

Eugene Lang: The “Masterless Man”
By Aliya Padamsee ‘14

We’ve all taken refuge in the Underhill Library of the Lang Music Building during final exams. We’ve all been to concerts at the Lang Performing Arts Center. We’ve all been inspired by our future peer leaders at the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility. But who has left these giant footprints on Swarthmore’s grounds? When asked why these buildings begin with “Lang,” an anonymous freshman answered in an unsure voice, “There must have been someone named Lang who gave a lot of money?” It’s about time we know whose legacy we celebrate day in and day out.

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 LOS recipient Nicholas Allred ’13...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, visiting campus as recently as December 2-3 for the board meeting.

“I find it inspiring to be at Swarthmore and to be able to talk with students and respond to their interests and ideas,” he said in his interview. “The spirit of Swarthmore and the role of Swarthmore in our society is that of a progressive, creative, social force.” Vice President of Swarthmore, Maurice Eldridge ’61, said, “All of his giving goes directly to the heart of meeting a need for the college or for setting an important new direction.” 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.

Childhood Lessons

Swarthmore has done a series of documentaries about its most generous donor that tells a classic immigrant story. Born to Hungarian parents in 1919, Lang grew up in New York City, attending P.S. 121 in East Harlem during the Great Depression. On the first floor of a railroad flat on East 83rd Street, Lang and his family paid twelve dollars a month for the home that they heated with their stove. Alongside horses and wagons, Lang would play with his friends in the street. When he wasn’t outside, his father would teach him how to use tools to make his own toys. Lang’s father had ignited a creative, innovative spark in his son and had urged him to ask questions, to challenge what he was told and to read voraciously – Tolstoy was his favorite. Above all, his father had taught him never to accept something he wished he could change.

Despite never having finished grammar school, growing up on a farm that could barely support his seven siblings and being apprenticed at ten years of age, Lang's father gained a lot of wisdom from life itself. He became a socialist activist very early on and refused to accept conscription into the Kaiser's army. Once he was found guilty of distributing what was considered subversive literature in Hungary, he stepped onto a boat to America in 1911 rather than submitting to authorities. "There's no particular virtue in working for anybody else," Lang remembers his father saying. He followed his own ideas, his own star.

Lang's father had a very simple philosophy: "the only human being that merits the dignity of the adjective 'human' was one who was creative, someone who added something to the social condition of the community. He thought farmers who grew things, mechanics and artisans who made things, and teachers who taught human beings were really human beings. People like lawyers, bankers, accountants he classified with one word, 'parasites.'" 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.

A Fortunate Encounter with Mr. Jackson

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. Mr. Jackson was a regular customer at the restaurant who turned a blind eye to prices but insisted on a hot, fresh, entrée 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?"

"What about high school?"

"I graduated from high school."

"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!”

Swarthmore, a Launch Pad

The main adjustment Lang had to make in coming to Swarthmore was that he was fifteen 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, carrying his father’s teachings with him.

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.

In a Time of War

Soon after graduation, Lang went to work for a financial publication. Days into work, the news of Pearl Harbor stunned the world. Blood pressure rising as he watched both the horror of the violence and the bravery of the American fighters, Lang decided to enlist. The next morning, all prepared for battle, he was rejected on account of flat feet. “I thought that was ridiculous, but I decided I wasn’t going to be defeated,” says Lang. Immediately, he quit his job and got into the war industry. Lang ended up in Long Island City working at Heli-Coil, an aircraft parts factory,

while earning an MBS at Columbia University and taking mechanical engineering courses at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. He started out learning how the machines operated and worked his way up to Director of Planning and part owner of Heli-Coil. During his time at the factory, Lang realized that the war effort was handicapped because manufacturers couldn't buy things that they needed due to the dearth of subcontractors. "I got the idea from the needs of my own little factory that I could solve the problem of shortages for the military. While, that sounds a bit grandiose, I didn't think of it in those terms because every little bit you did helped," says Lang.

Business Beckons

As his stream of ideas continued to flow, Lang tried to find products and technology that he could manufacture to assist small companies going back into business after the war. In 1951, he organized the Resources and Facilities (REFAC) Technology Development Corporation to establish and develop Heli-Coil and other high-tech products in world markets by creating overseas manufacturing licenses and joint ventures. After building his first factory in Connecticut, Lang's products gained worldwide allure as business internationalized.

Lang happened to meet the Economic Administrator of Japan, under General McArthur, as a consultant to the U.S. Departments of State and Commerce serving on global trade and investment missions. As a dinner guest one evening, the Japanese administrator notified Lang that half of the population was on the breadline being fed by the army since production was at a half-mast level. He sought to emulate Lang's endeavor. Lang set up the first post-war manufacturing venture in Japan. "This was, in a way, where life began," says Lang. Then President of REFAC, Lang became internationally recognized as being the very first one to pioneer licensing and technology transfer for industry in general as a practical means for small American manufacturers to establish their business interests in foreign markets. "REFAC has the particular virtue of being pronounceable in every language without translating into a bad word in any language," jokes Lang.

