

Excerpt from the New York Times, December 29, 2023

Six New Yorkers Who Made the City a Better, Cooler, Fairer Place in 2023

In a year that made many of us want to give up, these unsung activists found a way to help others.

By Ginia Bellafante

The Anti-Gentrifier



Debra Ack teaches her neighbors in Brooklyn about community land trusts as a tool to keep neighborhoods affordable. Jade Duskow for The New York Times

Debra Ack came to activism late in life, as a 62-year-old former administrative assistant who got involved in the newly formed East New York Community Land Trust. Three years later, as the special projects coordinator she has been instrumental in drawing political attention to a long-neglected neighborhood straddling patches of Brooklyn and Queens that is prone to flooding, mold infestations, overflowing septic systems and illegal trash dumping.

Equally significant has been her work educating her neighbors in East New York about community land trusts, which are relatively new to the city but have a long history in California. They battle rising housing costs and keep real estate out of the hands of predatory developers. These trusts buy land, then typically issue 99-year ground leases to homeowners who consent to sell the houses or buildings on the land back to the trust at a restricted price to ensure affordability over the long term.

“We want people to know how they can bring ownership back to their communities,” Ms. Ack said. The East New York Community Land Trust is expected to close on its first property in January — a 21-unit apartment building that has fallen into disrepair. With the help of money raised through donations and low-interest loans, Ms. Ack said, the trust will buy both the land and the building and then turn the building over to the tenants living there, who will eventually own their units as co-ops.