

Not by the Book

The Revson Foundation and the struggle to revive New York City's branch libraries

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In the crowded marketplace of New York City philanthropy — roughly one hundred charitable institutions have grant programs aimed specifically at the city, and many others make at least occasional grants there — the Charles H. Revson Foundation, with \$165 million in assets, is widely respected but far from the wealthiest. The Foundation has, however, specialized in identifying needs that might not be considered glamorous or fashionable, but where success could be achieved, in time, within a total grants budget of roughly \$6 million a year.

One such overlooked cause had been standing in plain sight for more than a century, literally in every neighborhood in the city: the 207 branch libraries, many of them crumbling, all of them undercapitalized and straining to serve a soaring demand that by 2014 was approaching 40 million visits a year — more than all of New York's professional sports teams, performing arts venues, museums, gardens, and zoos *combined*. In an era of digital media, the elite consensus had been that libraries no longer mattered and would eventually wither away. The reality, however, was that demand for library services in New York City was rising, not falling. Attendance at library programs alone had surged by 40 percent between 2003 and 2013; circulation had increased by nearly 60 percent. Yet in that time, the combined budget of the city's three library systems had suffered a steady drip of annual cuts that by 2013 had accumulated to well over \$60 million a year.

Decades of fiscal attrition — stagnant or shrinking budgets amid swelling demands on staff, facilities, and equipment — had not only limited the libraries' ability to meet their communities' needs, it had left the branches in desperate physical condition. Yet virtually no one knew precisely how desperate. New York City's libraries are divided into three autonomous nonprofit systems: the New York Public Library, serving Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island, plus the separate Queens and Brooklyn Public Library systems. Unlike schools, senior centers, or parks,

libraries have no designated commissioner or director in city government to take responsibility for their well-being and to serve as their monitor and advocate. As a result, no one agency or official has a mandate (or even much incentive) to document the libraries' hardships or to propose comprehensive solutions. Every branch manager, and many of their supervisors, could detail grave conditions in their own branches and networks — roofs leaking, heat and air conditioning out of service, antiquated or broken computers, a lack of working toilets, and on and on. But the condition and needs of libraries as a whole? It was no one's job to know the answer.

Each system had to fend for itself, filling its own gaps, serving its communities as best it could, with the political support of its own particular City Council members and whatever few other allies each system could attract. As political actors, they were more successful in some years than in others, but they were no match for the far more organized and well-supported constituencies — public safety, education, parks, housing — that annually rally armies of organizers and community leaders to claim a share of the city budget.

And yet the branch libraries served a broad tapestry of needs among rank-and-file New Yorkers, including huge numbers of the city's least wealthy residents and newest immigrants. As Jonathan Bowles, executive director of the Center for an Urban Future, an influential New York City think tank, wrote in a 2007 essay, the libraries

foster reading skills in kids, assist adults in addressing skills gaps, help immigrants assimilate and bolster technology access for thousands of seniors and low-income individuals who don't have computers or the Internet at home. Libraries complement the public schools in improving student achievement by offering after school tutoring and other learning initiatives. And through initiatives ranging from GED prep courses and entrepreneurship workshops to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, they help equip adults with the tools they need to compete in today's knowledge economy. All of these functions are invaluable at a time when New York desperately needs to invest in its human capital.¹

Seen in that light, reversing the long decline of neighborhood libraries was the perfect Revson Foundation target: an under-appreciated but threatened municipal resource, critical to the well-being of millions of less-well-off New Yorkers, and urgently in need of a champion.

Yet even if Revson were to spend its whole endowment on this one cause, the foundation could not have made up even the libraries' operating budget shortfall without running out of money in a couple of years. And even then, it would have done nothing to meet the capital cost of repairing dilapidated buildings and obsolete equipment, eventually estimated at more than \$1 billion. Rather than trying to meet the libraries' needs directly, Revson's challenge would have to be to help the three library systems, their branches, their frontline staff, and their patrons coalesce around an effort to make their case to a largely unmobilized public — and by that route, to galvanize enough support in City Hall to reverse the years of decline and neglect.

That would call for three unprecedented steps, each of them difficult and risky, but all three of them necessary, in careful combination, if anything significant was to be achieved.

