

# From Julie Sandorf, President of the Foundation

Fall 2015

During his life, Charles H. Revson built an extraordinary business empire and focused his considerable philanthropic activities in New York City, his adopted home. Judge Simon Rifkind, who served as the first Chair of the Revson Foundation's Board of Directors, wrote, "Charles Revson's zeal to learn was prodigious—he reached the heights of his chosen profession but never forgot those who struggled below. The Board of Directors has striven to approach our task with the creativity and belief in man's capacity for improvement that distinguished Charles Revson."

Like other well-known philanthropists, Charles Revson was a self-made man. When the Foundation was endowed after his death in 1975, Mr. Revson gave the Board a mandate to innovate, allowing it unusual freedom to chart the Foundation's course. Drawing on Mr. Revson's personal philanthropic interests, the founding Trustees established four areas of activity: Education, Bio-medical Research, Urban Affairs, and Jewish life, which includes grant making in Israel. Following the lead of my predecessors, Eli Evans and Lisa Goldberg, and guided by Trustees, current and former, who shared Mr. Revson's passion for creativity and innovation, we strive to remain true to his legacy of "expanding knowledge" and his love for New York City through continued investments in all four program areas.

2015 marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revson Foundation. Much has changed since 1975—in the philanthropic landscape, in New York City, and in our world. Forty years ago, New York was in dire financial straits, facing bankruptcy and massive population losses that were the harbinger of severe reductions in services and widespread neighborhood disinvestment and abandonment in the years to come. The Internet and the role of technology in our daily lives were literally unimaginable. The growth and diversity of the philanthropic sector—from the rise of living "mega-donors" to the unprecedented wealth that has been created during this latest gilded age—present very interesting challenges as well as opportunities for smaller foundations with a broad mandate such as ours.

The Foundation's interest in helping to re-imagine New York City's public branch libraries is a unique opportunity to make a difference in the lives of millions of New Yorkers and also remain true to values and intent of its benefactor. The Libraries' very mission is to nurture the human capacity for improvement, with a physical presence in every single neighborhood-- aligning well with two of our four major program area—education and urban affairs.

In a city that has again become a magnet and adopted home for millions of “strivers”—immigrants seeking better lives for themselves and their families, young people attracted to its opportunities and vibrancy, older residents who want to remain active members of community life, and all New Yorkers with a “zeal to learn”—New York’s 207 branch libraries, located in every neighborhood across the City, are ideal venues for “expanding knowledge” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Millions of New Yorkers rely on their local branch for Internet access, job search assistance, English-as-a-second-language classes, homework help, community and cultural programs, and a safe and horizon-expanding place to go after school. The branches also continue to serve their essential role of offering free access to books and other reading materials for pleasure and curiosity. For a 21<sup>st</sup> century New York City, with 41% of its population foreign born and 2.9 million residents lacking access to the Internet at home, the branch libraries are lifelines to opportunity.

Yet, despite the City’s spectacular rebound from its darkest years and the overwhelming demand for library services in the “information economy,” our branch libraries have suffered from decades of neglect and public sector disinvestment. At the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, New York City’s branch libraries saw a 27% increase in program offerings, 40% increase in program attendance, and a 59% increase in circulation—ranking the City’s public libraries among the national top 10 in each of these categories. Huge increases in demand for library services were met by a beleaguered system. Budgets were slashed even as collectively New York City’s branch libraries failed to make the top 10 in terms of local government funding and average hours of service per week, when compared to other major U.S. cities, including Boston, Seattle, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Houston. In addition, many branches were crumbling to the ground because of over \$1.5 billion in decades-deferred construction and repair needs.

In the face of these daunting challenges, how could a foundation with relatively limited resources make any sort of significant and sustaining difference? Was it a combination of folly, hubris, and audaciousness to think that we could play a role in re-envisioning the urban neighborhood public library for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Could we help shatter the conventional wisdom of opinion leaders who spoke of the “irrelevance of the community library” in the digital age, but had never stepped foot in branch libraries teeming with people from all backgrounds and all ages? Could we help give voice to the millions of New Yorkers who depend daily on their neighborhood libraries? To the front-line library staff who dedicate their lives to serving their communities?

Our resources were few, and our passion for branch libraries was certainly not fashionable. To quote our colleagues at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, our goals were ambitious: “Nothing short of placing branch libraries at the heart of community life and strengthening their capacity to serve as vibrant, flexible and responsive community institutions.”

Over the past six years, our grant-making strategy has embodied the following elements:

**I. Raising public awareness about the value and centrality of branch libraries to the health and welfare of communities:**

- The Foundation supported the Center for an Urban Future's (CUF) groundbreaking research and policy analysis of the myriad roles and services provided by branch libraries. CUF's report, "Branches of Opportunity," served as an independent and singularly authoritative resource for policy, advocacy, and media reporting on NYC's libraries. "Branches of Opportunity" and the Revson-funded "Re-envisioning New York's Branch Libraries," CUF's analysis of the capital needs of the city's libraries, were cited in numerous media outlets, editorials, public hearings, and opinion pieces. CUF's independent, fact-based research made a resoundingly clear case for library investment.
- CUF's "Re-envisioning Libraries" symposium invited five multidisciplinary design teams to tackle the capital needs crisis and physical design challenges facing the branch libraries. Presented to a standing-room-only audience of hundreds of people from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, the symposium attracted wide-scale interest and attention.
- The Revson Foundation established the NYC Neighborhood Library Awards program, the country's first and largest cash awards recognizing excellence in branch libraries. In 2013, the first year of the Awards program, Revson teamed up with Brian Lehrer of New York Public Radio to ask New Yorkers to tell us what they loved about their libraries. Over 4,300 people responded, and 10 libraries were chosen for recognition and funding. In 2014, we partnered with WNYC and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for the second Awards program, which generated over 13,400 submissions, representing every single branch library in the City. In addition to increased cash prizes, the branch library staff at each of the 10 finalist libraries was honored with recognition from local elected officials, as well as significant local media attention.
- Revson Foundation staff was proactive in advocating for the branch libraries. Staff penned opinion pieces, which appeared in major media outlets, testified at multiple public hearings, and spoke at public and foundation forums.

