

# Beyond 246<sup>th</sup> Street: Service to the Community

by Nola Kende Long

**T**he concept of community goes back literally to the times of the first peoples, who gathered together in small groups to help each other survive the harsh realities of life on earth. Whether they understood that they had created a community is unimportant; what matters is that they had a shared sense of mission and together they built upon their shared experiences.

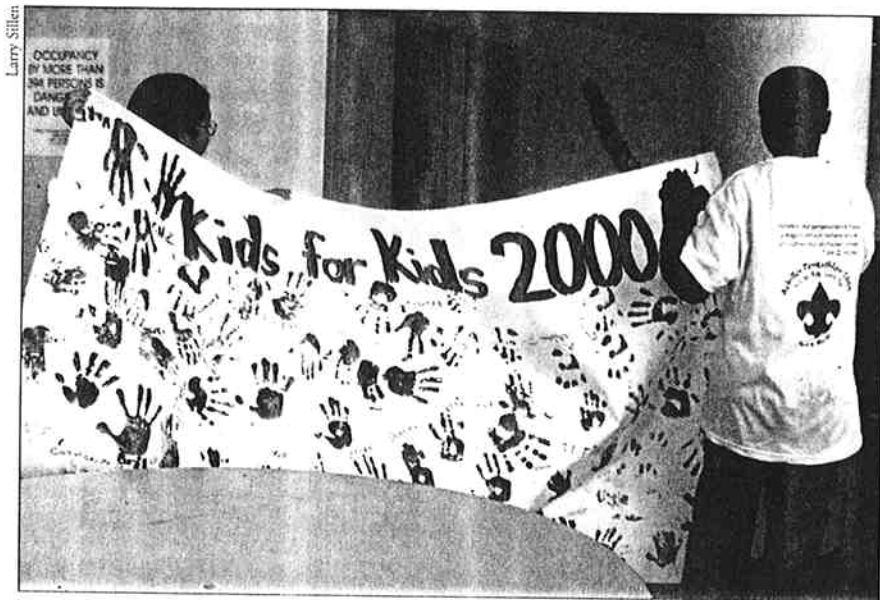
Today, the concept of community hasn't changed much. People still gather in groups to celebrate, to work, and to live in ways that strengthen the human experience on earth more than individuals can achieve alone. Schoolyards, hallways, and classrooms are no exception as groups of young people and teachers gather to further their studies, their experiences, their knowledge, their humanity. "Community draws its strength from a shared sense of mission..." states Horace Mann's strategic plan, a poignant recognition on the part of its drafters of what we, as a school, are forever striving to be.

Within the realm of our community, which includes 1681 students, 221 faculty, 101 other personnel, 4 campuses, and more than 120 acres of land, a sense of mission is embodied in what is aptly titled community service. There is no confusion surrounding this term, it simply means what it says: service to the community. What can be interpreted is what kind of service and to which community; the answer to which lies only within each individual student.

Mandatory community service started at Horace Mann in 1988 with the vision of a program by then headmaster Gordon I. Newcombe, which was created, designed, and implemented by faculty member Wendy Reiter. The concept: to introduce upper division students to community service through a required program. Headmaster Newcombe always felt, said Wendy, that service was a part of a student's education. While community service was historically a part of the Horace Mann way, as



*Supporting an Achill*



The Achilles Kids-HM Pentathlon 2000 banner showcased the day.

evidenced by the Saturday Tutoring Project, established over forty years ago and the academic mentoring program that had been a model program for other independent schools for more than forty-five years, it was never formalized and was never made an official part of the curriculum.

This new program, heavily debated because of its mandatory requirement, was a work-in-progress, says Wendy. Initially, she wasn't sure about the success of the program because of the hefty eighty-hour requirement (divvied up into forty hours in ninth and tenth grades and forty hours in eleventh and twelfth), but she came to believe in the wisdom of that choice. In the first year of the program, Wendy initiated an association with the Bronx Special Olympics, one that would continue for about seven years. Approximately one hundred students turned out to help make an Olympic village, with booths, events, activities, and everything one might expect. Over the next year or two, Wendy developed a computer system to log in students' community service hours, established a community service advisory board, produced a handbook detailing different service opportunities, and most importantly, defined what service was. "I always felt that we had to develop the program to reach students on different comfort levels and that if the program was going to be successful, it had to be meaningful," says Wendy.

