

## ***“You Gotta Move It!”***

# **A Midwood Crossing Guard Keeps Things Moving Safely for 22 Years**

*By Maria Newsom*

On any given weekday morning, the intersection of Coney Island Avenue at Foster is a parent’s nightmare. With its four lanes of traffic, double-parked trucks, delayed walk signals and cars turning from every direction, at all four corners—YIKES. After fifteen years of living footsteps from this location, the thought of it still makes this Midwood mom’s hands hurt. That’s right, my weird bodily reaction to fear is that my hands start to ache. And oh boy, how my wrists really throb when I think about children crossing Coney Island Avenue at Foster! They hurt as much as when I imagine young bodies bobbing in the riptides at Jacob Riis State Park, or my newly-licensed teen drag racing along Ocean Parkway.

Yet for all my fears over the years, I’ve gained consolation when I’ve reminded myself that my kids, as well as those of other fretting Flatbush families, are in the care of veteran crossing guard Joanne Vetere. For twenty-two years, this hyper-alert, quick-stepping civil servant of the City of New York has shielded thousands of young lives as they’ve braved oncoming traffic at this treacherous thoroughfare. In June, Ms. Vetere crossed her last child safely, and retired to take care of her own grandson.

In July, I sat down with her over a cup of Lipton in her Bath Beach apartment to reflect. Her husband, now deceased, served in Vietnam, and the couple raised two daughters and a son before “Ms. Joanne,” as everyone would come to call her, decided to go to work for the DOE.

“Apart from child rearing—which we all know is the biggest job there is—has this been your only job?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Were you trained?”

“When I first got started, they put me with a trainer. They showed me how to cross kids. I bounced around Brooklyn at first.”

“Before you landed on this corner of Foster and Coney Island Avenue right?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh thank God you stuck there!” I exclaimed.

Ms. Joanne laughed modestly.

### **Extreme Weather**

“It’s been a hot summer,” I said, “I bet you’re glad you’re not working today.”

“The heat didn’t bother me when I first started. Then after years working, I couldn’t take the heat no more. You still have to wear the whole uniform, you know, in any weather, and boy do you sweat!”

“What was the coldest winter you worked? Do you remember?” I asked.

“Every winter.”

We both laughed, and I was reminded of my good fortune to work in the comfort of a climate-controlled indoor job.

“What did you do to keep warm?” I asked.

“You gotta bundle up,” Ms. Joanne explained. “Thermals under your pants. Heavy sweatshirt under your jacket. When it was below zero you had to wear something over your face.”

“Of course you did,” I said. “What about gloves?”

“Yeah, heavy gloves and those warmer things that heat up, you put those things in the gloves too. My fingertips used to get so cold and numb.”

“What time did you go on duty?” I asked.

“7:15”

“And you stayed on the corner until when?”

“Quarter to ten.”

“So from 7:15 until 9:45 AM you were outside, at your post, in below zero weather?” I was incredulous.

“Yeah. It was bitter.”

“How bitter?” I wonder.

“Like twenty below.”

“Twenty below?” I’m surprised.

“I’ve never heard of it getting that cold.”

“It used to, years ago.”

“By 8:30 there were no more kids to cross. When it was that bitter out, me and the other crossing guard used to go into the Pakistani Restaurant.”

“The Pakiza.” I said. “I know that Southeast Asian steam bar well. Best rice pudding and Kashmiri Chai in the neighborhood!”

“Yeah, that’s the one,” she confirmed. “They’d ask us: ‘You want a cup of tea?’ Sometimes me and the other crossing guard, we’d take it.” Nothing like a hot chai on a frozen day.

“What about the driving rain?” I ask. “How would you manage when it was really raining?”

“I’d put a thing over my head, and big rain boots.”

“What rain coat worked best?” I asked.

“The eight dollar one from the 99cents store!” Ms. Joanne chuckled.

### **The Safety Dance**

To watch a competent crossing guard on a weekday morning is to witness poetry in motion—a perfectly rehearsed ballet between kids, cars and changing traffic lights.

“You were so good at your job!” I sighed, resting my tea cup on the tray of her grandbaby’s high chair. “I noticed you would always walk out into the middle of the intersection. Other crossing guards, they don’t all do that.”

“No, they don’t all do that,” she said, a small smile lifting her lips.

“They stay at the curb,” I continued, “but not you. That’s such a dangerous corner!” Needles of pain shot through my fingers as I said these words.

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*Happy Retirement, Joanne Vetere, Thank you for keeping our kids safe for 22 years.*

Yeah, it is,” The humble smile remained.

“Talk me through a typical morning. You’re standing on the southwest corner, waiting for the light to change.”

“Yeah, you wait for the little white man, and then you walk into the middle of the street.” Suddenly on alert, Ms. Vetere stepped away from her kitchen counter to demonstrate. “The cars are coming from this way, and they’re turning that way. From two directions.”

She glanced over both shoulders, arms outstretched, and directed imaginary traffic. One hand beckoned while the other was cocked at a 90 degree angle to her wrist, fingers splayed. There was no ambiguity in that gesture: it could only mean: FULL STOP.

“You gotta really stop the cars from turning ‘cause the kids are crossing. Once all the kids get across the street and the hand blinks red, you walk back to the curb and then you have to cross more kids, the other way, across Foster, cause now that light has changed to the little white man.”

“And what about those refrigerated trucks?” I asked. “The ones that are always double-parked at that corner, unloading gallons of milk and yogurt to those delis right there.”

“Oh yeah, those trucks double park in the crosswalk where I’ve got to cross the kids. They pull way up into those crossing lines. I always say to them ‘You can’t stay parked there, I gotta cross the kids. YOU GOTTA MOVE IT!’”

### **Near Accidents**

“I was almost hit by a car at that corner. I was walking back to the curb and this driver seen me walking back and he goes to turn anyway, and he almost hits me. He just turns. God forbid, he could have hit me. I go: ‘You idiot!’ to him. He missed me by about an inch. That happened two times to me. Thank God no child was ever hit.”

“Only twice in twenty-two years?” I said. “That’s pretty good for that corner. Did you ever seen an actual accident?”

“Yeah, once two cars came crashing together. I’d just got finished crossing the kids. Thank God no kids got hurt.”

### **The Late Families**

“What about those families who are always running late?” I asked. “You know, those parents who are running and dragging their kids behind them?”

Ms. Joanne chuckled.

“Yeah, one or two families would always come late.”

“That was us!” I cheered. “And you were still always there to cross us!”

### **Morning Hugs**

“Are you missing your job at all?”

“Not really. I miss the kids though. I do miss crossing the kids. I liked my job.”

“I know you did,” I said. “It showed. And it must have felt like you had a relationship with certain kids, right?”

“Yeah, it did feel like that. There was a bus driver when I first started. His daughter went to P.S. 217. She used to ride the bus with her grandmother. When she got off she’d say ‘Bye Daddy!’ Then she’d walk up to me and give me a hug, every day. Now she’s big, she’s in college.”

“Every day? From like pre-K to 5th grade, she’d hug you? You must miss that!”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “She used to say ‘Good morning Ms. Joanne!’ and give me a big hug,”

“That must be something,” I said. “To get a hug from a little girl, every day.” We paused, silent, and enjoyed that mental construct. “And now you have your grandson to give you hugs,” I added.

“Yeah, now I have my grandson,” she laughed and rolled her eyes. “He drives me nuts, but I love him.”

On behalf of countless grateful parents, thank you so very much Ms. Joanne! Enjoy retirement!