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Meet the Upper West Side's Bench Bunch

Posted at 2:00 am in Art, Community, Neighborhoods, Oral History, Profiles — 0 Comments

Bench Bunch members Lauren Lester and Jeanne Lee at Tom's Restaurant. Photo by Ted Dennis

By Ted Dennis

The benches just inside the entrance to Central Park at West 72nd Street are occupied by a group of "old people" who have been there for years, sometimes in weather permitting between 3 and 5 p.m. Some are geriatrically eligible, some 35 grandchildren. The Great Depression and Second World War. Add in age and people get little glue pieces of wisdom and experience in the group of a dozen or so Upper West Siders.

Men and Americans or transplants. Three women are retired teachers. One husband had a long career in manufacturing, preceded by a stint in Air Force intelligence. Another was a Wall Street lawyer who spent his retirement volunteering at group practice. Another graduated with Ralph Nader. Another began at a Park Avenue church. Most have called the UWS home for at least half a century (pitching to 90 years in one instance).

Daily attendance isn't required, but it is very much desired. Members of this highly informal group say they come for comfort, for conversation, and sometimes just to enjoy the pleasure of each other's company, so talking needed. "It's good to see people," said Lauren Lester, 78, who lives in the Langham. (He respects individual space, writes only using first names.)

The group has, after a bit of back and forth, agreed on a name: the bench Bunch. The origin story, going back about a year — is a bit murky. Still, most agree it probably begins with Helen. Helen, 93 and speaks in a Jamaican twang, has a personality that rumbles like 90-year-old's ought to. She's acknowledge the title President of the Bench Bunch, but Venus wins by imperatives.

"It's not like I was elected or anything," she says.

Helen is the unofficial president of the Bench Bunch.

Helen was married twice. Her first husband, Gaston, like many Upper West Siders, escaped the Holocaust as a young man. In America, he became a renowned psychiatrist. Helen was also the rare mate of her generation who insisted on doing the cooking. She recall "Helen cannot cook and says she couldn't (and isn't here).

Helen can often be heard on the bench promoting her son's upcoming concerts at the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society. Her second husband, Ivan, was a Holocaust survivor who ran the city Criminal Justice Coordinated Council. Ivan, who's also spoken about makes her sick, and what kicks he sent off. A baritone reading Italian Fascism Wrings Again features no doubt about that.

Helen resists it now one of the Bench Bunch couples, Richard and Ruth, who appointed her president. She says they introduced Gaston and Ivan to each other, and others remember Helen initiating first contact.

Regardless, Richard and Ruth are considered founding members. Together for half a century, the pair live very active lives, neither was there when I visited the Bench Bunch, though all entered for their pre-regular participation.

Jeanne Lee, and Ted.

Another couple, Chase and Jane, have been married 61 years. In addition to being UWS lessons, Chase, a retired teacher, and Jane, a retired physician, are a global presence. The couple has traveled to 156 — or 6 137 — countries. (Their favorite, so far? Ireland.)

Marion and Jerry have also lived on the Upper West Side for quite some time — in Marion's case, the 96 years mentioned earlier. The two have been married 73 years.

Marion and Jerry.

"Did you know I was named for the youngest Marx brother's wife?" Marion asks. She wrote around that — a youngster compared to most of the bench — knows the Upper West Side intimately, remembering when Columbus was a vibrant neighborhood. Marion volunteers that young women used to be warned to stay off UWS side streets. "That was a long time ago," she adds quickly. "It's nothing like that now."

Also in attendance at the daily gatherings are Beth, a marketing professional for 30 years, and her sister, Ruth. Beth younger than the others, they consider themselves junior adjacent members.

Let's not forget the home health aides — Yvette, Tamara, and Joy. Among other things, they ensure the Bench safely navigates the constant stream that surrounds them. Joy's charge, Ruth, is a Bronx native, home carriages and pedicabs, as well as every electric conveyance imaginable.

Bench Bunch members are quick to credit aqui's role in bringing them together: Ruth and Helen the smart phone; they possess social skills many screenagers lack — like making eye contact, making an introduction, or making small talk. They also know how to listen and offer a helpful hand, a gentle reminder, or a critical pleasure of being on the UWS. It comes naturally.

Bill Kaplan (left, sign in hand) is joined by Ruth and Beth Kaplan and Yvette Jackson (second and third from left).

Tales Bellis every into the group. In Helen tells it, she and Beth met over a wave. Each time they passed in the park they waved, until — after a month of waving to each other — Helen moved closer. Contact was made and a new member joined the budding community.

"In the big city, you can always find a little community," says Judy.

What do they talk about? The latest excuses of a cat out of the door (that's in middle aged just has, about). The arrival of a grandchild. A shared affinity for simply pressed suits. The Bench Bunch knows the meaningful and the mundane.

They also share impressions of an ever-changing Upper West Side. The neighborhood would always so popular with families; they note — or even popular, in general. Dining has also improved immensely over the years, they add.

Still, while the Bench is friendly, there is a certain reticence when it comes to expanding the group. Members are wary of the time and emotional investment this book and event of Helen's and humanity. They're built businesses, raised future generations, stuck by each other in long-lived marital unions.

Yet, for all they're wary, left and experienced, the group is firmly focused on the here and now, and on the future.

"Every day, we see the people of the walking past us," Helen explains.

