

E T H I C A L O U T L O O K

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First Community Service Award

Goes To "My Own Book Fund" Founder

Larry R. Yates

How do children learn to cherish books? How do they learn to select and care for them? The answer is that children learn to love books and care for them when they have adults in their lives who teach them to do so. And if they do not, then they might need kind strangers who will spend their own time and money to give these children the opportunity to acquire their own first books.

We met such "strangers" in a ceremony at our Sunday Meeting on January 6 when **Burton M. Freeman**, a retired corporate lawyer and founder of My Own Book Fund, received the Society's first Distinguished Community Service Award. To launch the award and its ceremony, Carol Nadell, Chair of the Ethical Humanist Award Committee, explained the rationale of the new award. The committee believed that the Society needed to recognize outstanding humanists who perform their good deeds away from the limelight. They chose well in giving the award to Mr. Freeman and his small band of kind strangers.

One of the volunteers who accompany the little shoppers was not a stranger to us but rather Jerry Chamlin, a member of the Society. Jerry

prefaced the award by saying that he and his wife, Carole, volunteered to work with My Own Book Fund after meeting Mr. Freeman, and becoming infected by his enthusiasm and dedication to children. Jerry explained that they take classes of third-graders from inner-city schools to bookstores, for many of the students their first such visit. They teach the kids how to buy books and start their own libraries. Each child has a \$50 allowance to spend. They select books that will challenge and delight them. Their spending is a prudent investment in their reading and literacy with dividends that will last their entire lives. Perhaps they might not know the full value of their first books for many years, but they enjoy their book-buying expeditions and respect the strangers who make it possible.

As Mr. Freeman accepted the award from Khoren, he confessed his reluctance to receive it because he has so much fun with the kids. Moreover, he credited his family with establishing the Freeman Harrison Family Foundation that supports My Own Book Fund and volunteers such as the Chamlins for the program's success. He did not mention his own enormous effort that is his investment in the children's future. He did explain that the program started in 1999 with 90 children in the East Harlem Tutorial Program buying their first books. Last year, the program had expanded to include 2,000 students in ten schools in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx with help of the NYC Board of Education, donors such as the W. T. Grant Foundation, and bookstores such as Bank Street

College and Barnes & Noble. With more support, the program could serve tens of thousands of third-graders who have no books. Its success in New York has not gone unnoticed; it is being emulated in other U.S. cities.

As a postscript to the ceremony, Mr. Freeman urged Society members to volunteer and donate funds to reach more needy children. Members who want to volunteer can speak to Jerry and Carole Chamlin. Those who want to donate can send their checks, made out to "Fund for Public Schools—My Own Book Fund," to The Fund for Public Schools, Inc., NYC Board of Education, 110 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201, Attention: Philip Tama.