These very young women from Ecuador were in their late teens and came to church of their own accord, traveling great distances to be with the Saints and bringing along their primary age brothers: Mike & Hugo Michilena. Cecilia Michilena ended up marrying Michael Messenger after they both served missions (Mike went 1<sup>st</sup> then Cecilia). Maria Michilena was a Sunday School teacher at the age of 15 then married in the Bronx and became a nurse. Sister Kaye V.H. Kongaika from Tonga was the Branch's second Relief Society President direct and effective. All the members of the branch held multiple church positions and did what was necessary, when it was necessary, and often under very difficult situations.

How can you put a measurement of the faith and service of the Figueroa, Pate, Hutchison and DeJesus Families? John Hutchison dealt with epileptic seizures at church meetings, on subway platform etc (once fell onto train tracks-saved by passer-bys) his incredible wife Betsy was the first Primary President and faithful Relief Society leader and also joined Marlene DeJesus for music service, they were the only ones who could play the piano. The DeJesus family also played an incredible role in faithfully serving where and when needed. Victor worked late 3<sup>rd</sup> shift as a mechanic for the garbage trucks of NYC and still came. He later served as a Branch President in Florida. The branch records could have never been recorded had it not been that Marlene DeJesus was there as the Branch's secretary. I still remember this family's travel to the Washington DC temple to be sealed.

The Pate family was lead by Agidio and Linda. Their Italian “fever” was also vital for getting things done. Long days of meetings were held in their home, surrounded by the rich smells of Linda’s fabulous Italian cooking. Linda was also instrumental as a Primary leader, first Relief Society president and youth leader. Agidio Pate had only an elementary school education, but there was nothing elementary about his faith in God and service to the Lord. I recall the many, many long nights of visiting families in the South Bronx with Agidio by my side. He served as the Branch’s second President. They adopted three children (2 of which were special needs) and then the Lord blessed them with two of their own. Agidio Pate passed away in 2016.

Rafael and Anna Figueroa had five children and were always serving the Branch. Anna served as a Primary President, in the Relief Society and Rafael as a Sunday School teacher, leader and counselor. They sent two children on missions and were always available to do what was needed. They provided lesson after lesson, testimony after testimony of the gospel to the Bronx Saints. In the Bronx pictures Anna is there always ,always faithfully serving! She was one that never failed to make every effort possible to serve others, she was wonderful.

### **The Beginning:**

The Bronx, has approximately two million inhabitants. Yet in the late Spring of 1973, the members who lived in that borough witnessed quite a different scene than the one on January 26, 2003. During the late sixties and early seventies, church membership in the Bronx ranged from 20 to 60. The members would travel to the borough of Manhattan to a chapel on the West Side of Manhattan (81<sup>st</sup> street) to worship. They would go there three times a week (twice every Sunday) by bus, by train, or by the few cars they had, to worship together in Primary, Priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, and Sacrament meetings.

In 1973, Bishop Carl Rogers ; of the Manhattan Ward felt impressed that it was time for the Bronx Saints to hold meetings there. He felt that a Dependent Sunday School would be a good start. Through inquiries from faithful Manhattan leaders the Paternal Brotherhood of Elks (PBOE) Lodge ,on the street called the Grand Concourse , agreed to allow the Saints to use portions of their building for Sunday meetings. At that time, Bishop Rogers asked Rafael Reyes Jr. a 24 year old young man and a convert of less than two years to act as the Dependent Sunday School President. After prayerful consideration, Brother Reyes chose two counselors: Brother Werner Rudolf, a high priest who was born and raised in Germany, was chosen as the First Counselor. There with his beautiful and thick German accent and scriptures he carried on the Lords work from his start in Germany years before. Brother Orlando Cintron was chosen as the Second Counselor. Brother Cintron was an incredible faithful member of the church and served with unwavering faith and testimony.

On a cool and very bright Mother’s Day on May 13, 1973, the first official Bronx Sunday School meeting of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was held in the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks building on the Grand Concourse. In a cavernous and dark meeting hall with mounted elk and moose heads on the walls, the Saints met. Chairs were set up; approximately thirty members attended that first meeting. Bishop Rogers went to the old organ that had not been played in years and with dust bellowing from the pipes played the first sounds of Zion in the Bronx. Those pioneer members taught lessons in every nook & cranny in the building accessible to them. Classrooms were held in large walk-in closets, on staircase landings, in the women’s anteroom, and in the Elk’s Lodge library. Literally any corner that could be found was set aside with chairs, and faithful members of the church did their best to share the gospel principles and lessons in a way that would help them and their families grow closer to the Lord.