What has been a big help since the beginning, reflects Wendy, is that the program has had strong support from the administration with a budget, dedicated staff, office space, and assistants to make sure it runs smoothly. The support demonstrated that service was a valued and key element to a Horace Mann education. Two years ago, John McIvor took over the program from Wendy. As director of community service,



Eileen Mullady and Dick Traum '58 share a smile during the Achilles Kids first year on campus, in the spring of 1999.

much of John's time throughout the year is dedicated to overseeing the community service program, which has been well organized since the beginning. Even so, there have been challenges in fine-tuning the program to be the most beneficial it can be for both students and the outside community. One of John's particular concerns is in making sure that students find the right balance between community service work that takes place on campus and the type of work that takes place in the outside world. For instance, many opportunities exist on campus, such as tutoring other students, helping out with the website, or other school-related projects that are worthwhile, but do not expose students to people beyond school boundaries who could benefit from the program. He would like to see a committee established that would help address this issue on an on-going basis so that students' community service hours are appropriately balanced between internal and external service.

To help keep community service running smooth,



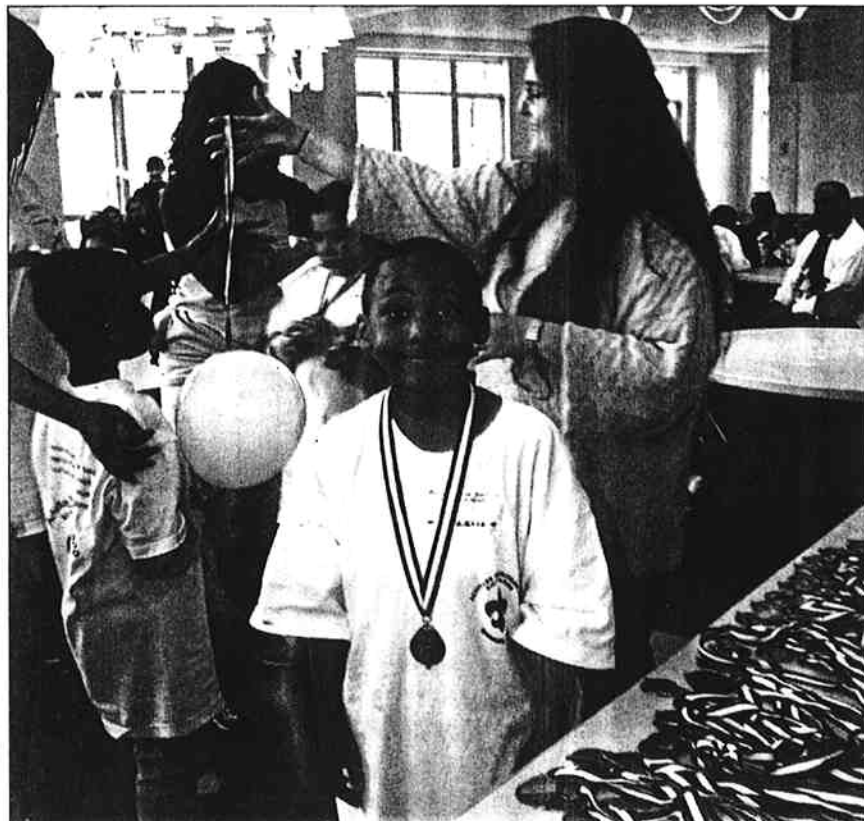
"Bobsledding" was just one of the many sporting events that kids at the Achilles Kids-HM Pentathlon 2000 had a chance to try.

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*says Amanda.*

John selects a new student community service coordinator each year to lead the Upper Division program. It always has to be someone whom John would describe as “super-motivated, well-rounded, organized, and certainly committed to service.” It is the student community service coordinator’s job to organize and be responsible for the major service events on campus, currently Sanctuary for Families and Achilles Kids-HM Pentathlon, as well as to be available to other students for questions and help with fulfilling their service requirements, which can sometimes seem daunting.

While some students dislike the mandatory hours, many others appreciate the push in that direction, as Amanda Fenster '01 readily points out. Currently, Amanda is the student community service coordinator for this academic year. Like many other students, Amanda is busy juggling about a thousand things and trying to give one hundred percent to all of them. She was turned on to community service in the tenth grade, even though she had already performed lots of service in both the eighth and ninth grades as part of the requirement. She admits that if it weren't for the requirement beginning in eighth grade, Amanda may not have found this part of her life that she believes is crucial to her makeup. By the tenth grade, she was recruited to be one of the core volunteers helping out the student coordinator, who tries to have at least two students per grade as part of his or her bevy of helpers.