- *First*, the three library systems — historically protective of their independence and not always trustful of one another — would have to come together into a sufficiently cohesive force to make an authoritative, persuasive argument for the importance of their services and the urgency of their needs.
- *Second*, that argument would have to be backed up by incontrovertible evidence, most of it never compiled before, on the critical role that branch libraries play in millions of lives, and on the social and economic harm — to all New Yorkers — from the chronic starvation of the neighborhood libraries.
- *Third*, the library systems, their users, their staffs, and their allies in government and civic leadership would need to weld themselves into a well-coordinated, strategic force in municipal affairs — a civic army comparable to those behind the city’s other indispensable services like health, schools, and safety — to reclaim their historic levels of government support.

These three goals — forging a coalition, making a case, and facilitating a campaign — became the centerpiece of what would grow into a \$5.5 million Revson library initiative over the next half-dozen years. It would contribute to a near-revolutionary change in the way the city’s three great library systems relate to one another, to city government, and to the communities they serve, as they ensure that libraries remain gateways of opportunity in the 21st century.

1. The Coalition

Encouraging more collaboration among New York City’s three library systems might seem an obvious and comparatively simple first move, but it was in some ways the hardest of the three. The three systems weren’t just wary of one another; they rarely spoke. “We have more contact with Toronto [Public Library] than with New York or Brooklyn,” a senior official of the Queens Public Library told a Revson consultant in early 2011. “There’s a competitiveness among us, which is healthy, but it inhibits collaboration.”

Divisions among the systems were more than bureaucratic; they affected users as well. New Yorkers who worked in Brooklyn or Manhattan but lived in Queens could not borrow a book in one borough and return it in another. No library card was recognized in more than one system. The catalogues were separate; the cards used different technologies; and the information systems showing the books in circulation were unconnected. Creating a single circulation and catalogue system for all three branches would be complicated, given that all three had invested in their own separate technology, with resulting systems that were not mutually compatible. The fragmented system also fostered administrative duplication in some areas, with the possibility of some cost savings if some functions were shared.

But any attempt to strong-arm the libraries into closer cooperation was almost certainly doomed to fail. Given the far greater size and wealth of the New York Public Library, with its fundraising star power, fueled by an internationally renowned research collection, leaders of the smaller, geographically focused Queens and Brooklyn systems were on their guard against

any suggestion that they be subsumed under the colossus across the East River. So, treading warily, with plenty of back-channel assurances to library executives that no shotgun weddings were in the offing, the foundation agreed with the administration of then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg to convene and fund a “Tri-Library Retreat.” Its sole purpose would be “identifying common challenges as well as collaborative opportunities to enhance quality and cost efficiency of library services citywide.” It took place at Gracie Mansion, the mayor’s official residence, on March 7, 2011.

The meeting produced no breakthroughs, but it set a longer — and ultimately more fruitful — set of discussions in motion. The libraries agreed to start exploring circulation and back-office efficiencies, including joint purchasing arrangements; to establish a process for sharing best practices; and to create a common agenda on acquiring or licensing e-books and other digital material. Revson made further grants for consultants and conferences to pursue all three goals. Additional grants to the New York Public Library also underwrote an initiative called “ReadersFirst,” in which an international coalition of some 200 library systems organized to create a better, simpler system for library patrons to borrow and download books onto their e-readers. The effort required complicated negotiations with the company that channels e-book content from publishers to readers, in order to create a user interface that called for a minimum of technical knowledge from users but could reliably provide material from multiple publishers in the right format (for Nook, Kindle, iPad, or other devices).ⁱⁱ A second, related effort, also supported by Revson, involved negotiations with the publishers themselves, who were skittish about the potential for borrowed e-books to diminish their sales. The result was a set of agreements that eventually extended far beyond New York, and encompassed virtually the whole e-publishing industry. All major publishers now provide lendable e-books to libraries, though with restrictions on the number and frequency of loans to protect their market share.

These steps had two side-effects that proved to be just as important as the achievements themselves. First, they demonstrated the foundation’s bona fides as a partner with the libraries, willing to support their own priorities — e-books, for example, had been a particular concern of all three systems at the time — and to help them try out new ideas, without insisting on big, hasty changes. They were, in other words, essential trust-building gestures, without which little else would have been possible. Second, these early collaborative projects helped thaw the longstanding chill in the three systems’ relations with one another, another indispensable step toward building a more solid, citywide coalition of support for their work.

