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## New York Public Library Volunteers

**Abstract:** From the early 1970's to the present, this article explores the history of the New York Public Library volunteer program and explains how past volunteer initiatives have not only continued to support the Library's mission but have created many staff led departments that still exist today. Volunteers help the library to support staff efforts to serve New Yorkers and the larger world.

**Keywords:** Volunteering, New York Public Library, volunteer manager

### Ehrenamtliche an der New Yorker Public Library

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel behandelt das Freiwilligenprogramm der New York Public Library seit den frühen 1970er Jahren. Viele Initiativen der Freiwilligen haben nicht nur die Mission der Bibliothek weiterhin unterstützt, sondern auch viele von hauptamtlichen Mitarbeitern geleitete Abteilungen neu geschaffen, die heute noch existieren. Freiwillige unterstützen die Bibliothek bei den Bemühungen der hauptamtlichen Mitarbeiter, den New Yorkern und der ganzen Welt zu dienen.

**Schlagwörter:** Freiwilligenarbeit, Ehrenamt, New York Public Library, Management der Freiwilligen

### 1 Introduction

There is a strange coincidence happening as I write this piece about volunteering and the New York Public Library (NYPL). The Covid-19 pandemic has left New York City financially devastated, politically fraught and with an uncertain future. Fiscally, the situation is looking quite bleak, exactly where we were in 1975 when New York City was on the verge of bankruptcy and the NYPL volunteer program truly began. Back then, New Yorkers came forward and asked, "How can I help?", "What do you need?", "What can I do?" It was then, out of concern, that volunteers stepped forward to assist NYPL.

### 2 A look back

I joined the NYPL in 2000 as Coordinator of Volunteer Programs for the Research Libraries. They included what was then called the Humanities and Social Sciences Library and is now called the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building; the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B Cullman Center, and the Science, Industry and

Business Library. At that time we had 450 volunteers assisting in those four libraries. I was fortunate to arrive at a time when we still retained many staff and volunteers who had survived the 1975 fiscal crisis which spurred and strengthened the volunteer program at NYPL and can be traced back to approximately 1979. That year, a group of devoted New Yorkers, led by current NYPL Trustee, Barbara Fleischman, and assisted by then Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Richard Salomon, formed a group of supporters to bring new financial resources to NYPL and to raise awareness among city citizens that the library needed help.

### **3 Fundraisers and political activists**

Today, our official mission statement is to *inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen our communities*. That is exactly what that group of early volunteers set out to do in 1979. They were tasked with raising awareness about the library and raising money to help refurbish buildings and to replenish the collections.

NYPL's early volunteers assisted in three main areas: Special Events, Membership (fundraising) and Promotion. They were very successful with fundraising events. One early event was called "The Lecture Luncheon". It started in spring of 1980 with eighty people having a boxed lunch while writer and historian, David Halberstam, spoke to the eager audience and more recently packed the Bartos Forum with 450 people listening to former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, speak. Such fundraising programs started by volunteers brainstorming ideas together have evolved into successful staff-run and volunteer supported programs such as LIVE at NYPL. In fiscal year 2019, NYPL held close to 100 cultural events at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building alone, including both ticketed events and free programs. These programs were attended by roughly 17,000 guests and our ticket sales and associated sales (books, etc) generated \$334,753 in revenue.

Another early volunteer invention was the *Tables of Contents* fundraiser which ran from 1983 to 1995. New Yorkers opened their homes to 1200 unknown guests for small literary themed dinners with chefs from New York City's restaurants, cookbook writers and food critics along with special guests from the worlds of academia, literature, the performing arts and politics. It was called "The Night of 100 Dinners". During its eight years it raised more than one million dollars for the library. Those early days of volunteers finding ways to assist the library through tough economic times allowed for the future growth of staff led departments such as Development, LIVE@NYPL and Special Events.

