Mourners recall battles for clean air
Family, friends and fellow community activists remember the late Joe Perez as a tireless fighter for the South Bronx, who, despite his tenacity as an advocate for the area’s underrepresented, maintained a self-deprecating sense of humor until his death.

Perez died at 61-years-old on May 14 after battling bladder cancer for several years, was honored at the Bronx Community and Cultural Garden at 143rd St. and Willis Ave. on Aug. 12, with the unveiling of a commemorative mural, and a garden party featuring Puerto Rican folk music and roasted pig.

His close friend and fellow community organizer, Carlos Padilla, remembered Perez as an incorruptible idealist who often seemed overmatched in his battles against more powerful foes, but never gave up—and often prevailed.

“He was the Don Quixote of the Bronx, he wanted to save the world,” said Padilla, who fought alongside Perez for over a decade to rid Mott Haven of a medical waste incinerator on E. 138th St., whose fumes had fouled the air for years.

“Joe found meaning in his life with this movement,” Padilla remembered.
Perez and his first wife, Linda, both of whom were born and raised in Mott Haven, met while working together in the front office of the Biltmore Hotel at Grand Central Station in the 1970s; he as the manager, she as the head cashier.

In the late 1980s, when their only daughter, Veronica’s, grade-school teacher began speaking out against the incinerator, they responded by forming the South Bronx Clean Air Coalition, organizing residents to fight to close it.

"His main concern was for the children," Linda Perez recalled.

In 1999, following “demonstration after demonstration, we closed the place down,” she said.

Later, Perez went on to fight for other local causes. During the 1990s, he led residents to defeat a plan to build a paper mill in the Harlem River Yards, when he and fellow organizers found the process would have required hazardous materials be trucked through local streets.

In the early 2000s, Perez was named executive director of the Freedom Community Center on E. 140th St. The group helped organize tenants against negligent landlords, and provided free summer camp for neighborhood kids. But last spring, after Perez’s death, the landlord opted to shut the center, contending Perez’s leadership could not be replicated.

The mural in the community garden depicts Perez surrounded by Puerto Rican folk figures playing instruments and dancing, and the phrases “The people’s friend” and “The homeland is not for sale,” in Spanish. It was painted by South Bronx artist William Acevedo, who worked with Perez trying to provide leadership and inspiration for neighborhood youth. Teens from Highbridge-based youth arts education organization, YUCA, helped paint the mural, which took two months to complete.

Even after Perez’s second wife, Sandra, died in 2009, a blow Padilla said was one in a string of heartbreaks Perez suffered in recent years, “I would call him, to make fun of his life. It was the one thing that would make him laugh.”

Perez continued to prioritize his activist battles, at the expense of his health, Padilla said. On several occasions, while receiving treatment for his cancer, Perez walked out of the hospital to attend neighborhood meetings, leaving concerned doctors wondering where their sick patient had disappeared.

Linda Perez, who maintained a close friendship with her ex-husband until his death, said his humor was so dry, that he said of it, “only God knows my sense of humor.”

When Perez did not answer the door at his E. 138th St. apartment on May 12, emergency responders let Linda Perez enter first. She found his body seated in a chair with his arms crossed.

“He was at peace, looking at the ceiling, probably telling the lord, 'I'm ready,'” she said.

Along with his ex-wife, Linda, Perez is survived by his daughter, Veronica Torres, 31, of Mott Haven.