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LINDA – Fieldnotes – Tuesday, November 13, 2007

Subject: New York Cares volunteer training

Location: NYPL Harlem Branch, 124<sup>th</sup> street between Lenox and 5<sup>th</sup> Ave

Time: 5:45-7:15 pm, orientation from 6:05-6:45

NYCares has provided volunteers for at least two gardens in Harlem. I checked out the website and found that there are several sites in central Harlem looking for volunteers, including something run by the Abyssinian Baptist Church. One of the available trainings was at the Harlem branch (as opposed to midtown or LES), and I was curious to see if the people who showed up would be any different demographically from the people at the Wilson garden—mostly young, white do-gooders. I was not disappointed.

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On the bus to the library, I saw a small crowd gathering outside the Apollo Theater. The west side was lit up with bright lights, and papered with enormous images of Jay-Z [which I had to confirm by reading the marquee].

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I got off at 5<sup>th</sup> ave and walked to 124<sup>th</sup> street. The library was across the street from Marcus Garvey Park. [I believe it's the one that Baby College partners with, with the children's librarian.] There was a long wheelchair ramp leading up to the door, with a gate surrounding it. A man and a woman were standing at the top of the ramp. I walked up the short stairs and went in through the double doors.

Inside I mistakenly tried to enter a turnstile on the left that turned out to be the exit. A young woman behind the counter told me, "Other side." There were four young people behind the desk, the female, another female and two males, one dark-skinned and chubby, the other light-skinned and short. I asked the chubby male, "Are you taking returns?" He took two books from me, and said "Ok." I was waiting for a receipt, which the Morningside Heights branch gives you, and he had to say OK again. I asked about the volunteer training, and the light-skinned guy told me third floor. I thanked him and walked past the stairs hoping for an elevator, which I quickly found.

The first floor has magazines. A young boy was drinking water at the water fountain. I rode the elevator to the third floor. When I walked out of the elevator I peered into a room on the left, which was mostly empty except for a middle-aged black woman, maybe in her 60s, sitting on a plastic chair. She was shabbily dressed in a faded black trench coat and faded purple sweatpants. She pointed me in the opposite direction. I thanked her [immediately thinking that this is one of the only times when non-African Americans come into the library?].

A thin petite white woman meets me at the door to a large room. She introduces herself as "Linette, the team leader." She is dressed in red t-shirt with a pagoda printed in black on it, a thin black sweater/shirt with 3/4 sleeves over the t-shirt, a pair of black or dark gray slacks with a 2 inch cuff at the bottom, and black shoes. She has long dark curly hair

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and a high-pitched voice. She speaks with a heavy Latin accent that sounds South American.

She gestures inside and tells me to “take one” as she runs off. There is a screen at one end of the room and glass-front bookcases on the other. Inside the bookcases are multiple copies of one of Zora Neale Hurston’s books. On the back wall to the right of the bookcases there is a poster of Zora Neale Hurston. On the other side of the bookcases there are small framed prints or photographs, I can’t tell from the distance. In front of the screen there is a TV on a stand, with what is presumably a DVD or VCR. Two rows of plastic chairs are set up in front of the screen and TV. Just inside the door two long tables were set up next to each other to make a square table, with seven chairs arranged around it.

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Three women are sitting at two tables set next to one another, silently filling out forms. A young, dark-skinned Asian woman sits closest to the door. [Later I hear her speaking Vietnamese.] She wears a short-sleeved black blouse with loose sleeves and polka dots in different colors, black stockings, and black high-heeled boots with tapered heels and a tapered tip. A young white woman sits near the wall. She has brown hair tied into a messy bun/ponytail with the ends hanging down. She wears a gray sweater, a dark green skirt, and black boots. Another white woman, middle-aged (late 30s or early 40s), sits at the table nearest the screen. She wears a light green fleece with a teal long-sleeved shirt underneath. The sleeves of the teal shirt are pulled out beyond the sleeves of the green sleeves. She also wears jeans and brown suede nurse shoes, and has a black and silver jacket hanging from her chair.

I say hello with little response. I sit at the only empty side of the table. The form, a booklet, and two other papers are laid out in four neat piles in front of me, with blue and black pens on the left. As I fill out a form another young woman comes in, a medium-colored woman who looks Latina in professional wear: long black jacket, blue blouse, black slacks, and black leather bag. Her long straight black hair is tied up behind her head in a plastic comb. She reaches for the form and the booklet, and I hand her the other materials. She thanks me.

A few minutes later a young Asian American man shows up. He also says hello with enthusiasm and only the Latina says hello back with any feeling. He wears jeans and a two-tone gray long-sleeve shirt over a light gray t-shirt with trail running shoes. He also wears glasses with black wire rim frames. I also hand him materials, including a pen. He thanks me. Almost everyone is quite young and plain. None of the women wear makeup or have elaborate hairdos, and Linette is the most glamorous of all of us.

The application asks for information such as your address, your workplace, and interests. It also asks if you have been convicted for any child abuse crimes.

Linette comes back at some point and chirps her pleasure at the new arrivals. After almost everyone finishes the application she asks us to introduce ourselves, including

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what we are interested in. Linette says she has been with New York Cares since September, so she's relatively new.

