

In a different (JUNIOR) LEAGUE

Can professional women find relevance in a slightly faded blue-blood volunteer group? **Gena Lovett** is determined to make sure they will.

BY JUDY DEYOUNG



Of all the charity groups in America, the Junior League—that venerable, all-women volunteer organization—is probably the most misunderstood. The name itself conjures up images of stuffy society tea parties, debutante balls, and a cloistered club whose members (or their descendants) stepped right out of the pages of Edith Wharton.

“The early reputation of pearls and lace precedes us,” says Gena Lovett, the president of the New York Junior League, who is also a partner and COO of Alexandra Investment Management, a small hedge fund firm in New York. When Lovett was named New York Junior League president in January 2008, the appointment was widely reported in local and national media; she became the first African-American to hold the post when she assumed her responsibilities on July 1.

Part of the League’s ongoing stereotype, Lovett explains, is tied to its blue-blood, old-money roots. Barnard student and society debutante Mary Harriman, daughter of railroad baron E. H. Harriman, founded the organization in 1901. Gathering nine friends who were about to be introduced to society, she persuaded them to produce a show to raise funds for the benefit of needy immigrant New Yorkers. Harriman saw the debutante system as an untapped resource for social good; under her hand, the group quickly



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Big Leaguers

PAST AND PRESENT MEMBERS AND THEIR LOCAL CHAPTERS

Jan Babiak

Managing partner,
Ernst & Young, London

Shirley Temple Black

Child actress and dancer,
U.N. delegate, U.S. ambassador,
Palo Alto, California

Barbara Bush

First lady, Houston

Laura Bush

First lady, Austin

Betty Ford

First lady, Grand Rapids,
Michigan

Katharine Hepburn

Actress, women's issues advocate,
Hartford, Connecticut

Oveta Culp Hobby

U.S. Secretary of Health,
Education & Welfare, Houston

Lynn Martin

U.S. Representative, Secretary
of Labor, Rockford, Illinois

Marilyn Carlson Nelson

Chairman and chief executive,
Carlson Companies, Minneapolis

Sandra Day O'Connor

Supreme Court Justice, Phoenix

Nancy Reagan

First lady, Los Angeles

Eleanor Roosevelt

First lady, labor advocate, civil
rights advocate, syndicated
columnist, U.N. delegate,
New York

Margaret Chase Smith

First woman elected senator
without previous appointment,
first woman elected to both
the House and the Senate,
Bangor, Maine

Eudora Welty

Pulitzer Prize-winning author,
Jackson, Mississippi

Phoebe A. Wood

Former vice chairman and CFO,
Brown-Forman Corp., Louisville,
Kentucky



grew to some 80 members, including Harriman's friend Eleanor Roosevelt. League members sent themselves into the settlement houses of the Lower East Side, helping newly arrived immigrant families. Then as now, the idea was—in Harriman's words—"to put to good use the opportunities afforded . . . by the advantages of time and means."

The organization has grown to 161,000 members worldwide, with chapters in Canada, England, and Mexico. In the U.S., there are 159,000 members in 285 local Leagues. Now, in contrast to the early days, 71 percent of all active members in the country are working women.

The New York chapter—one of the League's largest local branches—estimates that half of its 3,000 members hold management positions. "Many professional women bring the same drive and tenacity to our programs as they do to their careers," says Amanda Parrish Block, who works at an outreach service for the city's homeless; she is NYJL's communications manager and serves on the board. (NYJL members choose their placements from approximately 30 programs. After a four-month training period, they are matched with community-partner organizations, such as halfway houses, health organizations, and neighborhood centers.)

If Mary Harriman were alive today, she would probably be surprised to see her organization promoted on YouTube.

But why would anyone with a demanding 60-hour-a-week-plus job commit herself to charity work? Why not just write a check?

"You get a tremendous high," explains 44-year-old Susan Gammage, executive vice president for Foreign Exchange and Loan Sales at Thomson Reuters, a financial information company in New York City. "No matter how tired I'd be, coming home from the women's shelter at 11 at night, I felt like I did something important." Melissa Richards, 42, a vice president of merchant banking at Morgan Stanley, appreciates the change of mind-set. "In my business it's all about the bottom line, beating last year's performance, and bringing in new business. You're very focused on yourself and your own performance," she says. "Volunteer work is completely the opposite. It's about the other person."

And for Gena Lovett, it's a way to bring balance to her life. "It's very easy to burn out in finance," she says. "We work 12 to 13 hours a day. You've got to be able to do something to break up all the tension."