## **II. Encouraging partnerships between the libraries and like-minded community and institutional partners to expand and enhance services:**

- With Revson support, Lincoln Center partnered with the Queens Library to establish “Lincoln Center Local”—bringing first-rate live performing arts to Queens Library branches. Now in its fifth year, Lincoln Center Local has expanded to libraries throughout the City and continues to play to packed crowds.
- The Brooklyn Public Library, with Revson funding, established a Department of Outreach Services, designed specifically to build partnerships with community organizations and city agencies to expand services to underserved populations, including immigrants, older adults, and homeless individuals.
- Funding for a partnership between the NYC Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs and the New York Public Library to expand the number and geographic diversity of English language classes.
- Supporting a partnership between Spaceworks and the Brooklyn Public Library to revitalize the second floor of the Williamsburgh Library as performing and visual artists’ studio and rehearsal space and integrating the visual and performing arts into the life and culture of the branch library.
- Funding the Queens Museum to expand its partnerships with the Queens Library and to create the nation’s first fully integrated museum-library service model at a branch located inside the Queens Museum.

## **III. Supporting the libraries’ transition to the Digital Age:**

- Funding research and convening conducted by Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society of major publishers, library leaders, and policy advocates to explore emerging business models for distribution of eBooks to public libraries. Follow-up funding was provided to the New York Public Library to develop and implement pilot

programs with major publishers to test and assess potential business models for eBook sales/leasing to libraries. Funding was also provided to establish “ReadersFirst,” a national coalition of public libraries that collaborated to develop and advocate for more effective interface tools for the borrowing of eBooks.

- Supporting the development and implementation of “JobMap,” a new online assessment tool for job seekers throughout the Queens Library system. JobMap has now expanded to the Brooklyn Public Library.

#### **IV. Encouraging collaboration between the City’s three library systems to realize cost efficiencies and to enhance the quality and reach of services to all New Yorkers:**

- In 2011, Revson funded the first ever convening of professional and Trustee leaders representing the City’s three library systems (New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, and Queens Public Library), and senior leadership from the Bloomberg administration at Gracie Mansion. This retreat served to identify the common challenges shared by the three systems as opportunities to collaborate across systems to enhance efficiencies and effectiveness of services across the City. The retreat was followed by a decision by the City, all three library systems, and Revson to invest in a “Tri-library” shared technical services initiative, resulting in across-the-board cost savings of over \$2 million annually.
- Revson supported NYPL to implement the “New Chapter” program, a partnership among all three systems to temporarily waive outstanding fines for all patrons under the age of 18.
- In 2014-2015, Revson worked collaboratively with the three systems and funded the “Invest in Libraries” campaign, an unprecedented initiative to increase public funding and support for branch libraries. Revson’s support enabled, for the first time, the three systems to spur advocacy activities at the branch level and to coordinate public education, outreach, and engagement of front-line staff, patrons, and media across the City.

By 2015, the woeful physical conditions and severely underfunded budgets of NYC’s branch libraries were front and center in the City’s policy discourse. Over the past six years, Revson

staff established trusting relationships with a renewed and energetic leadership across all three systems, all willing to work collaboratively towards a common goal—the re-envisioning and revitalization of our branch libraries. The editorial pages of the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Daily News*, and the *Staten Island Advance* all strongly called for dramatic increases in City funding of branch libraries, and the outpouring of activity by tens of thousands of New Yorkers re-energized the City Council to fight vigorously for the libraries. By the end of the FY 16 budget process, six day a week service was restored—with some branches open seven days a week! And, for the first time, libraries were included in the City’s Ten-Year Capital Plan, with an allocation of close to \$400 million.

There is now a very strong foundation in place to re-imagine and innovate the urban branch library of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our work, however, is far from complete. How can the branch library become an anchor for community revitalization and inclusion in a land-starved city that has become unaffordable to many residents? Revson has teamed up with the Robin Hood Foundation to establish “New Stories,” an ambitious effort to support the rebuilding of deteriorated branch libraries as mixed-use library and affordable housing. This initiative not only promises to deliver state-of-the-art libraries, but also hundreds of units of affordable housing and the engagement of communities in their planning and development.

Revson has also recently funded the NYPL to significantly expand a branch library “Innovation Fund,” which provides small grants to test new ideas and programs that are aligned with community needs and interests. If successful, we hope to expand the Fund across all systems. We will continue to help the libraries strengthen their capacity to expand public support for the branches and develop new partnerships that leverage the social and intellectual assets of libraries for the common good.

The leadership, faith, trust, and patience of the Trustees of the Revson Foundation, and their willingness to take risks and encourage staff to participate actively in the public conversation, created a significant multiplier effect, leveraging limited funding resources to “advance knowledge” and promote opportunity for all New Yorkers, regardless of age, background, or place of origin. I am grateful to the Revson Trustees, current and past, and to my professional predecessors for nurturing a culture that encourages innovation, risk-taking, and creativity in the service of building a strong future for all New Yorkers.