Within a year, Revson was seeing encouraging signs on both these fronts. “There has been a sea change in the culture of collaboration among the three systems,” Revson President Julie Sandorf reported in a June 2012 memo to the foundation board, citing a growing list of projects, well beyond e-books and back-office efficiencies, that the systems were beginning to pursue together. By the end of 2012, it was becoming possible to detect signs of a nascent solidarity among the three systems, through which they could eventually mount a common appeal to the public, the media, and city officials with something approaching a common voice.

2. The Case

While the coalition-building was still in progress, in late 2011, Sandorf met with Jonathan Bowles, of the Center for an Urban Future, to ask if he and his colleagues would consider producing a report on the value that libraries add to the city's economy and society. Not knowing about the encomium to neighborhood libraries that Bowles had spontaneously posted on his blog a few years earlier, she thought she would need to make a convincing argument for why a wide-ranging research organization with a specialty in the urban economy would want to focus its resources on libraries. Instead, she had found an already eager ally, with considerable knowledge and more than a little passion for the task. With a Revson grant of just \$60,000, the center quickly set to work on a study that was completed and published just over a year later, titled "Branches of Opportunity." It was a sweeping 50-page analysis of the branch libraries as "a key component of the city's human capital system."ⁱⁱⁱ

After an opening section detailing all the fundamental needs libraries met for families, children, older adults, immigrants, and job-seekers, the report's second half painted a stark contrast, juxtaposing all these critical services against the accumulated fiscal damage done by years of budgetary gamesmanship in City Hall:

All three library systems have experienced funding cuts totaling tens of millions of dollars in recent years, but cuts aren't their only financial obstacle. In many ways, the lack of security afforded by the city's budget process has been at least as big a problem. ...

[L]ibrary budgets are often not completely accounted for in the mayor's Financial Plan, a document that balances expenditures with real and expected revenues over several years. Instead, when it comes time to enact a given year's budget, the City Council tends to negotiate higher funding levels for libraries than is called for in the Financial Plan. According to observers, this process gives the mayor more control over the final budget and lets council members look like heroes when they produce the inevitable restorations. However, the revenue sources both parties agree upon in order to provide library funding are guaranteed for only one year. The discrepancy between the libraries' ostensible budget as seen in the Financial Plan and their actual budget has tended to not only continue from year to year but widen even further.^{iv}

The report's detailed analysis of what it called the "annual Kabuki dance" of City budgeting for libraries explained why branch managers needed not just more money, but more stability. Lacking a "baseline" of expected funding, with which the library systems could make long-term plans, branches had to be fully prepared, each year, for anything from small reductions to catastrophic losses. Although the report concluded on a hopeful note, envisioning "libraries of the future" and various ways of achieving that vision, its essential message was dire: America's cultural capital; its beacon to newcomers, creators, and entrepreneurs; the pinnacle of the nation's economy offered its residents fewer hours of library service per week than did Columbus, San Antonio, Jacksonville — or even beleaguered Detroit, which was then just weeks from bankruptcy.

Press reaction to “Branches of Opportunity” was broad and swift, though not especially prominent. Astute city-affairs reporters for the *New York Daily News* and public radio station WNYC paid the most attention, but overall the story remained mostly in the less-traveled sections of neighborhood and online publications. But even if the message was not yet front-page news, a signal had been raised. Most important, the report began circulating among policymakers, including City Council members, borough presidents, budget officials, and top executive staff in the mayor’s office. It was the quality of the audience, more than its size, that led Sandorf to conclude in February 2013 that “Branches of Opportunity” “has already far exceeded our hopes and expectations.”

Nonetheless, within days of the report’s publication, Mayor Bloomberg released his proposed budget for fiscal 2014. It included a \$106.5 million cut to the libraries. As in the past, City Council members promptly vowed to restore most of that money, and eventually did so. But at least for the time being, the Kabuki dance remained in full swing.

