

DAN BARRY

About New York

Raising A Family And a Bridge

MANY years ago, Delonda Bates took a course on nontraditional employment for women. Maybe she would become a construction worker, or a carpenter, or an electrical technician. Who knew how fate would employ her?

The only thing certain was her need to work. Right out of high school she had taken a factory job, married a factory man, quit the factory and given birth to four children in fairly quick succession. Now it was time to rejoin the working world.

As she considered her nontraditional options, an employment specialist for the city's Department of Transportation seduced her with a compelling pitch to introduce women into the closed male world of bridge operators. The job sounded cool; she gave it a shot.

That was in 1989. Today Ms. Bates is the only woman among the 15 operators-in-charge who oversee the 25 city-owned movable bridges in New York. A few other women have come and gone, but she stuck it out, and now she is the only woman who, with a push of a button here and a turn of a switch there, can elevate tons of New York

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road. And it is cool.

Over the years, Ms. Bates, 41, has worked at many of the city's movable bridges, from the Unionport Bridge along Bruckner Boulevard in the Bronx to the Mill Basin Bridge along the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn. She has also worked at the Pulaski Bridge, which connects Brooklyn and Queens over the Newtown Creek and provides its operators with a choice view of the majestic Manhattan mirage to the west.

For the last four years, Ms. Bates has worked at the Ninth Street Bridge, one of the five bridges over the curious South Brooklyn waterway known as the Gowanus Canal. It takes some imagination, though, to find majesty in the view from her squat office tower — a cityscape that includes an old brick warren of a factory, a parking lot for a Lowe's and a Pathmark, a construction site, and Old Man Gowanus, dressed in oil spots and debris.

And directly above clatters the train that every day takes her on her way to Far Rockaway, where she lives with her husband, Vernon, now a track worker for the Long Island Rail Road, and her children, now numbering five.

The canal is not exactly a hot spot for pleasure craft, and if anything, traffic is even slower in winter. According to the red log book that she keeps on the windowsill, the bridge rises twice or maybe four times a day — for the Cando, a crane barge, going in, going out, or the Mister T, a gravel-hauling tug, going in, going out. That's about it, give or take a vessel.

The captains will radio in, and Ms. Bates, the unseen bridge levitator, will work the control panel. An air horn honks, sending pedestrians scurrying; "Everybody in this area knows that sound," she says. Traffic signals blink. Two sets of gates lower. Massive pins within the bridge disengage, or unlock. Then an 82-foot-long section of road rises, slowly, magically, some 50 feet in the air.

A tug will glide by. The bridge will lower. And six minutes will have passed.

MS. BATES has responsibilities beyond the control panel. She has to make sure that the bridge mechanisms are free of debris, that the air pressure is fine, that the lights along the pier wall are working — that her piece of Ninth Street, of Brooklyn, of New York, is in order.

This still leaves time for the diminutive bridge operator to look out her window at the discolored, ever-moving water that rises and falls with the tide. The oddest things float past: a blue laundry basket; a green ball; a family of ducks; those shimmering oil slicks that look like passing clouds, and set you to wondering.

Last year, her second-oldest son, Kash-eem, started to have seizures during his senior year at Beach Channel High School. It turned out he had a brain aneurysm that required two operations because, she says, the first one "didn't take." He gradually got better, made it through rehabilitation and is now, his mother says, "taking it kind of slow."

But for a while there, it seemed as though the life of Delonda Bates was a constant raising and lowering of bridges and spirits. Her son was unconscious for three weeks, while family members assured him with hand squeezes and words that they were there beside him.

The operator-in-charge at the Ninth Street Bridge remembers what she would say: "We're here every day. You don't see us. But we're here."