

# Excerpts from MAYOR WAGNER'S Address to the Alumni

. . . These are days in which the subject of equality and equal rights is very much in the headlines—the deeply troubling and distressing headlines from Birmingham. And it is from this perspective that we may view Hunter College and our other fine City Colleges. This institution is a great equalizer—an equalizer of opportunity, an equalizer of status and an equalizer of potentiality for fulfillment. These colleges of the City University, of which Hunter is one of the great ornaments, are more than educational institutions. As important as they would be if they were only that, they stand, even more, for an idea—a concept—one of the most important concepts in the United States today—the idea of equal rights and equal opportunity. An intrinsic part of that idea, if not its actual kernel, is the system of free tuition which, to change the figure of speech, is part of the bedrock of our City University—and it always will be, as long as I am Mayor, if I have anything to say about it. And I will always have something to say about it when the free tuition system is under attack or in danger, as it is today.

I am glad to give recognition to the fact that the alumni of Hunter College are in the forefront of the fight to protect the free tuition system, a system which has a tradition more than a century old. But our resistance to any departure from the free tuition system is not because we dislike breaking with tradition. There are times when tradition should be broken to make way for improvement. I say to you, however—and I know all of you agree—that to break *this* tradition would be to move backward, away from the direction in which we must, in fact, move in the field of education, toward making ever more available the advantages of higher



*Mayor Wagner speaking at the Spring Reunion*

education, and actively reaching out, *especially*, for those students from the disadvantaged groups in our society, to provide indigenous leadership to those groups, and to equip an increasing number of our citizens with the skills that these times insist upon. . . .

One piece of Albany legislation brought the change, first of all—a single piece of legislation enacted two years ago which put into what is known as a legislative package three separate items: one, a student incentive program; second, an authorization for New York City to combine its colleges and establish a City University; third—the insidious pitfall—the repeal of the hundred-year-old mandate and the vesting of discretion in our Board of Higher Education to charge tuition in the City colleges. . . .

But that was only the first step. That was two years ago. The second step came last winter with the promulgation by the Trustees of the State University of a new schedule of tuition fees in all the colleges of the State University, accompanied by a broad policy pronouncement which told us that our retention of our system of free tuition was at our peril, at the peril of the City of New York, and at the peril of the students and future students at our City University. . . .

There is no longer any veiling of the threat to our system of free tuition in our City colleges. The threat



*Bess Myerson Grant '45 and President Meng  
at the Reception*

is quite naked. The drastic reprisals against the City colleges threatened by the Board of Trustees of the State University were not taken this year, and this has been described as a victory. But I do not consider it a victory when the Sword of Damocles continues to hang over the head of the free tuition system.

The fact is that one blow has fallen with the promulgation of the new fee schedule for the upstate colleges. Thus, next semester, twenty-four public State colleges will charge tuition where none has been charged before. I do not know how many students will be unable to enroll or to return to upstate colleges because of these tuition charges. If the number is only one, it is still one too many—and very much too many.

This is happening upstate, but this does not mean that we in this City are not directly affected. The boys and girls of New York City *are* affected. A very substantial number of them attend upstate colleges. Thus, more than 15 percent of the students attending the formerly free State Agricultural College at Ithaca, which trains farm specialists, come from the sidewalks of New York City.

This change has got to be fought, and fought hard. We must take the offensive. We must join with all like-minded groups all over this State, from one end of it to the other, to oppose the action that has been taken and to demand its reversal—both as it affects the upstate colleges, and as it will surely affect the City colleges, if we do not succeed in our efforts.

Here is a cause which, as surely as any other I can think of, calls for a crusade.

I do not suggest that free tuition is really free. It is costly to government, whether it is State government

or City government, if it is accompanied—as it must be—by a determination to keep high the levels of education at these institutions. The taxpayers must pay, and that means all of us. But we must pay for our elementary and secondary school systems, too.

There is no more reason, in my judgment, to establish a tuition charge for our public colleges than there is for our public grade and high schools.

A college education is no longer a luxury of the rich or the hallmark of the aristocratic few. It is a *necessity* for all our boys and girls who can usefully receive a college training.

The important principle is not the ability to pay. The important principle is that no one, not even one student who is otherwise qualified, shall be barred from attending a public college in this city and in the State, too, for lack of money for tuition.

Our City colleges have been a great force, through the years and the generations, for encouraging and providing leadership for the groups which have most recently arrived in this city—the successive waves of them. I know, if anyone knows. A diploma from City College is still today a treasure in the Wagner family. As many of you must know, it was my father's diploma. And it was the free tuition system that permitted him to go through City College. I have not forgotten this, nor will I ever.

Thus, I have a personal as well as an official motive in joining with you in solid ranks, in any and every effort we can make to press on with this fight. We will not relax or relent in it until victory crowns our efforts. I am sure that, in the end, it will.

*Dr. and Mrs. Gustave Rosenberg*