Larry Sillan

When the event portion of Achilles Kids-HM Pentathlon 2000 was over, an awards ceremony, complete with medals took place.

By eleventh grade, Amanda knew that she wanted to be intimately involved with community service on a host of levels. The rewards, Amanda finds, far outweigh the work that goes into projects, as was demonstrated to her last year during the awards ceremony for the Achilles Kids-HM Pentathlon. “After the athletic part of the day was over, we had a barbecue and an awards ceremony. Everyone got a medal. After the ceremony was over, this little kid came up to me and gave me his medal and said ‘thank you, you’ve made my year.’ I just burst into tears. I had this feeling that by doing this project, I had an impact on someone’s life in just five hours. It made all of the work that I put into it worthwhile. It was such a great feeling and couldn’t be matched by all the A’s in the world,” says Amanda.

Projects like Achilles Kids-HM Pentathlon, which is in its third year, really bring people together, says both Amanda and her predecessor, Patricia Hernandez '00, who is now a Harvard freshman. Achilles Kids is sponsored by the Achilles Track Club, which was established by alumnus Dick Traum '58 in 1983. The kids program, touts its website, is a “running/walking/rolling program for children with all types of disabilities (and their non-disabled siblings). The aim is to promote the joy of these activities and to encourage all kids to participate at whatever level they can. Through



Santa usually makes an appearance during the Sanctuary dinner.

our combined school program and at our own events, over twenty-five hundred children with disabilities have run/walked/rolled farther than they ever thought possible, proving that disabled does not mean unable." Last year, over eighty disabled kids and their parents as well as one hundred and fifty volunteers came to the Horace Mann campus to participate in a full day of athletic events, complete with an awards ceremony and barbecue. It's an inspirational experience, explains Patricia, who feels that community service is important "because you feel the sense of being part of a larger community. It shows you what you have and what you can do for others. It also allows you to meet a diverse group of people."

For Dick Traum, the ability to bring both kids and himself back to Horace Mann for such an event is meaningful in that "it exposes Horace Mann students to other young people who are disabled and helps to reduce the feeling of awkwardness that many people have. At the same time, it allows our kids to have an opportunity to use their bodies and participate in various sporting events—it's the nicest day of the year for some of them."

The main community event on campus during the winter months is the annual Sanctuary for Families dinner and holiday party. While the sheer number of people is much less, it is no less important for those who come to participate. A Manhattan-based nonprofit, Sanctuary for Families is a shelter for battered

and abused women and their children. It provides a much-needed place to help families get back on their feet after life shattering experiences. Since 1993, Horace Mann students have been connecting with these women and their children first through the Sanctuary's own holiday party and then, through an annual holiday dinner here on campus beginning in 1995. Completely organized and run by students, under the direction of the student coordinator, the holiday dinner always brings out emotional goodwill on the part of the attendees and the volunteers. It is a chance for these women and their kids to simply have fun in a new setting, with good food, good cheer, and of course, gifts for the kids. "It was the highlight of my year," reflects Patricia describing the incredible experience of seeing the children interacting with the Horace Mann students and having a great time. Mary Ann Mailman, the president of the board of Sanctuary for Families, feels that the work Horace Mann students have been doing is extremely important to her families. "Horace Mann's annual holiday party is a major highlight of the season, and is always eagerly anticipated by the women and children of Sanctuary. For most of Sanctuary's clients, the holiday season is a difficult time — a time apart from familiar surroundings and the comfort of friends and family. The Sanctuary staff redoubles its efforts during the holidays to help clients experience the joy and hope that is the hallmark of the season. One need only look at the faces of the Sanctuary moms and their children, upon their arrival at the Horace Mann party, to know just how meaningful the event is to them. The festive atmosphere, holiday music, wonderful presents, delicious food, and of course, the appearance of Santa Claus, truly helps to make the season bright. But most importantly, for those who have made the difficult decision to leave a life of violence, it is heartwarming to experience the warmth and love of concerned students; the fellowship of a caring community; and the generosity of others," she says.