Compelling as the center’s analysis had been, a successful argument needs more than data; it needs stories. For the Revson Foundation, therefore, the question was not just how to document the vast reach and importance of library services, but how to draw out, in human detail, the day-to-day lives of libraries and their users, and how to make them vivid to the rest of New York — particularly that subset of New York society that influences private donations and municipal budgets. One solution, which the foundation could create on its own initiative, would be to establish an award for the city’s best branch libraries — spotlighting, in their often emotional detail, the creativity and heroism that take place in libraries all over the city, every day, far from the floodlights surrounding City Hall. Nominations would come not from library insiders and executives, but from the legions of regular patrons — the people whose actual experience determines what constitutes excellence in any public service.

WNYC, New York City’s public radio station — a Revson grantee, and a prime source of daily reporting on city affairs — eagerly accepted a co-sponsor role. It offered to cover the nomination and awards process on its daily call-in news program, *The Brian Lehrer Show*, where the project was launched on May 20, 2013. With Sandorf and Revson Chair Reynold Levy as guests in the studio, Lehrer asked listeners to call in with stories of how libraries had enriched their lives. He then formally opened the competition by inviting people to nominate their favorite branch and explain what made it great. The five winners would receive unrestricted grants of \$10,000 each — seemingly a small gift by the standards of major foundations, but in reality an unimaginable windfall for institutions accustomed to having the use of every dollar strictly circumscribed, with no realistic hope of ever making an unplanned repair or mounting an impromptu program. It would be the largest cash prize for branch libraries anywhere in the United States.

The search for an organization to run the competition proved fruitless, so virtually every aspect of the process — from designing a web page to printing and circulating nomination forms, the processing and review of nominations, the selection and convening of judges, and the final awards gala in the penthouse of Hearst Tower near Columbus Circle — ended up in the hands

of Revson staff, led by Maria Marcantonio, the foundation's program officer for urban affairs and education. Although the work was sometimes grueling, the results were beyond anyone's expectations: more than 4,300 nominations spanning every borough, a distinguished civic and literary panel of judges, a packed awards ceremony, and widespread media coverage (led by WNYC, but with many print articles in community newspapers and the local sections of major dailies). Just before the awards ceremony, Lehrer hosted another show and announced the finalists, with many listeners calling in to elaborate on the nominations they had submitted, often in deeply personal, moving terms.

The entire initiative, from the preliminary concept to the finishing ceremony, had cost just \$150,000 (not counting hundreds of hours of uncompensated staff overtime).

Subsequent years' competitions (there have been two more at the time this is written) have grown in size, polish, and impact. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation, an international funder making roughly \$100 million in grants a year, joined forces with Revson for subsequent awards, doubling the available money and the size of the prizes, adding translators to allow for nominations more languages, and helping to reduce the workload on Revson staff. The Heckscher Foundation became a funder in 2015, sponsoring an additional special cash prize for outstanding service to children and youth. Many more funders have joined an advisory panel that picks finalists.

Best of all, with each new round of awards, the number of people telling their stories has grown. In the second round, in 2014, the number of nominations more than tripled, to 13,400. More than one-third were handwritten, and roughly 400 were in a language other than English. In 2015, the number of nominees had risen again, to nearly 19,000. Over time, the awards have created a heroic storyline about branch libraries to rival any of the city's other, more powerful causes. And the thousands of nominators — together with the branch personnel whose work they spotlighted — have increasingly become the long-absent People's Voice for libraries, creating a popular narrative of community service in action that no amount of research and official testimony could ever have supplied.

3. The Campaign

To complete the challenge of rescuing branch libraries from fiscal strangulation, the final step would have to be an all-out effort to persuade the mayor and Council to restore the operating support that had been chipped away over the years, and to make provision in the city's capital budget for major repairs to buildings and equipment. This was something that Revson could not fund, given tax law that prohibits most foundation support for lobbying. Even so, the foundation could help the library systems coalesce around a common message, clarify their appeal, and inform the public about the importance of their cause — all of which would be essential underpinnings of a successful campaign that the libraries would then have to wage on their own.

