



## Union Settlement College Readiness Turns 50

2014 will mark the 50th Anniversary of Union Settlement's College Readiness Program (USCRP). During these 50 years, USCRP and the related Upward Board program have helped over 20,000 young people gain admission to college, the overwhelming majority of whom are the first in their families to do so. This is life changing work and one of our greatest achievements.

In preparation for this anniversary we have begun researching the history of this program and reaching out to alumni and former staff to hear their stories. Each new document and conversation reveals the challenges the students faced and the dramatic backdrop of the period when this initiative began. Local teachers, community members, young people and their parents, as well as colleges that had very few low income students of color, were inspired to work together to make change and advance opportunity for East Harlem students.



*Union Settlement College Readiness Summer Workshop Class of 1968 on the steps of Earl Hall at Columbia University*



*A recent class of College Readiness participants on the campus of Drew University.*

### The Early Years

In 1963, **Marshall Kaplan**, a teacher from Benjamin Franklin High School walked into Union Settlement seeking help for students who had the capacity to go to college, but did not have the resources or the support. When word reached **William Kirk**, the headworker, he immediately asked his wife, **Mary Kirk**, to get involved. Mary Kirk described the beginning of her deep involvement with the College Readiness Program as being "in the right

*continued on page 3*

#### IN THIS ISSUE:

**A Message from the Executive Director, p. 2 • Staff Spotlight: Danese Forbes, p. 5 • Leading Union Settlement College Readiness, p. 6 • Foundation Profile: The Isaac H. Tuttle Fund, p. 6 • Donor Spotlight: Judy Kirk Fitzsimmons, p. 7**

## A Message from the Executive Director

Dear Friends of Union Settlement:

New York City is a classic urban setting, filled with steel, bricks, concrete and asphalt. Yet virtually every resident of this city sees dozens of trees every day.

We see them, but generally don't notice them – just like we don't notice manhole covers, or lampposts – because they are always there, serving a purpose, but not calling attention to themselves.

There is a wonderful tree in East Harlem, which similarly is almost never noticed, even though it should be one of the most famous trees in the world.

It is an oak tree, tall and majestic, towering over even the tallest buildings in the area. Its branches, astonishingly, extend to reach not just every portion of the neighborhood, but far beyond. The tree offers shade from the sun, adds oxygen to the air we breathe, and inspires all who have encountered it.

It is also the most amazing climbing tree. The lowest branches are too high for small children to reach, but by the time youth reach high school, they are tall enough to jump and grab hold of a limb, and pull themselves up. Because the tree is so fun to climb, it is always filled with people, many of whom help those on the lower branches climb to higher ones.

There really is no limit to how high you can climb in this tree. The views are remarkable, and once you have seen them, you never forget them, and they influence your future forever.

Like all oak trees, this one started as an acorn, almost 50 years ago. During that time, over 20,000 people have climbed the tree, and everyone who climbs it gets an acorn of their own, which they can plant wherever they wish. Those acorns, in turn, have grown into strong trees all over the country.

Yes, this is a very remarkable tree indeed. You can read all about it in these pages.



— David Nocenti



Left: Summer College Readiness workshop at Columbia University, c. 1974.  
Right: College Readiness participant Nisat Begum shows off her work in an architecture class at Drew University.

## College Readiness

*continued from page 1*

place at the right time. . . I was just terribly lucky because I was available to start a project which has been as rewarding, exciting, interesting and has given me as much joy as anything I have ever done in my life, aside from my family.”

College Readiness was founded in the wake of the March on Washington and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and began in the midst of the Harlem Race Riot of 1964, which was a response to the killing of a 15 year old African American boy, James Powell, by a policeman. The Civil Rights Movement was changing our country, and the East Harlem community was caught up in the struggle.

At Benjamin Franklin High School, Mary Kirk met **Irv Goldberg**, a track coach, who helped her to earn the trust and respect of the students. Although the program was planned to start in the fall, Mrs. Kirk and Mr. Goldberg created, in a matter of weeks, what would become one of the most remarkable aspects of the College Readiness Program – summer workshops held on a college campus.

Looking back on the first year, Mrs. Kirk wrote, “The heroes and heroines of this story are not the teachers, not the sponsors [mentors], not even Mr. Goldberg, none of us, but the students themselves – Pearl, Willy, Daisy, José, Beatrice – who by their candor, sweetness, and courage are helping to destroy some of those myths which divide us.”

One of the students from the first graduating class of USCRP, **Pearl Duncan**, recalls, “We read The New York Times from cover

to cover each day – and I still do. I read the Times and the Wall Street Journal, plus several magazines and online publications because daily reading is an activity I gained in the Program. I was also exposed to a variety of intellectuals and artists who visited our classes each week as speakers.”