To be a caring community is a lesson taught early on at Horace Mann. Beginning in the Nursery Division, students along with parents are involved in projects that provide benefit to both the Nursery Division community and the surrounding one. For instance, in most years, the big project for nursery students is Common Cents New York, Inc., a program that encourages schools to collect and count coins for donations to different charities. Each year, the students collect coins and then come in to school on a Saturday to count them up. Sometimes they participate in the decision-making process of which charity will receive the donation. Other projects such as a crayon drive, where crayons are sent to a school in the Philippines and a book drive that donates books to a

Harlem school, all serve to introduce nursery-age students to the concept of giving to others.

In the transition from nursery years to the Lower Division, service becomes a bit more organized and formal, mainly through the efforts of the program Caring-in-Action. The mission of Caring-in-Action is to “involve students from kindergarten through fifth grade in a series of coordinating activities engaging their hands, their minds, and their hearts. The program has at its center, developmentally appropriate opportunities for students to care for and serve their own community within the framework of daily school life. Through their active engagement with service activities, students are given the necessary foundation for understanding their roles as caring individuals...both individually and within a group, as well as for the larger world.” Says Pat VanderWerff and Louise Parms, two key faculty running the program, “it is important for children to learn to play a role in the community and that they can make a difference.”

Translating a program's goals into reality for students is sometimes difficult, however, Lower Division students, along with their teachers, have initiated and continue many projects that service both the internal Horace Mann community and the outside one. Projects such as a candy drive, which gathers candy to give out at the Upper Division Sanctuary for Families dinner, to the annual WonderWalk, which raises money for the March of Dimes, involve the entire Lower Division and its student body. Smaller projects like clothing and children's video drives for neighborhood shelters, outreach programs like choral concerts and visits to people in homes for the elderly around Riverdale are practiced throughout the year, mainly by individual classrooms. No matter the size of the project, however, both students and teachers feel the end results are worthwhile, knowing that it is valuable time well spent.

The experiences that students have in the Lower Division reinforce their desire to continue participating once they enter the Middle Division, where service becomes a required activity (consisting of either three in-school community service projects or one out-of-school project, depending on the student's interest). Lynne Hirschhorn, who has headed the community service program for middle schoolers since its inception six years ago, recently handed the program over to faculty member Paul Wood. Over the last number of years, the program has grown to include about twenty-two community service choices from which students may choose. One favorite destination, says Lynne, is the Trinity Church in Manhattan, where students help out with food preparation and distribution to the homeless. “It's very hands-on and the church is very welcoming,” says Lynne, “allowing students to literally

get their hands dirty in order to help out.” Other programs from wrapping toys for the holidays and preparing gift baskets to bingo at the Hebrew Home for the Aged to making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the Midnight Run all serve to reinforce the concept that helping others is a worthwhile endeavor, a lesson that students learn well.

Many students go above and beyond the requirements. For instance, eighth grader Erica Wolf '05, says Lynne, read an article about a young girl who organized a suitcase drive for children moving from foster home to foster home. The success of her drive led to a national program. Using this program as a guide, Erica brought this drive to Horace Mann and organized a suitcase drop off location. The suitcases were then delivered to area shelters. Two other outstanding service projects worth mentioning, among many others, are the Council to Combat Teen Violence (CCTV) started last year by a team of psychiatrists and high school students. The CCTV's goal is to teach kids to combat the cruelties of rejection and ridicule, and to embrace the values of tolerance and acceptance. A second innovative project was organized and directed Sabrina Kippur '01. She planned, raised substantial funds, and continues to lead a program called Sundays in New York. Thanks to Sabrina's ingenuity and concern for underprivileged kids, more than a dozen children spend one Sunday afternoon a month on an educational and recreational outing.

In the Upper Division, community work that goes above and beyond expectations is rewarded with recognition at the end of every year. Two awards, the Gordon I. Newcombe Community Service Award and the Allard K. Lowenstein '45 Alumni Award, both honor exemplary service and leadership to both the Horace Mann community and the surrounding one. The recognition is just one small way of recognizing those students who take service and leadership to new levels. It is likely that in any given year there are many students throughout all of the divisions who deserve recognition for the work they do without thought to the time and effort involved or to the things they have to give up in order to do them. Initiatives like this keep the community service program running strong. It is what helps our students fulfill the expectations of the administration whose “educational challenge is to create a community where students will benefit most broadly and deeply from each other's intellects and experiences throughout the day, inside and outside of the classroom. We believe that success at an early age in understanding issues of community is a primary goal of excellence in education.” —LHM

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