The first step would be to agree on a common set of arguments to present to city officials. This was harder than it sounds: For the three library systems — which were still learning to work together, and whose alliances and political styles were still widely divergent — the goals were not, in fact, all alike or easy to homogenize into a single appeal. For example, although the physical deterioration of library branches was a citywide problem, the needs were especially acute in Brooklyn, but somewhat less so in Queens. An inability to keep branches open six days a week was a predominant problem in Queens, but not in the New York system, which had restored six-day service over the past two years. In Brooklyn, about 40 percent of the branches were already open six days a week, though their budget and staff shortages severely limited what they could do on those days. And 40 percent were still stuck at five days.

Still, the most critical needs were general enough so that the three systems should be able to work on a joint campaign, in addition to pursuing some issues of their own. What they needed was more structured cross-consultation, a stronger effort to build community support, and some professional coordination to keep their teams working on a single plan. To help with those requirements, Revson made a grant of \$272,400 in March 2015 to supply one-fifth of the cost of an advocacy campaign. It combined support for new outreach workers and organizers to build public support and the services of one of the city's most influential public-relations firms, BerlinRosen, to help the libraries package, sequence, and synchronize their efforts for maximum effectiveness.

Yet even as library executives began to contemplate a more ambitious and cohesive budget campaign, they still had no firm, agreed-upon number for how much money they were actually seeking. Each system had some estimate of its own operating and capital shortfalls, and the “Branches of Opportunity” report had established a credible estimate — \$68 million — for the aggregate amount of operating money the libraries had lost since the days when they could afford six-day-a-week service at all branches citywide.⁹ That amount (plus \$10 million already restored in former Mayor Michael Bloomberg's final budget) would provide a decent target for a requested boost in *operating* funds. But how much of an increase they would need in the *capital* plan, and what any given amount would actually buy — were separate questions that needed an immediate answer.

To help fill the information gap, and to focus attention on the critical problems in the branches, Revson had turned once again to the Center for an Urban Future. This time, a new grant would pay for a more intense look at the libraries' crumbling physical properties and the possibilities for turning those conditions around. With a \$203,000 grant, the center proceeded to produce a report titled “Re-Envisioning New York's Branch Libraries,” which documented severe structural defects branch-by-branch, as well as examining many buildings that, whatever their condition, were “poorly configured for how New Yorkers are using libraries today, with little space for classes, group work, and individuals working on laptop computers.” More than a quarter of all branches had building problems that would cost \$5 million or more each to solve. Adding up the provable needs — branches without working bathrooms, ceiling leaks so bad that equipment had to be removed every time it rained, sputtering heat and ventilation systems,

constant power failures from overburdened and antiquated electrical systems, and on and on — the center and the libraries put the bill at a minimum of \$1.1 billion.^{vi}

But the new report did something both more ambitious and more politically astute than merely toting up a defensible capital-budget request. In a separate section laying out “a bold new vision for harnessing the potential” of branch libraries, the publication proceeded to evoke what a properly designed, built, and maintained branch library network would look like in the 21st century. It described the need for more flexible meeting and community areas, more accommodation for computers and e-books, and the creative use of long-wasted space. And it issued a set of 24 concrete recommendations for how to transform the city’s current, dysfunctional budget and planning system for libraries into a coherent strategy for funding, managing, designing, and developing modern branches. Several of the recommendations echoed arguments the Revson Foundation had been making for years.

In early March, drawing heavily on the center’s research, the New York Public Library wove together a sharp-edged political document called “Long Overdue: NYC’s \$1 billion Library Fine.” The publication, launched by all three systems on the City Hall steps, featured photographs of the worst conditions in branch libraries, alongside profiles of library employees and their heroic efforts to provide service in squalid conditions.

BerlinRosen, which already had contracts with the New York and Brooklyn systems, orchestrated the press conference and publication, now working with the Queens system as a new client. The three libraries used the Revson grant to cover a portion of BerlinRosen’s overall fees, but the money also defrayed some of their cost in deploying organizers to their branches, to help establish coalitions of support. Their efforts soon jelled into a campaign called Invest in Libraries, which included social media, mobilization of large numbers of library patrons and employees as advocates, waves of e-mail and other correspondence with City Council members, rallies in key council districts and at City Hall, supportive statements from celebrities, and outreach to the news media. More than ever before, the three systems synchronized their plans to ensure that their efforts didn’t overlap or upstage one another, but instead contributed to a steady drumbeat of information flowing to the council at the moments of greatest influence. Every newspaper in the city — publications that normally agree with one another on almost nothing — ran enthusiastic editorials supporting the libraries’ requests.