Pearl was valedictorian of her class at Benjamin Franklin, went on to Bryn Mawr College for her undergraduate studies, and then to Newton College of the Sacred Heart to receive her Master’s in Philosophy. Out of 54 students in the program’s first year, 49 of them went on to college thanks to the guidance and support of Mrs. Kirk, Mr. Goldberg, the teachers, the sponsors, the families, and everyone else involved. The year before only a handful of Benjamin Franklin students went to college. Of course, this was only the beginning.

“Mary Kirk believed in abilities of the students she met in East Harlem,” said **Gina Rusch**, who succeeded Mary Kirk as Director of the program. “She believed they could go to college; she acted on that belief; and as a result they did go to college. She also refused to accept no for an answer, whether from donors she solicited for contributions, from colleges she requested placements or from the students themselves.”

From 1968 until 1980, Gina Rusch led the college readiness program and there was no better fit for the position. Not only had Gina worked in the East Harlem area with Mrs. Kirk as a college guidance counselor, but she also had valuable teaching experience during her years as a Peace Corp volunteer in the first group to go overseas.

*continued on page 4*



*Coach Irv Goldberg worked with Mary Kirk to start USCRP*



*Gina Rusch, Former Director of USCRP*

## College Readiness

*continued from page 3*

The goal of USCRP in its earliest years was simple: get low-income East Harlem students into college. And counselors at Union Settlement and Benjamin Franklin worked together to make that happen. From 1965 to 1973, 98% of USCRP students attended college, and 69% of these students stated that they would not have entered college without USCRP.

Some students remained in New York, and some of them went off to colleges in the South or the Midwest. In their first year of school, the students experienced challenges ranging from racial discrimination to being academically unprepared. During a visit to the students attending Midwest colleges, Irv Goldberg reported a student's concerns: "Jorge felt the Midwest was no place for a kid from East Harlem. He said he didn't know why he was there or what he was doing in college."

---

**"Mary Kirk believed in abilities of the students she met in East Harlem."**

**-Gina Rusch**

---

Fortunately, this visit allowed Mr. Goldberg to work out a plan with the student and the administration, so that he would feel more comfortable in this new environment. Self-motivation, support from the college, and keeping in contact with friends and USCRP staff helped to support students through the inevitable difficulties of adjustment.

The first graduates of Union Settlement's College Readiness Program became playwrights, lawyers, teachers, and counselors and they paved the way for so many young people that would come after them. By helping their siblings with college applications, or instilling the desire to learn within their children, or returning to the East Harlem community to mentor other high school students, many USCRP graduates became leaders (including a U.S. Congressman, a New York City Councilmember and a former Secretary of State for New York), role models and mentors to everyone around them.

Through summer courses on a college campus, the mentoring from sponsors, and the guidance and support from counselors like Mary Kirk, Irv Goldberg and Gina Rusch, the College Readiness Program gave the students the support and the hope they needed to achieve their goals.

## College Readiness in the 21st Century

Today, Union Settlement's College Readiness Program serves approximately 500 students a year with a variety of services like SAT prep classes, trips to Northeastern colleges, and summer workshops in the arts and sciences. Unlike the early years, the counselors for the program spend half of their time in the schools and the other half at the Washington Houses Community Center. Also, the program has expanded and now begins by offering their services in middle school and continues throughout college.

In 2011, we launched a new initiative to guide and support graduates of USCRP as they transition into college because we were concerned with how many of our most promising young people head off to college ready to take on the world, only to find themselves intimidated by campus life, unprepared for first-year demands and generally isolated from support systems. Nationally, college retention rates among low-income, minority students remain a major struggle; students whose parents never attended or completed college are twice as likely to leave before their second year.

Our transition program offers crucial academic, social, and emotional support and links participants to on-campus support services and activities. Peer Captains, older students at key colleges, provide supportive mentoring to freshman, and gain leadership experience guiding younger students through the college transition. This past year we provided intensive transition services to 50 students, and are thrilled to report that 49 of these students are still enrolled in college and have completed their first year. Furthermore, the 59 students from our first year of PACT have all completed their second year of college!



*Samantha Williams, USCRP Alumni and Intern*

“The doors were always open for me at Union Settlement, so I felt the need to open doors for others.”

-Samantha Williams

“Giving back” is a thread that connects USCRP students across the decades. Graduates from previous years have returned to Union Settlement as employees, mentors, and volunteers. **Samantha Williams**, a student who graduated from high school in 2012, has already begun giving back to the community by leading a Performing Arts class called Gifted Souls. The first session of the program was so successful that another session was added during this summer.

“The doors were always open for me at Union Settlement, so I felt the need to open doors for others,” says Samantha.

Similarly, a 1987 USCRP graduate, **Charlene Gordon**, got in touch with Union Settlement to inquire about doing outreach at our 2013 Ethnic Festival. Her information was passed on to our Youth Services and this summer she hosted two USCRP students as interns in her lead abatement program at the New York City Department of Health.

