Eugene M. Lang ’38: The “Masterless Man”
by Aliya Padamsee ’14, The following has been excerpted from a longer article, available at http://www.swarthmore.edu/x16062.xml.

...Eugene Lang ’38, has received recognition from presidents Kennedy, Clinton and G.W. Bush, holds 29 honorary degrees, and has contributed more than $150 million to American education. But this entrepreneur and philanthropist specializes in creating opportunities, not just buildings, and the prestigious Lang Opportunity Scholarship (LOS) is one of the best examples. Each year for over 30 years, approximately six Swarthmore sophomores have been awarded $10,000 to pursue a project of significant social change. During this time, students have conducted projects in 30 countries from Bolivia to India to Zimbabwe. “Eugene Lang isn’t just one of the College’s main benefactors; he’s one of its biggest success stories. He went to College on genius, hard work, ambition and a full ride. He has not just made billions; he has made a difference,” said Lang Scholar Nick Allred ’13.

...Urged to read from a young age, Lang says, “I was enthralled by Thorstein Veblen’s ‘masterless man.’ I wanted to be a ‘masterless man.’ ” Veblen was an American economist and sociologist whose “masterless men” constituted a nascent middle class who rejected the grip of feudal control and inaugurated an onrush of freedom and technological progress. Combining Veblen’s and his father’s philosophies, Lang was instilled with a deep sense of how individuals could make an impact in unconventional ways. Always immaculately dressed with his signature red-rimmed glasses, an inspiring spirit still shines through his eyes, glowing with great respect for everyone who has a vision to make a significant impact. Lang has lost none of his passion and remains very active in Swarthmore’s community...“I find it inspiring to be at Swarthmore and to be able to talk with students and respond to their interests and ideas.”

And to think that none of this may have happened if a waiter in a Harlem restaurant 78 years ago had not become indisposed at a crucial moment... As Lang was walking home one afternoon, he passed a little restaurant on 60th and 3rd Avenue with a sign in the window: “dishwasher wanted.” “I was looking for my first job and was fourteen at the time, which was probably against the law then, but it didn’t matter, I wasn’t expensive,” Lang says.
The “Masterless Man” (cont’d)

Mr. Jackson was a regular customer at the restaurant who turned a blind eye to prices but insisted on a hot, fresh, entree made-to-order just for him. It was an honor for waiters to serve Mr. Jackson. His regular waiter was suffering a personal emergency and couldn’t deliver Mr. Jackson his meal on time. Dishwasher Lang was requested to do the honors. Hands trembling while carrying the hot plate, Lang tenderly placed the dish in front of Mr. Jackson, who asked, “Who are you?” “I’m Eugene,” he said blushing. “Well Eugene, what do you do here?” “I work here.” “What kind of work do you do?” “Well, I wash dishes and help clean up.” “Aren’t you in school?” “No.” “Why aren’t you in school?” “Because I graduated?” “Are you going to go to college?” “Yeah. I’m going to City College.” “Why are you going there?” “Because I got in.” “Have you thought about other colleges?” “No. Other colleges cost money, and my family doesn’t have any money.” “Well, did you ever hear of Swarthmore?” “No.”

A few nights later when Mr. Jackson returned for his usual, he pulled out a Swarthmore application and gave it to Lang, who filled it out, handed it back and forgot about it all together. A couple of weeks later, Lang received a letter addressed from the Dean of Swarthmore inviting him for an interview at the Harvard Club. “I remember getting this letter was an experience in itself because I never got mail. This was the first letter I remember getting from anyone.” A few weeks after his interview, Lang received his second letter ever – a congratulatory one with a full scholarship attached. In hindsight, Lang reflects, “I guess I went to Swarthmore because Mr. Jackson’s regular waiter had to run to the toilet!”

The main adjustment Lang had to make in coming to Swarthmore was that he was 15 years old. “I still didn’t own a pair of long pants. I had never had a dance with a girl before. I didn’t know how to dance,” says Lang. Lang marveled at the older kids’ dancing on the steps of the amphitheater after First Collection. “I learned how to dance from a shoe advertisement in the New York Times, but it only showed shoes waltzing in a straight line. I still didn’t know how to turn!”

Persistence with dance moves was only the beginning. “In my classes, I continued to go up to the desk and aggressively ask questions,” said Lang.