Lovett juggles duties at the NYJL with her position at Alexandra Management by splitting her day. She heads to the League in the afternoon, then returns to the hedge fund firm at night to "take care of whatever else is needed." She says her partners at Alexandra want to "make [her League involvement] work for everyone, and make it good."

Like many executives, Lovett manages her life by maintaining a disciplined schedule, which she has kept to for years. "I'm up at 5 on four hours of sleep, work 70 hours a week, and have a personal shopper," says Lovett, who lives in a Harlem brownstone with her husband, a retired business executive, and their Russian terrier.

Sitting in a stately, antiques-and-chintz-filled room at the League's East 80th Street headquarters near Park Avenue—a five-story mansion that once belonged to Vincent Astor—Lovett is a long way from rural Arkansas, where she grew up on a 40-acre vegetable farm, "just like the Waltons," she says.

At six feet tall, with a crisp, chic style, Lovett is businesslike but at ease—a woman whose poise allows her to move in many different social circles. From the start, Lovett's mother—who had taught elementary school before her children were born—groomed Lovett and her brother and two sisters for life beyond the farm. (Lovett's father died when she was ten.) She made sure that her daughters participated in

the annual debutante ball sponsored by Alpha Phi Alpha, an African-American fraternity. "My mother felt that to succeed, you have to be able to fit into different social environments and get along with all types of people," she recalls. Lovett debuted in 1982, while a freshman at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (she transferred to Philander Smith College the following year). She understood it as an opportunity to network. "Your fellow debts are going to continue their education, and their parents are pushing them forward to achieve," she says.

While in college, Lovett worked part-time as a statistician's assistant. Comfortable with numbers, she set her sights on Wall Street. "I wanted to be able to make money," she says simply. A year or so after graduating in 1985, Lovett came to New York. She rose quickly through the ranks of such financial institutions as PaineWebber and Bankers Trust. "I was born driven and always felt that management was something I could do well," she says. "And I loved the whole banking industry."

She joined the Junior League in 1995, when a friend of her boss's proposed her for membership in the New York chapter. Lovett had been aware of the League as a teenager in Little Rock, where she would go through the society pages of the local paper, studying "this group of women who were working with people in the community. The kids always had smiles on their faces."

Since 1995, Lovett has served in a number of leadership roles at the NYJL, including treasurer and finance manager. As president, she oversees an annual operating budget of more than \$3 million, funded from a variety of sources, ranging from corporate contributions to membership dues (currently \$485 a year). Events such as the annual Winter Ball—formerly the Mardi Gras Ball, which was at one time televised with Walter Cronkite as host—a yearly holiday bazaar at League headquarters, and house tours, underwritten by Stribling & Associates, provide support for community projects and member training. Over the past several years, such firms as Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, and PricewaterhouseCoopers have contributed money, goods, and volunteers to several of the League's signature programs, including the Playground Improvement Project, which was Lovett's first assignment when joining the League.



Clockwise from top left: NYJL's Mardi Gras ball (later called the Winter Ball) in New York City, to honor volunteers; early Junior League member Eleanor Roosevelt; headquarters of the New York Junior League; Mary Harriman; Henry Fonda surrounded by Junior Leaguers at a Mardi Gras Ball in 1954



"Whether it's a CEO or a woman involved with the criminal justice system, Gena has a fantastic ability to connect with all types of people," says Valerie Mason, a partner in the New York law firm of Otterbourg, Steindler, Houston & Rosen and a League member who serves with Lovett on the board of the Women's Prison Association, another philanthropic pursuit. "She has no airs, but she's a success and commands respect. That's very inspirational to these incarcerated women." Adds Elizabeth Stribling, an NYJL member since 1969: "Gena combines financial acumen with a fabulous personality, so you have a very good leader."

That experience may be standing Lovett in good stead during her first year in office. While her appointment in January 2008 was widely applauded, the media buzz at the time highlighted some allegedly uncharitable doings that Lovett, as incoming president, would have to straighten out. Days before her appointment was

announced, Trisha G. Duval—then NYJL president—provided information to the *New York Times*, claiming that the board was trying to hide a projected \$1 million deficit from the membership. The loss, she said, had stemmed largely from the \$5 million renovation of the League's East Side headquarters. It was an embarrassment for a group that has always prided itself on its discretion and consensus.

The *Times* stated that Duval had filed a complaint with the New York State attorney general's Charities Bureau, asking for an investigation into the organization's finances. M. Christine Carty, the League's attorney in the matter, confirms that Duval did file a complaint with the Charities Bureau claiming that the League had a \$1 million deficit for the prior fiscal year, due to accounting misclassifications. The League says that its financial statements are overwhelmingly correct and that there has been no wrongdoing. However, Duval still maintains that there was a very large deficit, which was confirmed to her by an independent accounting firm she had retained to analyze the League's finances.

