

HUNTER

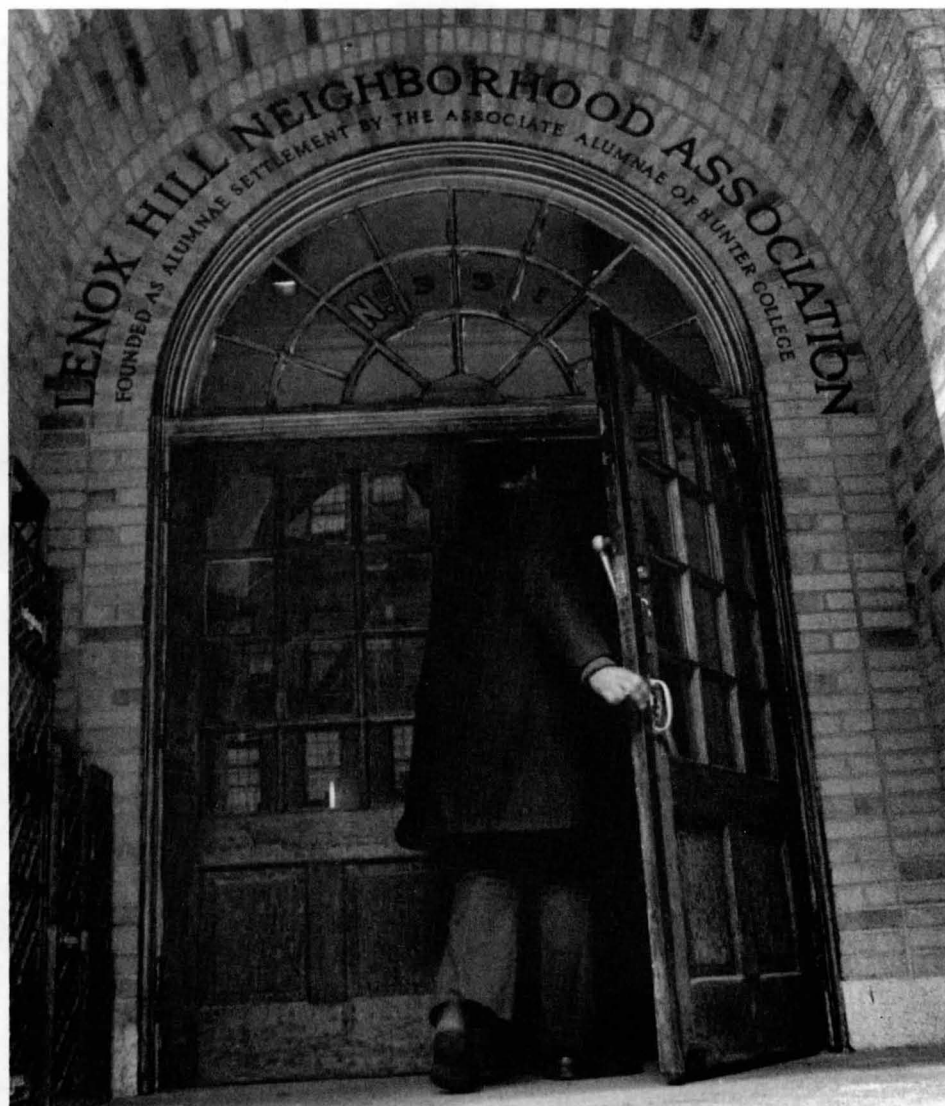
and its Neighborhood

Setting the Volunteer Example

by Eugenie L. Birch and
Stephen Johnston

Editor's Note:

For several months starting this spring, the Hunter community and residents of the Upper East Side of Manhattan will be enjoying an exhibit, "A Century of Service, Volunteers on the Upper East Side," mounted in three Goldome Bank branches in the area and at Hunter College (see schedule on page 25). The exhibit is a by-product of an extensive study and special course, "Volunteers in the Urban Community," conducted by Eugenie L. Birch and Stephen Johnston of Hunter's Graduate Program in Urban Affairs. The idea for the project came from Frances Levenson ('44), vice-president and director of urban housing at the Goldome Bank, and the Bank gave Hunter a grant towards research and the course. Here Birch and Johnston describe Hunter's special contributions to volunteerism in its neighborhood over the last 100 years.



The entrance to the present-day Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association at 331 East 70th Street in Manhattan records the role of the Associate Alumnae of Hunter College in the founding of the institution.

Janet Charles

Today half of all Americans, it is estimated, engage in some sort of volunteer activity.

Volunteerism is a vital aspect of city life. Urban volunteers shop for the home-bound elderly, establish and staff shelters for the homeless, visit the hospitalized. They fight for the construction of parks and the preservation of historic districts. They plant trees to shade congested streets and create gardens out of empty lots. They teach English to immigrants, supplement educational and recreational programs in public and private schools, organize to remove threats to public safety.* Many of the non-profit organizations urban dwellers take for granted and de-

pend on were conceived by volunteers and are largely directed, funded, and operated through volunteer efforts.

Present-day volunteers are part of a long and rich service tradition dating from the nineteenth century. Nowhere has this tradition been more evident or had more effect than on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Few institutions have been more a part of this tradition than Hunter College, located in the heart of the area since the 1870's.

