

Paula L. Root and Leon Root, MD



Recipients, Distinguished Community Service Award

The United Hospital Fund's Distinguished Community Service award recognizes volunteer leadership that significantly improves health care in New York City. This year, we salute Paula L. Root for her work with the Visiting Nurse Service of New York and Leon Root, MD, for founding the Hospital for Special Surgery's Pediatric Outreach Program.

Paula and Leon Root have taken different paths in their volunteer and professional lives, but the driving force behind each of their journeys has been very much the same—a deeply felt commitment to helping vulnerable New Yorkers, especially children, attain the best quality of life possible.

For Paula Root, that vision led to her service, for the past twenty-seven years, on the board of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, focusing on both children's and mental health. "I bring my family history with me," says Mrs. Root, citing the example of her grandmother, who was one of the founders of Canada's Victorian Order of Nurses, and who organized efforts to bring orphaned children from Europe to Canada in the 1930s. "When I was asked to become involved with VNSNY, I went on a home visit, saw the impact the nurse had, and from that moment I was committed."

Under Paula Root's chairmanship, VNSNY's Family Care Services Board introduced innovative initiatives—training community health advisors to help reduce emergency room visits for childhood asthma, for example—that expanded on the already extensive delivery of services for frail elderly and disabled New Yorkers for which the organization is known. Her work on the Community Mental Health Advisory Committee also helped establish new directions for home health care, providing clients with severe and persistent mental illness with care management, employment training, and other services. Mrs. Root was instrumental, too, in securing grant support to provide mental health services in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

From promoting programs for child health and development, at-risk and emotionally disturbed children and adolescents, and family skills for young fathers, to recently joining the VNSNY Hospice Care Board, Paula Root's efforts reflect her concern for "the whole cycle"—from a healthier childhood through a better old age—"ultimately, the huge importance of living and dying with dignity." And that is exactly what her passion for spreading the VNSNY message, and ensuring its ability to serve growing numbers of clients, has helped ensure.

A concern with the whole cycle—from early-childhood diagnoses through follow-up once young adults have "aged out" of pediatric services, and beyond—is very much a part of Leon Root's extraordinary volunteer career as well. A renowned orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Root started the Hospital for Special Surgery's pediatric service in 1972, and spent twenty-five years as its chief. Seeing that many of the children coming to the hospital had conditions that would have been more amenable to treatment had they been diagnosed earlier, he took a seemingly simple vision—screening services for children, in their communities—and created a program of enormous impact.

Starting with an initial visit to one school, the Pediatric Outreach Program, or POP, established in 1987, would go on to make monthly visits to elementary schools throughout Manhattan and the lower Bronx. With a team of three or four residents and several nurses, all volunteers, the program uses simple assessments to diagnose a range of orthopedic problems, and sometimes non-orthopedic ones as well.

Today, the Leon Root, MD, Pediatric Outreach Program, as it was renamed on its 20th anniversary, has seen some 25,000 children, and made more than 3,500 referrals. The critical heart of the program, says Dr. Root, is that when screening uncovers a problem, the program's coordinator works with the child's family to set up an appointment at HSS, provides cab fare to and from the hospital, follows up to make sure the visit was made, arranges additional visits, and coordinates applications for insurance, if needed.

Teaching, too, is an integral part of the program, providing orthopedic and pediatric residents with valuable clinical experience. That ongoing concern with clinical excellence, advancing orthopedic understanding and care, is also behind Dr. Root's instrumental role as the director of the HSS Department of Rehabilitation. And it was his vision that led to the opening of the hospital's pioneering Motion Analysis Laboratory, one of the most advanced facilities of its kind in the country.

Through POP, the lessons taught are also about the need to "give back," and to fully understand patients' needs. For Dr. Root, a specialist in managing cerebral palsy and osteogenesis imperfecta, "You can't just be an orthopedic surgeon. You have to help socially, counsel the family, take care of the problems anyone experiences with aging."

The compassion that Leon Root brings to the program, to his other activities at the hospital, and to connecting even with those he has counseled but never met—the thousands of readers of his best-selling book *No More Aching Back*—haven't gone without notice. Dr. Root has received the Healthcare Chaplaincy's Wholeness of Life Award, and the Hospital for Special Surgery's

first Lifetime Achievement Award. For his forty-plus years of volunteer service the medical wing of the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Nassau County was named after him. And for his dedication to teaching and mentoring he received, two years ago, the first Mentorship Award of the American Academy of Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine, of which he was president in 1988-89. His humanity also explains why so many of his former patients have become part of the Roots' "extended family," keeping in touch those "ten or twenty years down the road" with which Leon Root is concerned.

But perhaps his greatest reward has been seeing his commitment and compassion reflected in the equal commitment that Paula Root brings to her volunteer efforts. Their pride in each other's work is palpable. "We really are partners," they both say, "and that's a very lucky thing."

It is lucky, too, for all those their lives have touched. The United Hospital Fund is proud to present the Distinguished Community Service Award to Paula L. Root and Leon Root, MD, for their generosity of time and spirit, and for the tangible improvements they have made in the lives of thousands of New Yorkers.