While earning a B.A in Economics, Lang showcased his talents as both a businessman and as a social entrepreneur as he established successful dry-cleaning and college pennant manufacturing businesses. Simultaneously, every Monday night on 4th and Queen Street in Philadelphia, Lang organized and led an inner city youth club at a settlement house. “No other Swarthmore student, and certainly no other freshman, was doing that, nor was there any encouragement to do that,” says Lang, who continued to show a great deal of maturity from a very young age. Advocacy for the youth club was similar to starting a business. “A business wasn’t just about making money, it was about creating something that was significant to the community,” reflects Lang.

His arrival at Swarthmore represented his coming of age. “I was very proud to be a Swarthmore student. I always wanted to be different. I never wanted to be like everybody else.” Lang never needed a path already trodden for him. He did the treading. “I’ve always felt that innovation was an expression of one’s own worth and purpose of being on earth,” says Lang, who has helped establish over 100 companies in 45 nations.

To Lang, nurturing a young mind comes as easily as innovating new technology. In 1977, Lang ceased all his business ventures and dedicated the remainder of his life to philanthropy in education, continuing his 1963 establishment of the Eugene M. Lang Foundation. Since Lang was [by this time] a successful, world-renowned industrialist, the principal of P.S. 121 had requested that he give a commencement speech to inspire the
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graduating class of sixth graders. “I had never spoken to an audience of children and didn’t know what in the slightest to say that would be relevant to them,” says Lang. As Lang approached the podium in a packed auditorium with restless eleven-year-olds fidgeting in their chairs, he had an idea.

Crumpling up what he had originally prepared along the lines of “Work hard and you’ll succeed,” Lang instead gave an impromptu speech, telling the class about witnessing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech at the 1963 March on Washington. He urged the students to dream their own dreams, and promised to do all that he could to help them realize these dreams. This promise came in the form of a graduation present for each student: $2,000 for their college tuition in 1981 given that they graduated from high school – he would uphold his end of the bargain as long as they did too. Lang’s promises are never empty.

Immediately following his gesture, stunned, pin-drop silence swept through the room along with some audible gasps, followed by a rush of grateful students, parents and teachers cheering and encircling him. “I have never kissed so many strangers,” Lang recalls. The principal of P.S. 121 turned Lang’s message sour in private soon after. “Not to worry Eugene, it’s not going to cost you much because maybe one or two of the students you saw today will actually go to college,” said the principal. Distressed and irritated by the matter-of-fact way the principal admitted to the inadequacy of the educational system, Lang said, “Well, my purpose is to un-do exactly what you just told me.” Innovative as always, Lang would find a way to keep the children in school so that they were prepared to receive the college tuition he would grant them. This was between him and them. Lang wanted no publicity, and above all, he wanted to establish faith and credibility with the children, who he called his “Dreamers.” “I didn’t want the kids to feel that they were tools of my own ego. I was doing this for them, not for me,” says Lang.

The essential significance of the project was to watch the “Dreamers” blossom into educated, proud individual contributors to society. Lang has since maintained the closest of relationships with his “Dreamers” who he has considered extensions of his family…Lang’s family extends far beyond those who share his last name. In a different way than his “Dreamers,” Lang sees his LOS recipients as budding ambitious activists like himself and says, “Many of my Swarthmore relationships I have regarded and will regard as members of my family.”

Lang has always remembered his roots. “I think a lot of what it took for me to accomplish all of this came from the challenges that Swarthmore presented me,” says Lang. These challenges weren’t solely of being the youngest kid on the block but of running his own show and of having the freedom to counteract established policy as a pioneer... Lang truly [had become] the “masterless man.”

He used his Swarthmore education to propel him into providing opportunities that he had received and for improving an institution that remained ever susceptible to improvement. “Swarthmore has always been conscious that it could be better. It has been an extraordinary place that has always been willing to tolerate change,” says Lang.

Humbled by his modest roots and drawing strength from his father’s wisdom, Lang sought out to be the change he wished to see. Any idea he conjured up, he manifested. After ninety-two years of life, most of which was dedicated to giving and educating, he feels his work is not yet finished. “I am not yet completely fulfilled,” he said. “As long as I’m still breathing, there are still things to get done.”