The Elk’s organization was very cooperative in allowing the Saints to use their facility for 2-2 ½ hours each Sunday. Their facility served as a place for the Elk’s own social gatherings, which were often held the Saturday evening before the members would arrive for church. After such gatherings, the halls and meeting rooms would be filled with cigar and cigarette smoke that was still there when the Saints met the next day. There was also often leftover alcoholic drinks and food left throughout the building after such activities. The Saints were only able to use the building for a few hours on Sundays, but they treasured the time that they had to meet together.

A cherished set of pictures (seen on page 1 of this history story) is kept by many, it shows a board hanging from a nail on the outside of the building with the hand drawn words "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" and standing in front on the board were the Bronx pioneers. It was during those years at the Elk's Lodge (1973-1975) that the Bronx unit not only survived but thrived. During that time, the membership in the Bronx more than doubled, from thirty members to sixty-five. A light in the darkness, drew the faithful.

Members that moved into the Bronx found the local meetings to be convenient, and they began to attend the Sunday School meetings at the Elk's Lodge while still traveling down to Manhattan for their Sacrament services. The Bronx meetings were a lifeline for those members, as they provided a close connection to the church near their apartments that they had never had before. Over the years, converts joined the church, missionaries served, and the Bronx unit continued to grow. Administrative meetings were held in members' homes and apartments. When the priesthood was given to all worthy members, Brother Orlando Cintron was the first black ancestry member to receive the priesthood in the Bronx. (Bro Cintron was ordained an elder 11/10/1978 and a high priest 5/1/1994). It was in his dimly lit attic, under the light of a hanging naked bulb, that the Sunday School presidency often met to discuss the needs of the members. The guidance of the Spirit and the willingness of the members to give all that they could was the force that propelled the church unit forward.

By late 1975, less than three years later, it was evident that the Bronx Dependent Sunday School had not only outgrown the space available of the Elks Lodge, but the Manhattan Ward found that 40% of its active membership was made up from those members coming from the Bronx. A search began to look for a new facility including other church buildings, and schools for months. Brother George H. Mortimer, Regional Representative of the Twelve was of great assistance by counseling the Bronx unit in its search for a new meeting facility. Letters were sent to all the private schools in the Bronx and the Bedford Park Academy, a small private school, also on the Grand Concourse, agreed to rent their facility to the Saints. As a school The Bedford Park Academy had multiple classrooms, a small library, and a small gymnasium. The stake president at the time was President George F. Watkins and Bishop A. William Bodine was then bishop of the Manhattan Ward. Clark Hinckley was the Manhattan Ward bishopric counselor assigned to the Bronx unit. By the end of 1975, the saints started meeting in this facility. In April 1976 Brother Reyes was called as the second counselor to Bishop Bodine for the Manhattan First Ward. In the summer of 1977 the Bronx unit was organized as a "Dependent Branch", by stake president Victor B. Jex, with Brother Reyes sustained as branch president.

The Bronx dependent branch continued to grow. The ten classrooms and the tiny library that was used for Sacrament meetings with a small 66 key portable electric organ for music was soon bursting with members, investigators, and new converts. Every member served where they were needed, they sent out missionaries, and their faith grew. Initially The Bronx unit sent four missionaries on full-time missions: two sister missionaries and two elders. One elder was a young man who waited five years before he could join the church and serve his mission as he was of Jewish decent and his parents would not allow him to join until he was 18 years old- Jay Rosenburg. Converts joined the small unit at a rapid rate and traveled to Manhattan for their baptisms. The small library was soon holding well over sixty active members. In that location in 1979 that the "Dependent Branch" became an "Independent Branch" with Rafael Reyes Jr. as Branch President and Agidio Pate with Orlando Cintron as counselors by stake president Victor B. Jex.

By 1979, a search for a permanent location was authorized. With a budget of \$135,000, the members began to find a more suitable location. Finally, they located and purchased the Administrative Sunday School building of the Presbyterian Church on Olmstead Avenue. The building with leaking walls and roof, poor heating, no air conditioning, one exhaust fan in the main room, no overhead fans, hard linoleum floors, and drafty windows. Yet, it was a glorious site--the branch's first building and the first owned building of the church in the Bronx! Members of church units from around New York City came to help paint the building in preparation for its use as a chapel. By the Fall of 1979, the building was ready to serve as the meetinghouse for the Bronx Branch, and following that date the first Spanish Branch was created. Many first time ordinances were performed in this "new" chapel and each remembered as the first wonderful events as a new branch. Ron Mojica was one of the new members that joined and blessed the branch in 1979.

Members joyfully witnessed the first wedding in that building (sister Maria Michilena) and tearfully witnessed the first funeral, for the 3-month-old daughter (Rachel) of President Rafael Reyes and Teresa his wife.

