

POLISHING THE BIG APPLE

Told by Nancy Berg

Annette Williams had been on welfare for ten years when Joseph Pupello offered her a job at the New York Restoration Project (NYRP). After volunteering as a reading tutor and as a garden helper in the New York City public schools for the preceding five years, she'd become known as a dependable, hard worker who was exceptionally good with people. For seven summers she worked with Joseph at Success Gardens, a nonprofit organization that turned vacant lots into little community Edens.

Annette remembers her first NYRP meeting with Joseph; it was in an abandoned park that she says “looked more like a jungle.” Seeing the overgrown area and the temporary homeless shelter behind the playground, she wondered if this sad patch of land could ever be turned into a park again. But just one month later, she had a fairy tale to tell. “People started coming back,” Annette said. “The kids came first, asking questions about what we were doing. ‘We are giving you back your park’ was all we said.” Before long, the whole neighborhood began to show signs of transformation. “When children see people giving back, they see something wonderful,” Annette says. “It gives them an idea about how they too can help.”

As a mother raising six children in an economically troubled area, Annette knows the importance of having safe places for children to play. “Kids nowadays don’t have places to play,” she says. “Our cities are full of concrete and our parks with drug addicts, homeless people, and

unleashed dogs. The kids say, ‘We have nothing to do.’ No wonder they get in trouble.” Thanks to Annette and her team, they now have a safe place to go.

After a year at the New York Restoration Project, Annette was promoted to field director, managing a team of four employees and twenty AmeriCorps volunteers, supervising thirty-four members of the Work Experience Program (WEP). Together they are responsible for restoring six of New York City’s parks to their natural beauty. “The AmeriCorps volunteers are like my kids,” she says. “I become their mother, sister, brother, and friend. I’m there for them. We’re like a family.”

By working with Annette, the WEP members learn job skills and build self-esteem. By getting up each morning and doing something positive for themselves and others, they gain confidence that they can get a real job. “I know what it’s like to be on welfare,” Annette says. “It’s easy to get stuck in the cycle.” She encourages people to start moving away from welfare by volunteering “so people can see you as more than a mother on welfare.” After two years, she has seen five of her Welfare To Work people get good jobs. “One just got married and drives a Lexus!” she says happily.

Most people would be surprised to learn that Annette Williams has a good friend and partner named Bette Midler who founded the New York Restoration Project. They have more in common than first meets the eye: both women had to work their own way out of poverty, but while Annette spent her childhood in the concrete maze of New York, Bette grew up surrounded by the lush beauty of Hawaii.

Growing up in Halawa, one of the poorest neighborhoods on Hawaii, Bette Midler and her family were the only non-Hawaiian family for miles around. Treated as an outcast as a young child, she found solace in the awesome natural beauty around her. In the crystal-clear aquamarine sea, the little girl swam alongside bright magenta *kuma* and dazzling indigo parrotfish. Words like “smog” and “pollution” held no meaning for her in those early tropical days. She thought the whole world was as beautiful as Hawaii. When she grew up, she made her first journey to the mainland. It was as if she had just stepped off a time machine from some pre-industrial age. She was shocked by the way people carelessly treated her beloved earth, though she could barely recognize it.

For years, she lived in Southern California, developing her career. Later, she and her husband, Martin, moved to New York to raise their daughter Sophie. In a sense, the entertainer found a spiritual home there. “I love New Yorkers, and I’m like them,” she says. “I’m noisy. I have my opinions.” Bette exudes an energy and drive that have led most Americans to assume she was a New Yorker all along.

But the extent of careless waste and filth in New York took her by surprise. People were throwing their garbage out the windows. The city’s once-majestic parks were marred by refuse, old furniture, and abandoned toilet bowls. “We love the city. This degradation is heartbreaking and unacceptable,” says Midler. “I realized I had to do something. Even if it meant I had to go out and pick up all that stuff with my own two hands.”

The city once had eighty thousand park workers to care for its natural land— more than thirty thousand acres of playground, woodlands,

recreation centers, trails, gardens, and miles of protected waterfront. Cuts in public funding eliminated a staggering 77,600 of those jobs. With only 2,400 workers, there's too much litter, illegal dumping, and vandalism for the Parks Department to keep up with. It quickly became obvious to anyone who walked in New York City's parks that a volunteer effort was needed.

Bette decided to call her friend Scott Mathes at the California Environmental Project, an organization that had removed more than 3.5 million pounds of debris since 1989. Bette enlisted Mathes's help to set up a similar project in New York. The New York Restoration Project was born, funded by a special benefit premiere for her film *The First Wives Club* and \$250,000 from Bette's own pocket.

Joseph Pupello remembers his first day as NYRP's director, at the Little Red Lighthouse under the George Washington Bridge. He joined Midler and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, volunteers, and sixty schoolchildren from Upper Manhattan to clear away dump sites, plant trees, and remove rusted cars in a massive effort to reclaim Fort Tryon and Fort Washington parks and restore beauty to seven miles of the Hudson River waterfront. Since then, with the help of AmeriCorps volunteers, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Welfare To Work participants, they've carted away more than fifty thousand pounds of refuse from the city's parks. "The Divine Miss M. brings style to the project, and she really gets her hands dirty," Joseph says. "She shows New Yorkers that they can be involved."

When people ask Annette Williams about her job, she says proudly, "I pick up garbage." She finds working with Bette a real joy. "Bette is

part of our extended family,” she says. “She’s very down to earth—and just does her job. In her overalls and sneakers, she picks up trash, showing others there’s a cleaner way to live.” People walk by and say hi to her, without recognizing who she is. She just goes on about her business. That *is* who she is.

Yet Bette’s willing to use her celebrity status if it gets results, particularly with kids. “As long as I can remember, there have been anti-littering campaigns, but nobody pays attention to them,” Midler says to a group of children, who burst out laughing as she slips into her famous flamboyant persona. “They drop their lunch on the ground and that’s the end of it. And I have to come along and sweep it up and I mean, kids, I’m pooped, I’m exhausted! There’s more trash out there than even I can handle, and if we keep this up there won’t be any place left to walk; we’ll be picking our way over mounds of cans and bottles, acres of egg cartons and oceans of shrink-wrap. So please, please let’s stop treating the earth like it was an ashtray. Tell your friends, tell your moms, tell your kids, we just have to stop! I really feel that if everybody did their part it would be a beautiful world.”

Organize a clean-up day in your community. If you want to help beautify New York City’s parks and rivers, contact the **New York Restoration Project** at 212-258-2333 or visit their Web site, www.nyrp.org.