The result, though well short of perfect, was a stunning achievement. By late June 2015, in the waning days of the city’s fiscal year, the mayor and Council agreed on an operating budget increase of \$43 million. Though obviously short of the \$68 million target, it was likely to be as much as could be hoped for in a single budget year. The remaining \$25 million would have to await a future effort. But the number would at least provide what the campaign’s organizers had privately set as a minimum goal. It was the largest increase in public operating funds for libraries in New York City history.

The allocation of capital funds was likewise historic, though at \$400 million over ten years, it fell far below the billion-dollar target. In its final press release of the fiscal year, the Invest in

Libraries campaign put the best face on the increase, noting its unprecedented size and predicting that it would be a major step “towards improving, renovating, modernizing, and repairing library facilities across the city.”^{vii}

After a brief pause for celebration and reflection, Sandorf and Marcantonio were ready with a new submission to the Revson board, for an even larger bundle of grants to the three systems totaling \$311,680 for the following year, “to support the expansion of multifaceted community engagement programs to establish a permanent and active advocacy base for New York City’s libraries.” Another \$165,000 went to the Center for an Urban Future for further research. Among the libraries themselves, the campaign for fiscal 2017, and for the remainder of their operating and capital shortfalls, had already begun.

Revson has also gone on to expand its support for innovation within branch libraries, with a suite of new initiatives aimed at modernizing and extending the services they can perform in their communities. For example, two new Revson funds support projects in branch libraries that would otherwise have no hope of funding under normal budgets. This grew out of a core lesson from the New York City Neighborhood Library Awards, which demonstrated how precious — and how effective — even a small grant can be in helping cash-strapped branches respond to local needs.

Another grant has gone to Spaceworks, a nonprofit organization that develops affordable studio and rehearsal space for artists in New York. With the grant from Revson, Spaceworks has teamed up with the Williamsburgh Library in Brooklyn to transform the library’s second story, which had been virtually uninhabitable, into what Julie Sandorf describes as “a vibrant arts center that is fully integrated into the programs and services of the library.” The new space accommodates new public programs offered by the library and nearby community organizations, which together have brought a 49 percent increase in the number of visits to the building in the project’s first year.^{viii}

Roughly seven miles south in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, the Fifth Avenue Committee — one of New York City’s most accomplished community development organizations — is using Revson support to create the first affordable housing development in the city that integrates a new branch library into its structure. The crumbling, 45-year-old Sunset Park branch is far too small to meet even the current demands on its services, which are already among the highest in the city, much less to offer new or expanded programming. The new library, occupying three stories, with 50 affordable apartments above, will provide modern equipment, a sunlit environment, and vastly expanded floor space for books, technology, patron service, and programs. Another, similar project is under discussion in Manhattan.

To help other libraries meet burgeoning demand with limited space, Revson has supported the creation of a set of collapsible fixtures — called a “kit of parts” — with which libraries can quickly erect and disassemble custom environments for different kinds of programming. Developed by Situ Studio, an interdisciplinary design firm, the kits include such elements as chairs, desks, display shelves, counters, and electronic equipment, all of which can be set up,

rearranged, and stored away quickly as needed. Like the arts and housing projects sponsored by Spaceworks and Fifth Avenue Committee, the kit-of-parts innovation grew directly from design ideas curated by the Center for an Urban Future in its 2014 report “Re-Envisioning New York’s Branch Libraries.” The series of panels, discussions, and public presentations that accompanied that report have set in motion widening ripples of invention and imagination that, quite beyond the additional money and public support the libraries have won in recent years, promise to help them rethink the way their facilities can meet the demands of the 21st century.

Conclusion: Standard Techniques, Revolutionary Results

The significant success of the 2015 Invest in Libraries campaign is not a story about the Revson Foundation. The foundation did not — and legally, it could not — pilot the campaign for increased funding, devise the effective call-to-action, mobilize the various constituencies of support, or engineer new lobbying strategies in the face of disappointments or surprises. Instead, the foundation’s three integrated strategies — coalition, case, campaign — supplied the libraries and their allies with the incentives, the skills, and many of the raw materials they needed to orchestrate their own political victory.

