

Fin de siècle. The elegant French term used to describe the end of the nineteenth century attracts me far more than any of the over-used buzz words we've been hearing over the last year, the most egregious infliction being, of course, Y2K. Fin de siècle best describes the crossroads where Buffalo is now poised. In moving forward into the twenty-first century, our fondest hope is to regain some of the glory we possessed during the nineteenth and early twentieth. The following three feature articles, loosely grouped under this millennial theme, evoke both our nostalgia for the past and our hopes for the future. Two new visionary groups, New Millennium and 21st Century Club, are hard at work on the future part of the equation, while traditional Buffalo institutions like the 20th Century Club help us remember our past. And in looking at the celebrations planned in Buffalo to mark the millennium's passing, we also glance at the festivities that marked our entrance into 1900.

-Elizabeth Licata, Editor



The New Millennium Group: William Johnson, Bill Banas, Sean Gallagher, Mary Catherine Malley, Sarah Robitaille, Jeff Bell, Jason Yots, Scott Sroka, Judie Takacs, Chip Grieco, and Heather Stammler.

Labor of Love: The 21st Century Club and New Millennium Group Get Down to Business

Anna Geronimo Hausmann

If you pay attention to the local media with any frequency, you get the impression that young people are leaving the Buffalo area just as fast as JetBlue and Vanguard can schedule those new flights to New York, Miami, Denver, Dallas—anywhere but the good old Queen City.

But speak with Tracy Diina, one of the founders and current president of the 21st Century Club, and you will get a decidedly different image. Describing the first meeting of the twenty or so young people whom she had invited to talk about forming a community activist group, she says, "It was like that story of the six blind men trying to describe an elephant. Some of us thought we should be simply boosting downtown, some thought we should be purely civic-minded, some thought we should be political, some thought we should focus on trying to keep young peo-

ple from leaving town. Everyone had a different idea, but what we had in common was that we all cared enough to come together and form an organization." As it has turned out, they are doing all this and more.

Founded in 1997, the 21st Century Club has become—along with its similarly well-intentioned sister organization, the New Millennium Group—one of the places to hang out, to play, to network, and to effect change in Buffalo. It can't be a coincidence that these two organizations got their starts at almost exactly the same moment in Buffalo's history. It feels propitious, bordering on ironic, that these two groups have burst on the community's radar just as the exodus of young people out of the region has been widely publicized. But both groups are the result of years spent learning and practicing social

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activism. Both are born from their founders' deep attachment to and abiding love for this community.

Young as these two groups are, much has been written about them already. The conventional wisdom says that the difference between them is that the 21st Century Club is made up more of younger people, twenties and thirties, who work in government or the public sector while the New Millennium Group is comprised more of those in their thirties and older who work largely in the professions, in law, business, and finance. While that's not at all an unfair characterization, the differences between the groups are more subtle, more complex, and also more profound than just their demographics. In fact, the two groups can be seen almost as the two necessary, complementary halves to the notion of progress for Buffalo. The 21st Century Club is defined by its commitment to theory and process while the New Millennium Group is defined by its emphasis on results. Both groups are characterized by tremendous energy, dedication to volunteerism, and unabashed idealism. Their members burn with the fire of true believers, and it is positively infectious, even to the most jaded observer. To this "city of no illusions" these young

visionaries and doers bring, above all, the courage to dream of greatness.

Seeds of Change

Both groups have grown from modest but enthusiastic beginnings. "There was this groundswell of energy," Diina remembers. "We all cared so much and wanted to do something, but we didn't know what." Though they didn't have a model, they did have a mentor: several of the founders of the 21st Century Club and the New Millennium Group are current or former staff members of New York State Assemblyman Sam Hoyt. Though only in his thirties himself, Hoyt has assumed the role of elder statesman to young activist Buffalonians. Though Hoyt disclaims any role in either group's formation, it is clear that he has provided an example through his affection for the city.

21st Century Club member Jeff Pirrone says, "I've fallen in love with Buffalo, but if there's anyone who loves the city more, it's Sam Hoyt. An enormous number of interns come through his office and he turns them on to the history and culture of the city. His love of Buffalo rubs off on everything he does."

Of the groups, Hoyt says, "I am very proud that my staff and former staff have taken this type of aggressive public role as agents of change. These two groups are the most refreshing developments in the Buffalo political scene that I've seen in a long time."