While our early research library volunteers were fundraisers, our early branch library volunteers were political activists. They wrote letters to city and state officials urging for more funding for libraries and they attended community board meetings to advocate on behalf of libraries. They set up tables in their communities hosting petitions to collect signatures of support which were then sent to government officials to show that libraries were important to the citizens of New York City. I can recall firsthand the late 1970's and how the city's financial troubles had a negative impact on libraries. I was a pre-teen then and the library is where I went most days after school. It was bright and spacious and I could sit and read all afternoon, do my homework and then check out books for pleasure reading. I was devastated when budget cuts led to cuts in hours and service and my local library was padlocked and closed most days. Then and now, volunteers traveled with staff to Albany every year on Library Day, a day of advocacy, to ask New York State representatives for additional funding to support libraries. Those early volunteer efforts grew into what is today a fully staffed department called Government and Community Relations. Volunteers have created initiatives that over the years have created more jobs. As one of my volunteers explained to me, "I don't want a job. I have a career. Volunteering at the library is what I do for fun."

Early volunteer efforts were supervised committee style with a Volunteer Chair reporting directly to the Library President. As activities grew, various library staff were assigned additional duties in working with or training groups of volunteers such as Tour Guides or Welcome Desk volunteers.

In 1983 the NYPL hired a full time Volunteer Coordinator who was mostly concerned with the activities of the research library volunteers. The main volunteer office was located at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street and closely associated with the Friends of the Library, a membership and fundraising department since most volunteers were also financial supporters of the library. That position reported to our Deputy Director of Membership and was part of our Development or Fundraising team. In the early 1990's two full time assistants were added to the Volunteer Department.

At the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Performing Arts Library, and the Science, Industry and Business Library, there were very active volunteers called Lead Volunteers who helped run those programs with support from the paid Volunteer Coordinator. These Lead Volunteers were all part of the Executive Council of the Volunteers of the Research Libraries, a group of leadership volunteers who met 4-5 times a year to exchange updates and information and attend trainings with staff. They followed formal by-laws and held annual elections. At that time most activities continued to center around fundraising, membership, special events assistance, gift shop help, tours of each library and welcome or information desks at each location. There was a bit of push back from staff initially that the

Welcome Desk at each location should be staffed by librarians. However, when it was determined that the main questions were “Where is the bathroom?” and “What time is the next tour?” staff were happy to leave this task to volunteers. At every location the volunteers were trained by librarians so that they could refer patrons to the correct departments.

#### **4 Why people volunteer**

When I arrived as Volunteer Coordinator in 2000, the library was updating its very limited website. It was agreed that the Volunteer Department would have its own page. Once on the volunteer page, a person could download and print an application which was sent via postal mail to the main library. There were a few choices of activities that volunteers could assist with such as tour guide, gift shop helper, welcome desk and also tutoring for English Conversation Hours and administrative tasks in the Volunteer Office such as stuffing envelopes for special event invitations. When I began, the volunteers were a varied mix of “society ladies” from the founding of the program, to college students who were getting their MLS and wanted a more substantial volunteer experience, to teens who needed community service hours to meet school requirements. The volunteer program was beginning to experience growing pains and there were many activities happening, some that the library was aware of, and some happening in certain departments without following any policies or rules.

My first two years were mostly spent getting to know all of our staff and volunteers and figuring out all the many and varied departments that were utilizing volunteers and then seeing if we couldn't streamline some policies. I consolidated our list of which volunteers were “active”. My predecessor liked to have large numbers of volunteers to show in reports, but upon closer inspection many of those volunteers had not served the library in many years. I prefer to have fewer volunteers doing substantial (and documented) volunteer work, rather than many volunteers who pop in a few times a year and need to be constantly retrained. For starters we needed an application on file for everyone. Emergency contact information for everyone. A description of what tasks volunteers were performing. Up to date hours reporting and designated sign-in (and out) sheets for all departments and every volunteer. I quickly discovered that there were many volunteers who felt that they “didn't need credit for their hours served”. However, for insurance reasons it was very important for my department to know when and for how long our volunteers were in the building. At that time we carried a separate insurance rider for volunteers in case anything happened to them while performing their duties on library property. So, while some generous volunteers felt they didn't need to be acknowledged for all their time donated, our insurance company felt differently. Today, all of our volunteers are covered under our General Liability

policy for acts within their scope of activities while at NYPL. Also, it is important to track accurate volunteer hours as they may often be part of requested information on grant applications.

I came to Volunteer Management with an unusual background. My decade of experience in the fashion industry had exposed me to working with high profile celebrities, magazine editors and demanding department store executives , while my more immediate time spent as a director of a volunteer program in a large medical center gave me the organizational skills to help move NYPL’s volunteer program into the future. I had also recently received a certificate in Volunteer Management. My lifelong experience as a volunteer myself helped me to empathize with what volunteers wanted, expected and needed. I feel that it is very important that the person overseeing a volunteer program is also an experienced volunteer.