Still, the presence of a supportive funder, ready to commit resources on short notice with broad flexibility, proved to be a critical source of fuel. Without that, much of the power in this story might have remained latent — dormant potential without the spur to action.

To be sure, “Some of this would have happened without Revson,” a senior library official said, in a conversation about influences and leadership in the campaign. “The city had money; there was going to be some ask. The idea of six-day service was going to be an issue no matter what. ... But would it have played out the way it did, with all these forces coming together, all the press coverage, the editorial boards, a much better ground game, all of it coordinated citywide? Probably not.” Both the size of the accomplishment and its more lasting side-effects — a better working coalition among the three library systems, a stronger voice for libraries in civic life, more authoritative evidence of their importance to the city’s well-being — were the direct results of Revson’s leadership and its sustained financial support.

It is worth noting that this exertion of foundation leadership, consequential as it was, did not depart radically from the customary playbooks of strategic philanthropy. The Revson libraries initiative was not, in other words, an exercise in “innovative grantmaking.” On the contrary, it focused on a longstanding fixture of the urban landscape, institutions that had been central to the well-being of struggling (or, in any case, non-elite) New Yorkers for at least a century. Libraries were a cause, as Sandorf has put it, “hiding in plain sight.” It was precisely because libraries were *not* seen as trendy that they had come to languish in the shadows of the city’s civic and political life. Without question, the branch libraries themselves had been remarkably innovative in adapting to widespread demographic, economic, technological, and cultural changes, all while struggling with shrinking budgets and aging infrastructure. But the techniques needed to boost them back into the public’s consciousness, and into the priorities of policy- and

budget-makers, were relatively old-fashioned, by foundation standards. They consisted of forging alliances, compiling and analyzing data, appealing to the media, and fueling the work of community organizers, advocates, and champions. Those are techniques that virtually all the best foundation professionals learn in their first years in the field. What made Revson's effort remarkable was not some unprecedented use of philanthropic resources, but the thoroughness and effectiveness with which it used all the standard means and methods at its disposal.

Still, the result was something new: the movement called Invest in Libraries was all but revolutionary for New York City and its libraries. It was, for the first time, a campaign waged not solely by the three systems and their top officials, but also by their patrons — whose voices ultimately matter more to politicians than do those of elite executives with salaries that depend on city outlays. The distinguishing feature of Revson's contribution to the libraries was not the amount of money it provided, or even its encouragement of bold moves and big visions. What distinguished Revson's perspective was its relentless focus on the ordinary people with scant resources who use branch libraries to improve their lives and widen their economic, social, and intellectual horizons.

It would be wrong to exaggerate the success thus far. Despite the extraordinary show of force by the libraries and the unprecedented surge in support from the council and the mayor, the libraries are not yet assured of a permanently stronger political position than they held before. The next year or two, in which they hope to chip away further at both their operating shortfalls and their capital requirements, will determine whether they become the kind of civic players that can command the attention of City Hall year after year. But in facing that challenge, they now have a body of experience, a cadre of leaders, a team of operatives cooperating on public and government relations, volumes of data and creative proposals, and the support of a widening swath of philanthropy. None of that existed before. And it is highly unlikely that any of it would have taken shape, in anything like its current form, had it not been for the alliances, the analytics, and the advocacy underwritten in large part by the Revson Foundation.

ⁱ Jonathan Bowles, "Branching Out," *Off the CUF* (blog), Center for an Urban Future, August 2007, at <https://nycfuture.org/research/publications/branching-out>

ⁱⁱ Michael Kelley, "ReadersFirst, Vendors Search for a New Lending Model," *Library Journal*, January 29, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Giles, "Branches of Opportunity," Center for an Urban Future, January 2013, p. 3.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 30.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 12.

^{vi} David Giles, "Re-Envisioning New York's Branch Libraries," Center for an Urban Future, September 2014, p. 5.

^{vii} "Historic Investment by New York City Allows Public Libraries to Offer Six-Day Service," press release, Invest in Libraries, June 26, 2016.

^{viii} Julie Sandorf, "The 21st Century Neighborhood Library," *Cooper Hewitt Design Journal*, Fall 2016, p. 14.