

# Empowering Those Who Need It Most

GAIL FORTES

Rolling suitcases are filled with materials on health and nutrition, domestic violence, and economic empowerment.

They are at the ready for staff to provide outreach and education far and wide, servicing areas as far away as Provincetown, the Islands, Brockton and Providence.

"My job is not to be in the office all day. If I'm in the office eight hours in a day, I'm not doing my job. You go where the need is," says Gail Fortes, executive director of the New Bedford-based YWCA.

Twenty-two years at one place gives Fortes a lot of perspective.

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She remembers one woman arriving to the YW's residential program under court order. Her clothes and hair were ragged and she carried all her possessions in a green trash bag. She moved into the YW, began volunteering there and was able to successfully move out after a couple of years.

Years later, Fortes ran into the woman at the movies. She had become engaged, had custody of her children again, and had bought a home. "The YW saved her life," Fortes says, "If she hadn't come here, she would have ended up dead."

Gail Fortes took a job at the YWCA shortly after she graduated from college. Even though it was part-time, her mother told her it was a good way "to get her foot in the door." It's safe to say her mother was right. Twenty-two years later, she's still at the YWCA, serving as its executive director for the last ten years.

"That wasn't the plan," says Fortes of her long tenure at the YWCA. She had intended to open a dance studio but she found her work at the Y so compelling that she changed her goals. The YWCA's mission of eliminating racism and empowering women was powerful. Fortes says, "I love my

job. I love what I do. I never wanted to leave."

Fortes moved from working with children to working on women's health issues when the YW began a new program focusing on breast health. It was a natural fit. Fortes loved helping women navigate the health care system. Her work was making a difference and they expanded the program to include broader health and wellness concerns.

Then-Executive Director Yvonne Drayton began to give Fortes greater and greater responsibilities. Meanwhile, Fortes' daughters were also growing up around the YW, often visiting its offices and taking part in YW activities. Drayton laughs as she remembers when Fortes' daughter Gabriella

asked her, "Are you the big boss?" When Drayton announced her retirement, Gabriella asked Drayton if her mother could now be the big boss.

Drayton and Gabriella were on the same page. For a year and a half, Drayton and Fortes sat in offices across the hall from one another and during that time, Drayton mentored her on leading the YW.

Since taking the helm, Fortes has led the organization energetically. She has continued the YW's emphasis on collaboration with other non-profit agencies. For instance, when immigration officials raided the Michael Bianco factory in 2007, YW staff collaborated with other non-profits to help the families involved. "Something devastating had happened in our community. We stopped everything and asked what we could do to help," Fortes says.

Stories like that make it clear why Fortes has stayed so long at the YWCA. And why she has no plans to leave. She says, "I still haven't accomplished everything I want to accomplish." 🍀