An active proponent of small business interests, Lang received the Government's "E" Award from President Kennedy, the highest U.S. government's honor for increasing exports. Soon, Forbes was calling him "the quintessential entrepreneur" and Nation's Business, "a father of innovation." The funny thing was, Lang never desired or dreamed of financial success as a child. "I think my earliest ambition was to run a garbage truck. And then my next ambition was to be a social worker. And it was actually my high school principal who told me that, while the aspiration was noble, the fact was that in 1933, in the depths of the Depression, most social workers did not eat very regularly." "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, while always remembering his father's teachings.

I Have a Dream

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. While his father's dream was to come to "the land of opportunity," Lang found America to fall short in

providing many educational opportunities. Since Lang was now a successful, world-renowned industrialist, the principal of P.S. 121 had requested that he give a commencement speech to inspire the 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. "This has been an emotional experience that I wouldn't trade for anything to date. One of my 'Dreamers' said to me, 'Mr. Lang, you're really my father.'" Lang puts his work in perspective. He has not sought out to eradicate problems completely. Instead, he creates opportunities and shows that there is a possible way to deal with the problem. "I didn't do anything for them. I made it possible for them to do things for themselves," said Lang. "Now I want to emphasize that 15,000 'Dreamers' seems like a lot, until you measure it against the fact that each year in this country now we have some 750,000 to a million dropouts. So, we have barely scratched the problem," says Lang. "Every child that we can help build a life itself justifies everything we can do. That's the value we place on a human life," says Lang. However, Lang is never content with his progress, since he realizes the immense work that is yet to be done.

Continued Contributions

Taking education one step further in his home state of New York, Lang founded the Eugene Lang College – The New School for Liberal Arts in 1985. Reflecting aspects of his experiences at Swarthmore, The New School is a small, seminar-style, undergraduate, liberal arts college with a student-directed curriculum focused mainly on writing and exploring various fields of study before honing in on a major. Centered in the urban setting of Greenwich Village, The New School fosters critical thinking, social justice and cross-cultural understanding both inside and outside the classroom. The Princeton Review has described The New School as the best college in the country for encouraging debate and discussion, which is precisely what Lang actively engaged in at Swarthmore.

Back to the Old School

Lang has never forgotten the meaning of a scholarship – a ticket to his education and all the possibilities that education opened up. He has also never forgotten his family support, from his parents to his late wife Teresa. Lang’s familial legacies are sprinkled in familiar places, with grandchildren graduating from Swarthmore as recently as last year, and in unfamiliar places, with his son Stephen Lang playing Colonel Miles Quaritch – the villain – in the movie *Avatar*. In the 1950’s, Lang made his first contribution to Swarthmore in the form of a scholarship to honor his parents. That marked the beginning of a legacy of philanthropy to his alma mater. “I don’t think I’ve missed a single Swarthmore drive ever since,” says Lang. With an initial six million dollar donation over thirty years ago, the Music Building was born. LPAC followed in 1991. “They were more than just buildings. They were the foundation for bringing performing arts, music, dance, and the visual arts into their rightful place at the heart of the liberal arts,” said Eldridge. “I felt that the arts were appreciated here but not necessarily part of the educational flow. I wanted to do something about that,” said Lang. Creative and innovative from childhood, Lang always liked to be able to add something, something of value.

“The mission of the Lang Center is for social responsibility to be part of the energy at the center of the College, not for the Lang Center to manage this responsibility for the College from afar,” said Executive Director of the Lang Center, Joy Charlton. Even though scholarships and activism were prevalent prior to the Lang Center’s construction, Lang believed he had to house this inspiring spirit. “The Lang Center provides the container for a broad, active, social dynamic that inevitably associates itself with values that encourage education, all of the adjectives of democracy and the human spirit that associate with free and progressive society,” says Lang.

Not only manifesting but also keeping his vision alive, Lang has encapsulated Swarthmore’s identity: realizing the potential of each student to become constructive members of society. Having had the privilege to meet Mr. Lang in person as an LOS recipient, Allred said, “Eugene Lang will never back down. He holds accountable the people who are putting his money to work in making the world a better place.” 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.” According to Lang, Swarthmore’s mission is to educate and to inspire, and part of that education is experience. First, students must be able to identify their interests and develop their values, and second, to determine the media through which they can make a difference. Recognizing the need for exceptional Swarthmore minds in

our international community, Lang considers himself incredibly fortunate to have had the means to be able to provide select students with this media to realize their visions. “I never just give money. I use it to put ideas to work,” says Lang of his lifelong philosophy.

Education as America’s Defense

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 was 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. Lang is chair emeritus of Swarthmore College, and founder and chair emeritus of the National “I Have a Dream” Foundation and the Conference of Board Chairs of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges. Among many honors for his contributions to American education, President George H. W. Bush designated him a “Point of Light” and President Bill Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, this nation’s highest civilian award. “We have allowed the base of our success to erode. The education of Americans is the key to America’s defense,” 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.”

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