Diina and her co-founders were mostly all Buffalo natives who had left town to go to school or to take that first job but had returned to make their lives here. "I did not ever see myself moving back to Buffalo," she says, but come back she did. And after a few years of bouncing around in various unfulfilling jobs, Diina began to desire something more meaningful. "I come from a grass-roots background," she explains. "I was deeply involved in anti-nukes activism in college. I learned at an early age the value of standing up for what you believe in." 21st Century Club member Denise Herkey shares this dedication to activism: "I worked for NYPIRG (New York Public Interest Research Group) for two and a half years, so I am convinced of the power of grass-roots activism."

This commitment to activism informs the group's every activity. Their goal is to give decision-making back to the community by educating and informing them, by exposing the processes of decision-making, by making opportunities for community members to take part, and by helping people to develop a stake in their community.

But if this activist perspective sounds

naive or idealist, rest assured these are no dreamy-eyed freshmen in Politics 101. These are activists who have done their share of door-to-doors and cold calling. Diina wryly notes, "I am definitely more conservative now. I can see you have to work within the existing world to make change." Herkey agrees: "Activism doesn't happen overnight. It's a process of learning to maneuver in your environment." And that is probably the most impressive thing about both of these groups—their deliberate and unflinching admixture of uncompromising idealism and clear-eyed realism. You have to be a believer, it seems, to shoulder the burden that Buffalo has become. But without a harsh look at the challenges facing the area—as clear and chilling as the November wind whipping through downtown Metro shelters—you're just another talkin' proud billboard.

New Millennium Group

If the 21st Century Club was born of passion, the New Millennium Group is the result of a calculated assessment of the area and what is missing. Like a bunch of Amish neighbors come over to raise a barn, the New Millennium Group has rolled up its collective sleeves to get on with the business of fixing what they see as rather a mess. They seek solutions to Buffalo's problems outside the political process: through their own efforts and through collaborating with other community groups.

"We're a charitable and project-oriented organization," explains President Mary Catherine Malley. "We decide on a place where the community needs people to get something done and we do it." In this group's eyes, there's a lot to be done. Though Malley describes the group as a "quasi think-tank," it's clear that the group's strength is in focusing like a laser beam on tangible results. The group is organized into six "action groups" that reflect the various areas they see as needing improvement: workforce development, beautification, education, long term planning for the city, downtown, and the Peace Bridge expansion project. But the action groups aren't written in stone; they reflect only the group's current goals. They also try not to duplicate the efforts of other community groups. As Malley explains, "we want to take on issues where we can make an impact in the community."

And that is precisely what they are doing. The action groups have already yielded some concrete and fully fleshed out projects. For example, the workforce development group has created the "Ambassador Program" designed to reach out to young people considering relocating to

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The 21st Century Club: Shane Stevenson, Nicole Killenbeck, Jeffrey Pirrone, Denise Herkey, and Tracy Diina.

Buffalo as well as those who have moved here but don't know the area yet. "Our goal is to get to these folks early and plug them into the region and the lifestyle," explains Malley. But this is no glorified yuppie welcome wagon. In typical New Millennium fashion, the group has assembled an advisory panel of local human resources people from the area's larger employers to work with the Ambassador Program. The group has developed a workforce development website and an "action kit" to introduce a company and the region together, and to make it all work they have recently received a local foundation grant to fund these activities.

Another action group, the beautification group, has been working on long and short term goals. Jessie Schnell, chair of the beautification group, explains that their major project is to commission a piece of public art for the Inner Harbor: "We have been working with Nina Freudenheim, who has been charged by the city with preparing a plan for all the art for the Inner Harbor. We are hoping to be one component of that overall plan. Right now we are thinking of having a

competition of local or national artists for the piece."

In the meantime, the group has been working on a smaller, but arguably no less significant, project to spruce up the Niagara Street exit of the 190. Says Schnell, "We are working with Buffalo in Bloom and in October we'll be planting hundreds of daffodils bulbs, donated by the city and by Erie County Councilmember Judy Fisher, on that triangle of land at the exit. It seems like a small thing, but it's one of the gateways to the city and we think it should make a nicer impression."

Finally, the group has a lot of events designed to bring members together to socialize, to network, to re-connect with the group. They are fundraisers and social events, but they are also a reification of the group's main concept. Schnell states, "Sometimes you just need to be reminded that there are hundreds of people like you here in Buffalo, young, energetic, and committed to staying here."