*Union Settlement is reaching out to all College Readiness and Upward Bound alumni, past staff and supporters to build a new network. If you are an alumni or if you know one, please contact us at [uscrpalumni@unionsettlement.org](mailto:uscrpalumni@unionsettlement.org) to learn more. We invite you to join us in celebrating USCRP's anniversary next spring and to consider whether you might be able to assist current students and younger alumni. Please become a part of the future of Union Settlement College Readiness.*

### UNION SETTLEMENT COLLEGE READINESS PROGRAM DIRECTORS

1963 – 2013

Mary Kirk: 1963 – 1968

Gina Rusch: 1968 – 1980

Janice Gutloff: 1980 – c. 1984

Pedro Baez: c. 1985 – 1990

Pedro Santiago: 1990 – c. 1993

Karen Callender: 1993 – 1995

Colette Ellis: 1995 – c. 2000

Shirley Smith, Ph.D.: c. 2000 – 2008

Charmaine Massiah: 2008 – present



## Staff Spotlight: Danese Forbes

**Danese Forbes** is a college counselor in USCRP. She joined about five years ago and works with more than 250 high school seniors each year to help them apply to college. With her colleagues she leads trips to visit schools in New York and the Northeast.

She also works with high school freshmen, sophomores and juniors helping them to understand the college application process. Currently she works at Thurgood Marshall High School and Talent Unlimited High School.

She works intensively with her seniors during the fall and many speak with her daily. Many are feeling lost or confused and Danese is able to help them directly or point them to the resources that they need. She brings a wonderful positivity to her work with young people.

“I absolutely love my students.”

And they love her too. Many stay in touch while they are in college and now she is being invited to their college graduations.

# Leading Union Settlement College Readiness by Charmaine Massiah



There are giants among us. People who choose to create opportunities that changes lives, open doors and create hope in the face of overwhelming adversity. In October of 2007 I found myself standing in the midst of the legacy they left behind as the new Director of USCRP. I sat at my desk considering the huge mandate that lay before me, the small budget I had to accomplish it and my lack of preparation for the task. I felt overwhelmed. It is the same feeling experienced by thousands of high school students in NYC. Potential first generation students stand at the edge of high school staring at the wide achievement gap and wonder if they have what it takes to become college graduates. For almost 50 years USCRP has stood in that gap and provided them with the tools to make that leap successfully.

Over the years we provided participants with academic advisement, SAT prep, tutoring, college exploration, trips, training,

internships, summer programs, college admissions and financial aid counseling. The combination of services has been instrumental in assisting the students to graduate on time and enroll in college.

**Marsha Moses**, one of our alumni said that the secret to our success is, “The personal attention students receive from the staff.” She felt cared for and encouraged to achieve her goals. Her counselor, **Danese Forbes** saw her potential and helped her to apply and receive a full scholarship to the college of her choice. She attended her dream school, the University of Chicago, and graduated in June 2013. She was grateful for the support and invited Ms. Forbes to her graduation.

USCRP was born out of the passion of people who had a heart for the community and a vision for the future of the youth. Their legacy continues to thrive in the hands of the many staff members that have worked at USCRP. I would like to give a special thanks to the following past and present staff members: **Danese Forbes, Nitesha McHugh, Monique Keller, Linda Cotero, Sarina Gamez, Joe Kelly, Colin Dixon, Lauren Shuman, Yves Ambroise, Reco Grigsby** and our newest staff member, **Seth Weary**. It is their dedication and commitment to the advancement of low income and minority students that gives life to the work we do and hope to the people we serve.

I would also like to thank the partners who have joined with us to broaden the horizons of our participants: Drew University, City College Grove School of Engineering, Talent Unlimited High School, Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, Isaac Newton Middle School and Global Neighborhood Secondary School. Over the past 50 years our students’ faces, our community and our services have changed but our mandate has remained the same. USCRP continues to bridge the gap, build hope and create opportunities for the people of East Harlem and beyond.

## Foundation Profile: The Isaac H. Tuttle Fund

This spring the Isaac H. Tuttle Fund awarded Union Settlement a \$31,000 renewal grant to support health and wellness programming at our senior centers. With this grant our seniors are benefiting from Tai Chi classes, swimming programs at the Jefferson Pool and walking club activities. They also benefit from information sessions on diabetes and other health issues of concern to our participants.

“We are pleased to support Union Settlement’s work with seniors in East Harlem,” said **Stephanie A. Raneri**, Executive Director

of The Isaac H. Tuttle Fund. “This grant is part of the fund’s commitment to addressing gaps in support services that enable the elderly in Manhattan to continue to live at home and enhance the quality of their daily lives.”

“For more than three decades Tuttle has provided vital support to assist the elderly of East Harlem and Union Settlement,” said David Nocenti, Executive Director of Union Settlement. “I thank them for their loyalty and dedication.”

