A Gift of Opportunity for New Yorkers

A Scholarship Gift to the Borough of Manhattan Community College

By Melanie Grayce West
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With a new scholarship gift of $100,000 to the Borough of Manhattan Community College, Elizabeth Butson is investing in what she calls some of New York's most "underserved" undergraduates.

Ms. Butson, 75 years old, is a longtime resident of Greenwich Village and the onetime publisher of the Villager and Downtown Express, two community newspapers in lower Manhattan.

She has served on the board of the foundation for BMCC, part of the City University of New York system, for several years. Her gift of $100,000 for scholarships for academically gifted students follows another of the same amount.

What she likes about the college, she said, is that it is a "mirror of New York City and of a pluralistic environment."

BMCC has a total student body of around 24,000. Popular degree programs include accounting, child care and general liberal arts. Most students receive some kind of financial aid.

Through the scholarships, Ms. Butson said, she is able do something to support young people who really want "to be part of this great opportunity that our country provides."

Ms. Butson's personal life and professional career have been defined by opportunity. She moved from Turkey to Boston to attend college at Boston University. After undergraduate work in journalism and political science, she came to New York to get a newspaper job. But with bills to pay, she ended up in public relations and was hired by cigarette maker Philip Morris to work in advertising, including the company's Marlboro campaign.

Not long after starting at Philip Morris, Ms. Butson says, she got a call out of the blue for a photography assignment in Guatemala. She took time off, traveled, shot photos of a rebel group and sold her story.

In the process, she met her husband Thomas Butson, a longtime newspaper editor. The pair had been married for 32 years when he died in 2000.

When Ms. Butson retired from Philip Morris after a 27-year career, she and Mr. Butson took on the project of resurrecting the Villager. Ms. Butson said she didn't see her husband's interest in the struggling paper as a ripe opportunity. She saw it as "crazy," she said.
Still, helping to revive a downtown newspaper positioned Ms. Butson to learn more about her neighborhood and about BMCC. What initially touched her were the stories of young people who come from low-income families who are passionate about getting an education. BMCC has become "a very, very dear project for me," she said.

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