These ultra-professionals positively gush when they talk about their affection for Buffalo. Says Malley, "Most of us had left the region, but we returned, often tak-

ing a pay cut to do so. We chose to come back to make the area better. It's the quality of life here, the close-knit nature of the community, not just because family is here, but the whole community. Buffalo has everything you'd look for in city living: it's got entertainment, the waterfront, skiing, a year-round lifestyle. But it doesn't have the awful commutes and difficulty meeting people that you get in a larger city. And between museums and the amazing theater scene, there's a high concentration of cultural offerings here that you don't find in other places."

The Bridge and Beyond

The 21st Century Club has also been working on specific projects. The group rose to prominence this past spring through their publicizing of the Peace Bridge controversy; however,

Herkey is careful to point out that the organization is not a one-trick pony.

"We don't have a formal position on the bridge; what we really respect is that people got information about the situation and advocated for their view. That is what our group is all about." The club's activities this past summer included a voter registration drive focusing on young people, during which they signed up more than 200 new voters. Another project is to begin working with groups on the campuses of local colleges and universities to counteract that youth-flight. They are also working with Kids Vote, a program that promotes voting through the schools, and they have active collaborations with the League of Women Voters, the YMCA, and the New Millennium Group.

Indeed, their list of future projects is as sexy as a woolen sweater: voter registration and education, smart growth, city charter revision, and the importance of volunteerism. But listening to Herkey, you definitely feel the heat of a zealot: "Our goal is for everyone to take ownership of their communities, not to leave everything to the government." The club's major event

planned for late fall is a forum of elected officials, candidates, and urban planners, to discuss a master plan for the city. It's the first of what is designed to be a series of more focused discussions on issues that the community will or should be making decisions on, such as the convention center, reuse of the south Buffalo steel plants, and urban sprawl.

Breaking into the Political Status Quo

Voicing the goals of the community is one reason both groups have decided to remain non-partisan. Diina notes, "Four or five years ago, I was involved in the Erie County Democrats. It was hard, and we eventually disbanded because there was a lot of divisiveness." Herkey agrees: "Do we want to change the way business is done in Buffalo? Sure. Everybody wants change yesterday, but it takes a long time. I'd be disheartened to see our agenda co-opted. You can lose your agenda by being partisan."

Though neither group takes a political stance, many members of both groups are active politically and the September's Buffalo Common Council primary election saw two candidates spawned from these new civic organizations—Jeremy Toth, a founder of the New Millennium Group, and Kevin Horrigan, a founder of the 21st Century Club. Neither of these campaigns met with success this time around, and Herkey concedes that these losses were discouraging: "The primary took steam out of people. You start to wonder what it will take to make the broad changes. But we have to learn from this and move forward. I am excited to see the new female majority on the Common Council and what effect that will have."

And what does the old guard think of these young Turks? According to Herkey, they're happy to have some help. At the club's first big event, a cocktail hour held last March jointly with the New Millennium Group, not only did young people show up, but elected officials and seasoned public policy makers mingled and welcomed the fresh troops into the breach. Herkey recounted: "They actually said, 'we're not going to be around forever, we want to help you be the future leaders.' And since then, our group has been approached to sit on community boards. We've definitely affected their thinking." Hoyt notes, "As an elected official, we need all the support we can get from groups such as these. These groups force us to do our jobs better, but they also help us to do them better by being aggressive advocates for their cause. On the Peace Bridge issue, they can take direct credit for persuading many of the area's officials to change their thinking."

Refreshingly, except for the New Millennium Group's recent grant, you won't hear much about money in speaking to these groups—probably because they don't have much. You will hear endlessly about personal investments of time and energy:

About how gratifying it is to work for the betterment of the city. About how enriched their lives are by giving back. The common denominator for everyone involved in these two groups seems to be love for the city. They can talk all they want about master planning and sustainable growth; what it comes down to is these young people want this region to prosper so they can keep living here.

Such *fin-de-siècle* enthusiasm is nothing new to Buffalo. It was a similar spirit that led to Buffalo's hosting the 1900 Pan American Exposition, which itself ushered in more than half a century of growth for the city. Maybe like Haley's Comet—only a little longer time in coming back—it's been off somewhere, lighting up some other city. This time it has the scent of the real deal. These groups dare to use words like optimism with a straight face. That alone is a breath of fresh air in this town.

21st Century Club

LEADERS:

Tracy Diina, president
Brian Kelley, vice president
Nicole Killenbeck, secretary
Mark Koziel, treasurer

COMMITTEES:

Issues and Policy Committee
Membership and Outreach Committee
Public Relations Committee
Events Committee

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New Millennium Group

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Downtown action group
Education action group
Long-Range Planning action group
Peace Bridge action group
Workforce Development action group

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