According to League members, the relationship between Duval and her 22-person board deteriorated over numerous management issues, including the accuracy of the financial statements in question. Duval resigned in February 2008, and an interim president took over until Lovett assumed office in July.

Although Lovett had previously served on the League board, she was not a board member during this fractious period. "There was friction between the former president and her board members," Lovett points out. Duval, she says, "chose a route that to this day none of us can fath-

om. When you take on the responsibility of president, you have to work as a team." Queried further about the controversy, Lovett insists there was no deficit. "Now we have a million-dollar deficit," she says dryly. "We have spent seven figures to get out of this mess—on lawyers and accounting firms." She goes on to explain that "we've had to prove ourselves to the attorney general's office. Even things they didn't ask for, we gave them, to show that we are an open book and always had good business ethics, and that we know how to run a business organization." According to Carty, the matter is still under investigation; an email from the attorney general's office, sent in response to a request for a copy of the complaint Duval filed, read, "The office has no comment on the matter."

As a 22-year veteran of the financial industry, Lovett comes well equipped to tackle the organization's spreadsheets. With a newly hired controller, she will oversee all accounting. "But the main focus after this settles down is to get back to who we were—a group that's responsive to the needs of the community, as opposed to our own operational concerns—and to increase our visibility in New York City," she says firmly. "I want people to see all the positive, fantastic things we've been doing," she adds, mentioning such programs as advocating for domestic violence survivors in emergency rooms across the city, and workshops on early detection and screening presented in conjunction with the American Cancer Society. She has stepped up fundraising, targeting grants from private institutions.

While Lovett is committed to preserving Mary Harriman's original mission—to put women's time and talents "to good use" in service to the community—she wants to add programs that reflect the changing needs of the city, such as outreach projects for New York's rapidly increasing elderly population. She is also looking into possibly offering volunteer opportunities online. "There are women who want to be part of the NYJL but won't join because of the time commitment," she explains. With an online volunteer program, women unable to give several evenings a week could log in on a flexible schedule to do database administration, grant proposal writing, or other computer-centered work.

As for the membership, Lovett says it's growing: "We just rolled out 300 new trained provisional members. We expect a couple hundred in the fall." The growth is largely due to the open-door admissions policy that the League adopted four years ago—a significant change from the days when acceptance was by invitation only. Then, a woman seeking to join had to know at least one woman who was already a member,

and her application had to be seconded. Today, membership in the NYJL is open to all women 16 or older, regardless of color or creed, who are willing to participate in the League's activities and pay the annual membership fee.

Last year, to further attract new members, the NYJL created a recruiting committee to reach out to companies and other groups with social responsibility programs, such as UBS and Hunter College, as well as to the office of congresswoman (and NYJL member) Carolyn Maloney. The volunteer development committee is also targeting JPMorgan Chase and the real estate brokerage firm Corcoran Group.

"I believe in working as a team," says Lovett, "and the NYJL is a fantastic one, with some of the smartest women I've ever met." If Mary Harriman were alive today, she would probably be surprised to see her organization promoted on YouTube, but she'd be proud that the Junior League, in its 108 years, has remained remarkably close to her founding vision: that women with energy and passion can lead their communities in change.

Judy DeYoung is a reporter/researcher for Vanity Fair.

Smart Volunteering

Gena Lovett on how to pick a nonprofit

Find out where you want to be. Professional organizations such as the High Water Women Foundation (highwaterwomen.org) connect finance executives with volunteering, mentoring, and philanthropic opportunities; membership is free. If you're interested in joining the Junior League, the Association of Junior Leagues International (ajli.org) can help you find a chapter in your area.

Read up on the organization's financials and funding. It's like picking a stock, says Lovett: Make sure it's stable. Guidestar (guidestar.org) has a website with information on 1.7 million tax-exempt organizations, showing how they use their donations and revenues. (IRS 990 forms are included for most of the nonprofits listed.)

Start with your heart. Whether it's the arts or working with children, look at organizations that are doing what you care about.

Choose a cause you can commit to and balance with your personal and professional interests. Lovett, a passionate advocate for the welfare of women and children, says she doesn't stray too far away from women's issues. "I've been able to balance the different organizations I volunteer for because they're really similar."

Have fun. Aside from helping others, volunteering is a way to meet and spend time with like-minded individuals.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY JUNIOR LEAGUE OF NEW YORK (3); LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY; NEWYORKINPHOTOS.COM