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West Harlem Development Corporation Head Steadies Once-Troubled Group

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HARLEM — The first public meeting of the [West Harlem Development Corporation](#) under its new executive director had taken a wrong turn last October.

The audience felt that [Columbia University](#), despite a pledge of \$76 million in cash and tens of millions more in benefits related to its \$6.3 billion, 17-acre campus expansion into West Harlem, had not hired enough local residents and questioned the school's commitment to the neighborhood.

Flores Forbes of Columbia University's Office of Government and Community Affairs became angry.

"The \$76 million, that's a commitment. That means nothing to you?" Forbes said to grumbling and boos from the crowd.

Before Forbes could say more, Kofi Boateng, the executive director of the group charged with overseeing the community benefits agreement, rushed to the podium.

"Things may have been delayed but the good thing is the ship is now moving," he told the crowd, which slowly calmed down.

Boateng, 61, dismissed his actions at the podium that night as just part of the job. It's not the first time he's been called in to save a nonprofit organization in the midst of a nosedive.

At the National Puerto Rican Forum, Boateng was hired to wind down the then failing organization. By the time he left the group had \$20 million in programming.

"Anybody can work with an organization that is doing well. It takes a special person to work with an organization that's not doing well," said Ursula N. Embola, director of corporate and foundational giving for Westchester Medical Center.

Embola worked as a grant writer at the National Puerto Rican Forum and recommended Boateng as a candidate to lead the WHDC without his knowledge.

It's experience that Boateng will need as he tries to guide the WHDC from a disheveled organization that has drawn the ire of many — and the attention of Attorney General Eric Schneiderman — to one seen as a major player in the future of the neighborhood.

The group on Thursday will take one of its first steps toward that goal when it awards \$2 million in grants to West Harlem non-profits.

"There were high expectations from the community who expressed a desire to see something immediate and impactful done," Boateng said about the group's troubles. "Every day without a plan was creating anxiety and protest."

The group signed the community benefits agreement with Columbia in May 2009 and was charged with overseeing the distribution of \$150 million in cash and in-kind services as well as making sure the university met agreed upon mandates for hiring local and minority firms and residents for the campus expansion.



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Over the next two years, however, the WHDC failed to meet basic goals such as acquiring a headquarters or hiring an executive director. In 2011, [DNAinfo.com New York reported](#) that the agency had spent more on consultants — **two of whom left with six-figure paydays** before their goals were accomplished — than programming. The group gave out just one grant during that period.

That drew the attention of Schneiderman, who **subpoenaed the group's records** in Nov. 2011. About a month later, a headhunting firm contacted Boateng about the position.

"I said: 'I'm not interested. I don't want my name involved,'" said Boateng, who had heard of the investigation.

It wasn't until after a conversation with his pastor that Boateng felt the job might have been a calling from a higher power because his skills seemed uniquely positioned for the job.

"My pastor told me to look at it as answering a call," Boateng said. "I said, 'Who am I to argue with God?'"

Boateng had felt the same way as a young man growing up in Kumasi, Ghana. His father had a total of 30 children, including eight with his mother, and it was rough financially. Boateng didn't get his first pair of shoes until he was 15 years old.

As a top student, Boateng won a trip to the United States to represent Ghana at an international summer camp. He made contacts that eventually helped him to earn a scholarship to [Yale University](#).

Boateng planned on returning home after getting his education but his dad told him that as the oldest son, he needed his help to provide for his siblings. Boateng went on to get a Master of Science in professional accounting from [Northeastern University](#) and worked at KPMG before moving to Prudential, where he became the first comptroller of the Prudential Foundation.

Boateng says he's proud that he was able to pay for the education in Ghana of his younger siblings.

After launching his own consulting firm for a decade, Boateng, the married father of seven children who lives in Ossining, N.Y., was then asked by one of his clients, the National Puerto Rican Forum, to help it resolve a \$2 million debt owed to the Internal Revenue Service.

"Kofi was hired to put the group to sleep," said Edwin Jorge, who was the former national deputy director for the now defunct organization. "Instead, he looked at the history of this group that was founded in 1954 and said it was worth saving."

Boateng helped to start training centers for the organization, which served the poor and unemployed. By the time he left, the forum had \$20 million in program funding by partnering with other groups.

Herbert Ouida, former executive vice president at the World Trade Center Association, said Boateng helped turn around that organization in his next position as president and chief financial officer for the trade group simply by being a "straight shooter."

When he took the job at the WHDC, Boateng said he tried to bring some of that honesty and transparency. His pitch to the board was that the WHDC would operate as a foundation and seek to support and launch groups that could become self-supporting.

"The main problem was the distrust of Columbia by the community, and that bred a high level of distrust that ran into the board. Nobody trusted anybody," Boateng said.

One of the first things Boateng did was to meet with Community Board 9 while cooperating with the Attorney General investigation. He accomplished basic functions such as **launching a website**, finding a permanent space and hiring staff.

The board was reconfigured. Political appointees went to three from five and board members who were not likely to apply for grants were chosen.

Elliot Khan of the Broadway Synagogue said he was optimistic but still slightly wary during that October meeting.

"It seems like since you've taken over the helm there's been direction," Khan told Boateng.

Schneiderman concluded his investigation and found that the group **did nothing illegal** but was mired in chaos and had failed to develop policies on how the money would be distributed. A conflict of interest policy was put in place.

"It looks like he's doing a great job," said Rep. Charles Rangel.

But the group still has critics. Vincent Morgan, a City Council candidate, said the group is not doing enough to enforce the hiring standards of the community benefits agreement. [DNAinfo.com New York](#) wrote earlier this year about a group of black architects in Harlem who say the university has **shut them out of professional services contracts**.

CB 9 is set to vote on a resolution Thursday evening that would ask the Empire State Development Corporation to audit whether or not Columbia is fulfilling its hiring goals. The university says it has surpassed goals.

While the WHDC is "more focused" since Boateng was hired, former Community Board 9 Chair Larry English said "they are ignoring billions in contracts and scholarships."

Boateng disagrees and says the group is already working with the Empire State Development Corporation and a monitor hired by the state agency to monitor Columbia's obligations.

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"My vision is to create a community trust, something that will endure, and even serve as a model," Boateng said.

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By [Jeff Mays](#), DNAinfo.com

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SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
24	25	26	27	28	1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6

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Location: Convent Avenue
Time: 10:00 AM - 2:00 PM

North Star Harlem Community Organizing Workshop

Date: Apr 10, 2013 - Apr 10, 2013
Location: Manhattan Avenue
Time: 6:30 PM - 8:30 PM



First Person Plural April

Date: Apr 1, 2013 - Apr 1, 2013
Location: Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard
Time: 6:30 PM - 9:00 PM



Freedom Now Art Exhibition

Date: Feb 22, 2013 - Apr 5, 2013
Location: 163 West 125th Street
Time: All Day

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