"Like those two women, kissing," Lester cites.

As the days get shorter, darker and colder, the Bench strategizes how to stay together. "We haven't done winter yet," notes Sam. But not staying together is not an option. There's the sunrises in Diane and Alan's building — that could be a possible winter gathering place. A salmon sunrise is for coming into focus.

So we wrap, something the center into focus. It wraps Helen, Richard and Ruth, who are the Bench Bunch's oldest members, and it wraps the relationships that brought together around a park, in addition a new puppy, take delight in a child, share a window display. They are constantly tinking new. Human connections that make life richer and more meaningful.

Perhaps this helps explain the Bench's existence about discussing their personal pasts.

It is, simply, a bit of unusual, shared wonder. Life is best lived looking forward.

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17 COMMENTS

Lauren 2:00 am Reply
Great article.
Thank you.

Lauren 2:00 am Reply
This is one of the best examples of what love, community, care, and joy are all about. This group of people, from the Upper West Side, represents the best of humanity. Kindness, human-ness, that thank-you, Sam Cooke, for sharing the Bench Bunch with us.

Alan 2:00 am Reply
This is what's great about NYC

Terry 2:00 am Reply
I'm. I. Need. A. Bike
Well not necessarily to but all depends

Jed Stasenauer 2:00 am Reply
Thank you, Ted.
Would you be interested in a walk who knows the group?

Gigi 2:00 am Reply
Helen is my mother and I know her bench friends have given her a new spark and joy in life. Thank you for bringing them together and for this article. It was a wonderful and unexpected gift on my birthday. Nice Ted!!!

Jim 2:00 am Reply
Hanging with your crew is always a good time. Blessings to the NYC community of elders

Hartman 2:00 am Reply
Hanging with your crew is always a good time. Blessings to the NYC community of elders

Damian 2:00 am Reply
Great story.

Rachel Harlfoard Stearns 2:00 am Reply
What a lovely article!

Jed Stasenauer 2:00 am Reply
I look forward to joining the group. Why not, I am a senior member apparent? I am 80 years. Thank Ted for "Bill Kaplan." Bill watching. Lion on the upper west side for 40 years. Widowed after a 60 year marriage two years ago.

Rosemary 2:00 am Reply
Jed, I'm a member of the Bench Bunch I assume you mean membership

Vivian 2:00 am Reply
Jed, Rosie is a delicious!
I'll stop probably just show up and say Hi.

Allison 2:00 am Reply
Thank for this lovely article – what an antidote to, well, just about everything!

Susan 2:00 am Reply
Thank you for this lovely article.

Sam 2:00 am Reply
Looking to a similar group up near Bronxville.

Helen Jacobs 2:00 am Reply
What a wonderful article. It shows UWS culture!
Helen

Mike Kull 2:00 am Reply
Neat!

Sam 2:00 am Reply
Beautifully written article and insight into people beautifully writing their lives. What an inspiration.

Mary 2:00 am Reply
Sweet Story. Sad and Heavy for all of us.
Thank you!

Terry 2:00 am Reply
Agreed especially in this day and age

LINK 2:00 am Reply
Great story.

Naomi Bernstein 2:00 am Reply
Hi Chase my Mom lives on 96 Street and met with interest about The Bench Bunch group. Great idea! I wonder are there any such groups in my area? Would like to join a group for good conversation and socialization. Thanks.

Shannon 2:00 am Reply
Delightful article!

Peter Papadopoulos 2:00 am Reply
Wonderful heartwarming group. My husband, a disabled, once-upon-a-time-attorney-at-law and I have met with other members the 20th street Central Park entrance. Do you know of an East side group he could join?

Sharon Raphael 2:00 am Reply
Peter, I'm sorry I don't know of any.
Hey have to make something happen!

Carmen Clemente 2:00 am Reply
Fun good and delicious memoirs. the Big Bench should go the contact information of contributors. Not so many people are expressing interest in knowing more about the team of Bench Bunch that I wonder if there isn't some mechanism to provide links safely.

Naomi Bernstein 2:00 am Reply
I was thinking the same thing. I had posted earlier. I live on the West side on my 50 Street.

Sharon 2:00 am Reply
Delightful article!

Judy 2:00 am Reply
Great article! I can't wait to be old enough to join

Eileen Carter 2:00 am Reply
I am a young lady who has the delight of knowing "President" Helen for approximately 10 years. Mine not through music – my late husband, Jesse was a classical musician who was a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra for over 40 years and a music teacher. Our Friendship continues, I am so grateful to know Helen. She is quite a lady and I am the lucky recipient of her friendship.

Ed and Lisa Sweet 2:00 am Reply
Where do they meet? My husband and I are interested. Thanks!

Georgia Lewis Kaplan 2:00 am Reply
Perfect read for someone moving back to the city.

Lebron 2:00 am Reply
Hey, I'm a young man in my late twenties but hope some regular WSR commenters such as UWS Dad and Sam R will write to focus on needs of women (affluent, middle, and high income).

Sam R 2:00 am Reply
Lebron, I'm the closest. It shows that you can build community anywhere. Blessings to all these fresh people and may they have many more bench meetings to come.

Jeanne 2:00 am Reply
or it is missing in their own juices, some people, some opinions and ideas.

Reply to Jeanne

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