## **5 Managing volunteers is like a puzzle**

There are many reasons why people volunteer and understanding a person's motivation to give their time can help staff connect that volunteer to the right projects or service opportunities. Do they love your library and your mission and wish to give back to an institution that they have benefited from for purely altruistic reasons? I often hear from patrons who utilized all the free offerings of NYPL when they were younger and now that their children are grown they have the time to give back to help others. Other volunteer applicants would like to learn new skills. It could be a retiree who would like to become more computer savvy, or someone who is considering a career change and maybe wishes to apply to library school. Many volunteers offer their time and talents for purely social reasons. Perhaps they have recently moved to New York City and wish to feel connected to their new home or they might be older and have lost a life partner and are hoping to meet like-minded people for possible friendships.

I feel that interviewing, training and placing volunteers is much like a puzzle. If you match the right volunteer to the correct task, everything fits well. If you just fit volunteers into whatever openings you have without careful consideration, the whole puzzle falls apart. One of the hardest things to master as a Volunteer Engagement professional is saying “no” to potential volunteers who are not the right fit with your current open volunteer positions or your mission.

In my early years at the library I noticed that while we had volunteers in all of our research libraries, utilization of volunteers in our circulating libraries, known as branches, was quite varied. Some libraries had well run, robust volunteer programs and other libraries had no volunteers at all. A few libraries had problems with volunteers because staff had never been trained properly to work with them. Other

locations were hostile to volunteers because they felt that volunteers might be taking away their jobs. A few locations had volunteers because they didn't want to be rude and say "no" to offers from volunteers but they were unsure how they should be utilizing them.

In 2008 I was promoted to Manager of Volunteers at NYPL. I was tasked with organizing all volunteer efforts at all of our 92 locations. I looked forward to meeting my colleagues all over the city and their devoted volunteers. At this time the Volunteer Department began reporting to our Vice President of the Branch Libraries while I still attended all management meetings relating to our Research libraries. My department grew from 400 volunteers to 1400.

The NYPL Volunteer Department is presently part of our Human Resources department. It makes sense to be a part of Human Resources since they advertise, recruit, select and train the best staff for open positions and we do the same for volunteer openings to support the critical work of our staff. Today there are two staff in the department, myself, the Volunteer Manager, and my colleague who is our Volunteer Program Assistant. The Stephen A. Schwarzman Building also has a Manager of our Visitor Volunteer Program who supervises the more than ninety volunteers that welcome researchers and tourists from around the world. That position reports to our Communications department as there is much constantly changing information that must be communicated between the library and the volunteers so that they accurately convey information to the visiting public. Even though we report to different departments, we share an office, which makes for a great Volunteer Management team. We also have two devoted volunteers that are an integral part of our office. Judy is a retired Library Director from a neighboring library system and gives all of our incoming applications a first look. She sends the best applications to me for review, saving me much time. Ulla is the retired executive assistant of a hospital president. She answers our tour line and gives prospective visitors all the information they need regarding setting up tours and visiting the midtown area.

We have a very successful volunteer program at NYPL for a number of reasons. We have very detailed Volunteer Service Descriptions for each open volunteer position. Every position must be vetted by staff in Human Resources to insure that the volunteer position supports existing staff but never replaces the duties of staff.

Staff work with volunteers because they have requested their help or they want to include volunteers. We never insist that any library department must have volunteers.

## 6 Match the best volunteers

We have an exacting Volunteer Onboarding Checklist so that staff across the organization are all taking the same steps when welcoming new volunteers. It walks staff step by step through all the necessary paperwork and required basic training such as Child Safety Training and New York City Sexual Harassment Prevention Training. Once accepted, all volunteers receive a Volunteer Handbook outlining NYPL policies, procedures and benefits of volunteering.

We have a redesigned application that helps highlight the best applicants for each service description. We have the ability to frequently update our website to add or remove open volunteer positions and we are extremely lucky in that our website gets thousands of visits each day. We do partner with a few outside community organizations where we list our volunteer openings but the majority of applicants arrive through our website [www.nypl.org](http://www.nypl.org). We also have the ability to search through incoming volunteer applications by keywords or even zip codes, making it much easier to find potential matches for open positions throughout Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island.