LOS CLASS NOTES (cont’d)

For my Lang Project, I started a microfinance seed fund, Micro Anatolia Microfinance Fund, in my home country Turkey. I have been running Micro Anatolia in partnership with Grameen Turkey. Therefore, it was an incredible opportunity for me to spend three days with Professor Yunus, Professor Aziz Akgul, the CEO of Grameen Turkey, and other supporters of the initiative, Minister of European Union and Integration Affairs and the Minister of Family and Social Policies.

The second major event where I had the chance to shadow Professor Yunus was a ceremony for the launch of the first microinsurance in Turkey. The microinsurance celebration took place in the presence of 81 women entrepreneurs who are micro borrowers of Grameen Turkey (and some of Micro Anatolia) and the first microinsurance was given to the 55,000th member of Grameen Turkey. The number 81 represents the 81 provinces in Turkey. It was an incredible gathering for me as the energy and the sense of accomplishment of the Anatolian women were all around us. The women were extremely excited to meet Professor Yunus.

During all these events, I observed that Professor Yunus always has a calm but firm stance on issues pressing our society such as poverty. He is also very humble. He was very generous to share his thoughts and ideas with me whenever I had questions. I am glad that I had the opportunity to get to know him in person.”
Announcements & Updates

The Lang Scholars Present: *Innovative Solutions to Complex Problems*

For nearly 30 years, Eugene Lang ’38 has supported over 100 Lang Scholars and their social action projects in 100s of communities close to home and around the world. Join us as the LOS Class of 2012 to learn about the innovative solutions they developed to help solve some of today’s most complex social puzzles.

- **Adam Bortner’s LOS project, Having It Heard** consists of three main components: establishing a computer center in Chester, Pennsylvania, developing a basic computer training course, and facilitating small-group digital storytelling workshops for people with HIV.

- **Rebekah Judson’s LOS project, Voices of Literacy** uses digital media as a vehicle for increasing multiple literacies among youth and adults of underserved populations in Delaware County.

- **Tom Liu’s LOS project, Screening and Extended Eye-care Referral (SEER) Program** helps rural patients overcome multiple barriers in accessing eye care services and in so doing tackles the issue of preventable blindness.

- **Lizah Masis’ LOS project, Project Tumaini** provides a support group, education and training and economic empowerment through microfinance with widows of political violence in Mt. Elgon, Kenya.

- **Sarah Scheub’s LOS project, Centro De Experimentación Sostenible Onon Jonibo**, is a sustainable agriculture program – a food forest, livestock, and a center which acts as a sustainable living library open to the public, a place for workshops, as well as a demonstration site for eco-stoves and toilets which allows community members to learn about these low cost, sustainable alternatives – in the Peruvian Amazon.

**YOU’RE INVITED!**

Friday, March 30, 2011
5:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m.
Keith Room, Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility
Swarthmore College

*Please RSVP by March 26 to Jennifer Magee at jmagee1@swarthmore.edu.*

LOS Facebook Updates

The LOS Facebook group was created with the old format and has since been “migrated” by Facebook to the new “groups” format. Groups provide a closed space for small groups of people to communicate about shared interests. If you visited the group recently and clicked the link to continue your membership, then you remained a member of the group since it migrated; however, if you didn’t actively ask to stay in the group, you were not migrated. Never fear! If you’d like to be added to the group, just email jmagee1@swarthmore.edu and you will be added. Join our LOS group to participate in discussion threads, view photos and wall posts, and more!

With Gratitude

*Heartfelt thanks to Eugene M. Lang ’38 for his continued support and generosity to the LOS Program!*

Submissions Welcome

If you have a “class note” or “dogfish story” of your own, please consider contributing it for a future issue of the *Dogfish Stories: The Lang Scholar Newsletter*. The *Dogfish Stories* is e-published during spring break (March) and fall break (October) each year. Email your submission to jmagee1@swarthmore.edu.

The LOS Retrospective

Last year the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility hired an independent consultant to conduct a study of past Lang Opportunity Scholar’s projects and prepare a report – *LOS Retrospective* – on the nature, experience, impact on Scholars and the communities they worked with, and status of projects developed and completed by Scholars during the previous 10 years, including the prospects of their ongoing viability and continuing benefits. Electronic copies of the *LOS Retrospective* are available; simply email jmagee1@swarthmore.edu for your copy.

NEW: The Lang Center has a Facebook page, “Like” us!