Like many of the nation's urban areas, the Upper East Side has experi-

**The article by Nicholas Freudenberg beginning on page 18 describes the effect volunteers in community-based organizations have had on the environmental movement.*

This page — Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association in the past: fresh air bus (1928), kindergarten (c. 1910), cooking class (c. 1930).

Facing page — Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association today: carpentry lesson, beds for the homeless, children's dance class.



enced dramatic changes over the past 100 years. Once farmland, it endured the invasion of factories, elevated subways, and cinder-spewing railroads, only to see them replaced by successively taller apartment buildings, department stores, and pedestrian bridges.

Since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, the Upper East Side has been a neighborhood of contrasts. At first a rural refuge from the city to the south, it quickly became an attractive residential area for rich and poor alike. During the last decades of the century, half of its population was crowded into newly constructed tenements arrayed along First, Second, and Third Avenues in close-knit ethnic enclaves. Other East Siders lived in spacious mansions along

Fifth Avenue or in elegant townhouses on adjacent side streets. Hunter, located on Lexington Avenue, bridged the worlds of immigrant and industrialist.

By the end of the century, the area had also become home to a new kind of urban institution: the improvement association. Improvement associations typically depended on volunteers to achieve their social welfare goals. One of the most important of these institutions, the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, was a direct contribution from Hunter. In 1894, a group of socially conscious Hunter graduates ventured east of the Third Avenue El and were shocked to find children playing unattended in the gutters while their mothers worked in the sweatshops in

the area. They decided to establish a nursery school for the children. Originally called the Alumnae Settlement, the nursery school grew into a settlement house filling half a block and containing sports and teaching facilities and clubrooms.

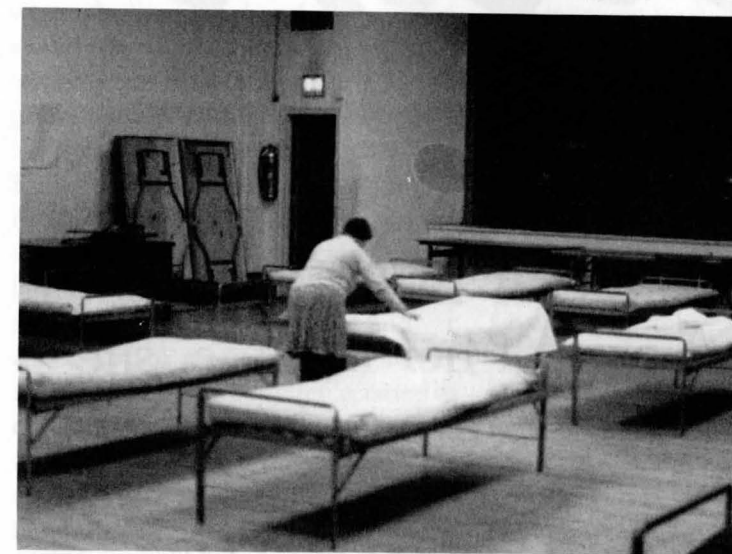
The twentieth century brought more changes to the Upper East Side. With the construction of large apartment buildings and the Lexington Avenue subway, the population exploded, reaching a peak of about 320,000 in the twenties. But the contrasts of wealth and poverty of the last century persisted. Consequently, volunteers continued their deep involvement in social welfare activities concentrated on youth, health, and employment.

"A Century of Service: Volunteers on the Upper East Side"

can be seen at the following locations:

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| Goldome Branches | 58th Street and Madison Avenue |
| 72nd Street and Third Avenue | August 1-30 |
| April 23-June 30 | |
| Hunter College | 68th Street and Lexington Avenue |
| 78th Street and Lexington Avenue | Lobby, West Building |
| July 1-31 | September 3-13 |

If you are interested in exploring possibilities for volunteer work, call the Yorkville Volunteer Center, which places volunteers for day, evening, and weekend work with 300 Manhattan agencies. The telephone is (212) 427-5754.



The Depression hit the neighborhood hard. In one response, Rosalie Manning, the head of Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, united other volunteer agencies to coordinate relief activities by creating the Yorkville Civic Council, an organization still active more than 50 years later.

In the postwar period, the demography of the area gradually changed. The upwardly mobile children of the immigrants moved out, often leaving their elderly parents behind. Tenements were torn down, high-rise apartments went up, and a new, younger, more affluent, and largely childless population moved in.

While still working in programs for the immigrant and young person, vol-

unteers began to focus more heavily on the elderly and the environment. The Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, now called the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association, remained a leader in the community. Under the direction of Celine Marcus (who is currently consultant to Hunter College's Special Gifts Campaign), it sponsored the area's first low-cost housing development for senior citizens, established the Lenox Hill Senior Citizens Center, set up day-care services, provided community organizing assistance, and engaged in a variety of other activities.

Today, volunteers and voluntary agencies are found everywhere on the Upper East Side, and almost every resident of the area is touched in some way

by their activities. Many Hunter students are volunteers and interns in local agencies serving the young, the elderly, others who need special attention, and the population at large. The School of Social Work, the Department of Urban Affairs, and other divisions of the College are training professionals who, working in local non-profit agencies, will coordinate the efforts of volunteers — and, in the Hunter tradition, do volunteer work themselves.

Hunter can continue to be proud of its contributions to a spirit of volunteerism that remains so strong on the Upper East Side. ■