We ask probing questions during both phone and in-person interviews in order to match the best volunteers to the position based on their responses, motivations and skills. For example, does the applicant prefer to engage with visitors, or are they more comfortable working alone on a project in an office? Do they speak a foreign language? Will they be satisfied with a project that might include repetitive tasks like mailings or do they need more intellectually stimulating assignments such as tutoring or being a docent? Matching volunteers to the right task helps with volunteer retention and satisfaction. The Volunteer Office then sends the applicant on to the department or branch library to meet the manager and have a final interview and orientation.

Most NYPL volunteers donate their time once a week for four hours. We require a minimum commitment of one year for most positions, though we do have a few short term or summer-only positions available as well. Having opportunities with varied time lengths helps meet the needs of our community, allowing our patrons to engage with us not only by checking out books, utilizing our electronic databases and attending programs, but by also giving their time. It helps our patrons be more involved volunteers, and our volunteers to be more involved and active library users.

In return, we offer ongoing training and invitations to special events, talks and programs such as our annual Holiday Open House and Volunteer Recognition Day, discounts in the library's retail shops and for tickets to LIVE@NYPL. Our office also has a relationship with theater management companies and in the past we have been able to offer free tickets to off-broadway shows to our active volunteers.

## 7 Stay in contact

In this strange time of social distancing and an uncertain future, we have had to reinvent ourselves in not only what projects volunteers can work on, but how do we keep them involved with the library so that when we eventually return to full service, we have not lost them to other causes or institutions?

We have made extraordinary efforts to stay in contact with all of our current 900+ volunteers. We've been calling, emailing, Zoom meeting and sending postcards and letters to keep everyone engaged. Nearly all of our volunteer readers who assist visually impaired patrons have continued to work with their assigned patrons from home, utilizing Webex, Zoom or other meeting apps to communicate with each other.

We have redirected many of our volunteers to act as Census Ambassadors, helping spread the word about the vital importance of the United State's decennial census. An accurate count helps communities to get their fair share of federal funding for hospitals, schools, roads and other public works along with support for many social service programs. This was originally intended to be a huge, in-person collaboration this year between our staff and volunteers to get the message out to our patrons. Instead, our volunteers are posting messages to social media, making phone calls and participating in text banking and assisting by doing simple tasks like hanging posters about the Census in their apartment building laundry rooms.

Our docents at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, missed giving their daily tours and so invented a new project for themselves. They sought my input and approval on giving Zoom tours of the famed building to local groups that they belong to. I collected photos and video clips from our Communications Department and tours are now being given to book clubs, political clubs, senior citizen groups and homeowner associations. I attended a virtual tour last week at the Bronxville Library along with 32 others who vow to make an in-person visit when we reopen to the public. I was also thrilled when our very creative docent mentioned some key items that were available in the retail shop and included the link to the gift shops online website in the chat box. Even while home, our dedicated volunteers are living our mission to advance knowledge and strengthen our communities!

## 8 Coming challenges

In Fiscal Year 2019, NYPL had 1,374 volunteers who donated 79,922 hours of their time to the library. Those volunteers welcomed visitors at our information desks, gave tours to more than 24, 000 people, helped children with their homework and assisted adults to learn to read and write and improve their

English language skills. They worked in archives, sorting and organizing so that the work of cataloguing could be done by our staff. Acting as ambassadors for the library they welcomed guests to hundreds of events and taught people to knit, paint, dance, learn a foreign language, make jewelry, crochet and play chess. They acted as career coaches, job search advisors and helped patrons fine tune their resumes. They helped staff shelve books and edge collections. They read to our visually impaired patrons and assisted them with their mail, filling out forms and even helping them order groceries online. They spearheaded membership tables to help raise funds and they are a crucial part of the audio studio operations at our Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library.

I'm unsure what our statistics will look like for FY20 and FY21 as we all continue working from home in an uncertain time, but I do know that for New York City to recover from this latest economic and psychological devastation it will take New Yorkers helping each other and asking questions like they did in 1975, "How can I help?", "What do you need?", "What can I do?" I am certain that we will be able to rely upon our NYPL volunteers to help us meet the coming challenges.



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