More than seventy years ago, Union Settlement began serving the elderly with recreation, meals and educational activities. In 1942, our “Old Age” programs were created out of a concern for growing isolation among older community members. It was one of the first such programs in New York City.

## Donor Spotlight: Judy Kirk Fitzsimmons



**Judy Kirk Fitzsimmons** grew up around Union Settlement Association and her childhood memories are of the Settlement in the 1950s, when tenement buildings defined the neighborhood and before public housing projects dramatically changed the streetscape. Her father Bill Kirk came to Union Settlement as Headworker in 1949 and her mother founded USCRP in the early 1960s. As a girl, Judy made her way to the Settlement after school to spend her afternoons with Patsy Cacase in the game room on the third floor or to help Josie in the kitchen. (Patsy came to the Settlement after his career as a violinist in a silent movie theatre orchestra was cut short by the introduction of talkies!) The first person Judy would see each afternoon was Mrs. O'Reilly who worked the switchboard and reception desk. (Picture a large switchboard unit with Mrs. O'Reilly wearing a headset and plugging fabric cover cables into rows of sockets.)

"I loved the vibrant people at the Settlement and in the neighborhood," said Judy Kirk Fitzsimmons. "The life of the community spilled out on to the streets and I soaked it all in. My parents were highly creative problem solvers; both loved East Harlem and the Settlement. It was an exciting time to be at the edge of so much change and promise."

Judy and her husband Douglas have contributed to our college readiness program for decades! We thank them for their support and we appreciate the dedication of multiple generations of Kirk family members.

**update** Our annual **Day of the Dead** celebration will be held on October 30th. Volunteers will build and decorate the altar between 11 and 4pm. Children are invited to make traditional sugar sculptures from 4-5:30 and the public is invited to join us for a Mexican meal at 6:30 and to enjoy musical and theatrical performances from 7-8:30 pm.

**update** Union Settlement has received its first grant of \$175,000 from **Robin Hood**, a leading anti-poverty funder and venture philanthropy grant-maker in New York City. The grant will support our work with "disconnected" low-income youth (i.e. young people ages 16-24 who are neither working nor in school) by providing employment placement and retention services to achieve one-year job retention.

**update** We would like to thank to **Garnier** and **TerraCycle** and their wonderful volunteers for helping to rebuild and improve our community garden, **El Sito Feliz**. It was badly damaged during Hurricane Sandy but now we have installed dozens of new garden beds, picnic tables, and garbage cans made of "upcycled" packaging from beauty products.

**update** Please join us on November Third for the **NYC Marathon** at First Avenue and 114 Street as we cheer on the Union Settlement Charity Marathon Team!

### UNION SETTLEMENT ASSOCIATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Reginald E. Harwell, *Chair*

Eli Gross & Ruth E. Pachman, *Vice Chairs*

Elisabeth Schupf Lonsdale, *Treasurer*

David K. Carlson, *Assistant Treasurer*

Maxine L. Rockoff, Ph.D., *Secretary*

Gina Rusch, *Assistant Secretary*

Kate Buford A. Slade Mills, Jr.

Helen V. Cantwell Walter G. Montgomery

David Castelblanco Christopher Quiñones

Kalaivani S. Duane Marta Rivera-Santiago

Steven W. Eaddy Robin Sparkman

Charles F. Etuk Julio Rodriguez

DeNora M. Getachew Carlos M. Ruiz

Ricardo Granderson Szilvia Szmuk-

Caren A. Heller, M.D. Tanenbaum, Ph.D.

Francoise LeGoues, Kate B. Townsend

James B. Lynch

### ADVISORY COUNCIL

Louise Bozorth Daniel P. Paduano

Roger Caban Anne Perkins

A. Macdonald Caputo Hugh Rowland, Jr.

Camille Chin-Kee-Fatt Sylvia Schoenbaum

Lorraine Cortes-Vazquez Ellen P. Simon, DSW

Arthur W. Einstein, Jr. Eugene Sklar

Hon. Robert Jackson Harriet L. Warm

Joanna Lancaster Ellen Werther

Susie Lancaster (Mrs. Burt) C. Stuart White



*Calling all participants in  
Union Settlement's **College  
Readiness and Upward  
Bound** programs!*

We invite you to connect  
to our Alumni Network!

Please contact  
[uscrpalumni@unionsettlement.org](mailto:uscrpalumni@unionsettlement.org) or  
[facebook.com/UnionSettlementAlum](https://www.facebook.com/UnionSettlementAlum)  
for more information.

Please join us for  
**Toasting  
Union Settlement**

*Thursday, October 17, 2013  
6:30 - 8:30 pm  
Vermilion  
480 Lexington Avenue at 46<sup>th</sup> Street*