We go in clockwise order from Linette's left. The older woman says her full name and says she's interested in everything. I also say my full name and say I heard of New York Cares through my work with community gardens and I know several that rely on NYCares volunteers. The Latina says her name [confirming that she's Latina, at least in part], and says she's primarily interested in working with children. The young white woman says she lives in Washington Heights and her husband works in parks there. The Asian American man, who introduces himself as Eric Hsu (most likely Chinese), says he's interested in everything as well. The older white woman then says that she works in a park and that they have used volunteers as well. Linette asks how it was and she replies that it was wonderful [or something like that].

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Linette goes over the organization and the handouts, especially "volunteer policies & procedures." She says the mission, and talks a little bit about some programs. She says that team leaders are people who can stay with a project for 3 or 6 months.

She asks for questions and Eric shakes his head no, no questions. She begins by emphasizing that we cannot bring guests except for New York Cares day, in the third week of October and again in April. We cannot bring our moms, or our friends visiting from out of town, without permission from the team leader, if they have not gone through the training. She explains that there are exceptions, "family-friendly" events, but these are so rare that they do not advertise these. This designation does not mean volunteers can bring their family members, but when children want to show up without parents.

She then shifts into reassurance mode, saying that we will never be alone with the client. If a child needs to go to the bathroom, for example, we should tell the team leader or ask one of the teachers or teachers aides. She reads over the rest of the handout.

She talks about the programs, including work with senior homes, where people don't always have relatives or loved ones coming to visit regularly. She says they do soup kitchens and Bingo but not just that, they have an opera night, they dance. She mentions that she does work reading with children in Queens, at PS 199. She says several times that the volunteers should give feedback, that the organization welcomes evaluations. She tells us that we can evaluate her and not to be afraid to be critical. She tells us the orientations used to be held in the office, but recently they decided to have them in "different places." "New York Public Library has been great in that," she says.

At one point Linette gives a little embarrassed laugh when answering somebody's question.

[I notice that Linette talks mostly to me. I'm not sure why. I'm not the only one looking at her, although my face may be more expressive than other people's. Only the Latina and I are dressed professionally, and I am clearly older than the Latina.]

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Then she shows us a video, asking us to move to the 2 rows of chairs. The older white woman sits on the left first row, then the Latina, then the brown-haired woman. I sit in the back row, and the two Asians join me.

She says the video will show the programs better than she can tell us about them. The video is a montage of feel-good images of mostly white young women reading to children and smiling at the camera. There is a sprinkling of Asian American volunteers, including an Asian American man chopping food and an Asian American woman with a brown child. The video does not give any specifics on what the programs are like.

Some cheesy phrases from the movie: “make sure everybody has enough,” and “people gave the coats off their back so others could be warm.” Something I found amusing—a closeup of volunteers dancing with senior citizens shows expressions of disgust and revulsion (or at least fear) on the volunteers’ faces.

At the end of the video there is a murmur of response from the white women in front but I can’t hear them. It sounds positive in tone. I ask what some of the common challenges are for new volunteers. This seems to fluster Linette [which may be in part because I took notes throughout the video, mostly on what people were wearing]. She says with the team leaders, you feel confident. You can start with something you feel comfortable with, she advises, such as meal prep, that “doesn’t require a lot of interaction with the people we are serving.” She says you can also try something new and challenge yourself. She concludes by saying “I can’t think of anything,” that she found it hard but she’s still doing it.

[I seem to have hit a nerve with her.]

She goes over the forms, making sure that we checked the box that says “none” in response to convictions. Otherwise we will get a call tomorrow. She also tells us that we will be able to register to volunteer by noon tomorrow. She collects the forms and people start to leave. I tell her that the organization is such a great idea, it’s so great for people who don’t feel they can come back every week. The older woman is similarly enthusiastic.

With almost everyone gone, I also ask Linette if she lives in Queens, since she has mentioned working on projects several times there. She says no, but there is need for people to serve as team leaders. I tell her I live nearby so I will probably working in Harlem. She tells me she is also local, she lives in Morningside Heights. I thank her and leave.

[Still no interaction between people who show up.]

On the way out I take the stairs. The third floor seems to be all meeting rooms. The second floor is the children’s section, and I think I recognize the librarian from Baby College. There are at least 4 children sitting at computers, several more in the stacks, and several adults reading at tables. On the first floor children and adults also sit at the

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computers. Eric is browsing the DVDs, and it seems that the other volunteers have left. It appears that everyone but the volunteers is black, and none of the volunteers are black.

Outside I find myself behind the Asian woman, who is talking in Vietnamese on a cell phone. She walks slowly and I quickly overtake her. A white man in a leather bomber jacket and slacks walks by, dragging a rolling briefcase/laptop case. I turn the corner to 5<sup>th</sup> Ave, keep walking, and cross the street to the bus stop. She keeps walking uptown on 4<sup>th</sup> Ave, still talking on the phone. The boots make her feet look 4 inches long.

On the bus on the way home, the crowd at the Apollo theater has gotten a little bigger, and the spotlights have been turned on. Three of the four black people sitting at the front of the bus start making comments. The female, a very large woman with a baby, reads the marquee in a skeptical tone: "Soul circus?" The elderly man sitting across from them in a suit and tie asks, "Jay-Z?" [I didn't hear if he was answering the younger man.] The younger man, who boarded with the large woman and carried a stroller, joked, "I'd be excited, but Jay-Z doesn't pay my rent." He repeated, "I'd be excited if Jay-Z paid my rent."

Back in the office I look up "Marcus Garvey Park," and sure enough, it is the "Mt. Morris Park" where the drummers have been threatened by local white residents. This is the front line of gentrification.