This seemingly small band of saints learned to be obedient and had faith that the Lord would provide a way. As stated by Alma, “by small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). How do you measure the commitment of one who goes out into the dark and dangerous nights of New York City by bus or subway to do home teaching or visiting teaching ? There, amongst the noise and danger of the ghetto, was the belief of these dedicated saints: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.” (1 Nephi 3:7) And go they did! And home teach/visit teach they did! With an average of 10 families for each companionship. Pray they did! Send out their sons and daughters on mission they did, and believe they did--in the building of a Zion in the shadow of an elevated train.

### **Back to the future:**

On January 26, 2003, the day of the new Olmstead avenue Chapel dedication those early Bronx pioneers gathered from great distances and rejoiced, cried and hugged in the halls, not in irreverence but “after a manner of happiness” ( 2 Nephi 5:27). Many never imaged that they would live to see the day that hundreds would be assembled on that sacred ground. “There are the old timers” Brother Bench (stake president) commented about the presence of the 10 original members present at the dedication. I wish many could have known that these seemingly scripturally weak and poorly learned members accomplished on their knees what had been promised by the Lord, “ God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” 1 Corinthians 1:27.

During my years on Earth, I have been in meetings with presidents of large and prestigious corporations with board meetings with impressive mahogany tables. There have been strategic sessions to discuss “significant” decisions. I have had numerous church callings, but the callings in The Bronx had the most profound impact in my life. The spiritual growth and guidance that the Lord provided to a 24-year-old convert in the Bronx was incredible. There in a New York City borough teaming with cultures from around the world and with limited access to what world measures as comforts, were the important things: the gospel and a place to kneel. There I grew to understand the purpose of life, to personally know our Savior and serve our Father in Heaven through service to my brothers and sisters. The richness of seeing members grow spiritually from the depths of a challenging New York City life to the glory of the Gospel at their side was incredibly beautiful.

Now, in my 75th year (2023), I recall those 8 years as the most spiritually rich time and impacting of my entire life. I felt blessed to be there at that time with the wonderful friends and families noted above. I was blessed to have at my side a tremendous companion, my wife, who through it all bore 5 of our 7 children and buried one in that small part of Zion, and through it all still continued to support the work of the Lord. Her confidence that the Lord will provide was an inspiration to me. Without her support, testimony, and prayers, I could not have survived those endless days and nights.

I love the Lord and the opportunity to serve, and I know that this church, His church, is true. I add my witness to those that now serve that we must carry on, that God lives and knows us all, even in The Bronx, New York. The chapel dedicated on January 26, 2003 is simply another next step in the Lords plan. May God bless you. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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The missionaries originating from the initial Bronx members are as follows (as of April 12, 2023):

**First Generation Bronx Missionaries**

Jay Rosenburg- cannot recall  
Olga Camejo – Florida  
Alan Martinez- Oakland, CA  
Maria Rocchi- Arcadia, CA  
Linda Pate- Houston , TX 2006

Rafael & Teresa Reyes, Puerto Rico West  
mission 2008-2010  
Michael Messenger: Japan  
Cecilia Michilena Messenger -Anaheim, CA

**Second Generation Bronx Missionaries**

Orlando Cintron Jr.-Carlsbad, CA  
David DeJesus- Roseville, CA  
Leah DeJesus- Padova, Italy  
Abel DeJesus-Santiago, Santiago, Chile-West  
Anthony Figueroa, Morristown, New Jersey  
Rafael Figueroa Jr., Buenos Aires, Argentina  
James (Jimmy) Hutchison-Ecuador  
Scott Hutchison-Atlanta, Georgia

Justin Messenger- Camptina, Brazil  
Jinni Messenger- Piura, Peru  
Lena Reyes: Maracaibo, Venezuela  
Marcos Reyes: Maracaibo, Venezuela  
Rafael. Reyes III: Puerto Rico & Orlando Florida  
Tomas D. Reyes: Chicago, Illinois  
Kenneth Samuel Martinel (Michilena family):  
Guayaquil, Ecuador

**Third Generation Bronx Missionaries**

Eli Jukes (DeJesus family) Frankfurt, Germany  
Aidan Jukes (DeJesus family) Curitiba South , Brazil

**I have surely left out many who played critical roles in the Branch's early years. Forgive me if I do not recall, fifty years ago represents a long time to look back and try to remember it all. I especially wish to acknowledge the many individuals who served with little to no family support. Contact me so I can add your legacy to this personal journal of the Bronx Branch Pioneers. If you have any data that could add to this personal history please email me: [reyes.ralph@yahoo.com](mailto:reyes.ralph@yahoo.com) .**